

TAKE CARE, SERIOUSLY: A GUIDE TO MAINSTREAMING CARE IN POLICIES

Monika de Silva, Isabel Hernandez Pepe



Policy Study published in March 2026 by

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



**FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)**

Avenue des Arts 46
1000 Brussels (Belgium)
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



KARL RENNER INSTITUT

Karl-Popper-Straße 8,
1100 Vienna (Austria)
www.renner-institut.at
@RennerInstitut



This Policy Study was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.

Copyright © 2026 by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies

Content editor: Ania Skrzypek

Project coordinator: Elena Gil

Language editor: Rosalyne Cowie

Layout: Downtown

Cover image: Shutterstock/Melitas

Suggested citation: M. de Silva, I. Hernandez Pepe. "Take care, seriously: A guide to mainstreaming care in policies". FEPS Policy Study. <https://feps-europe.eu/publication/take-care-seriously-a-guide-to-mainstreaming-care-in-policies/>

The co-authors contributed equally to all parts of this policy study

ISBN: 978-2-39076-064-1 9782390760641

KBR deposit number: D/2026/15396./15

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
1. BACK TO BASICS ON CARE	7
2. CARE IN EUROPE: FOCUSING ON ECONOMY, MISSING SOCIETY	9
3. FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE AND THE CARE SOCIETY	12
4. CASE STUDY 1: EMPLOYMENT POLICY AND CARE	17
5. CASE STUDY 2: EXTERNAL ACTION AND CARE	21
5.1 Care within the institution: The EEAS from within	23
5.2 Multilateral frameworks: Care in the EU's global discourse	24
5.3 The EU's geopolitical self-positioning on care.....	27
6. RECOMMENDATIONS	30
CONCLUSION.....	33
ANNEX	35
Employment policy	36
External relations policy.....	36
ENDNOTES	37

BIBLIOGRAPHY, ABOUT THE AUTHORS, FEPS & PARTNERS	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	44
ABOUT FEPS AND PARTNERS	45

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the European Union (EU) context, in recent years, 'care economy' has become a buzzword, not least thanks to the efforts of social democratic actors. With the adoption of the European Care Strategy in 2022, the EU consolidated its role as a particularly powerful actor in social protection of care work. With this policy study, we seek to bring the discussion on care and policy back from its limited and limiting demarcation as a 'care economy' to its origin in feminist thought. We briefly discuss feminist scholarship on the ethics of care, introduce the concept of a 'care society' and contrast it with the concept of a 'care economy'. We propose a guiding framework for analysing a policy from a care perspective. This framework can be applied to a policy in any policy domain and at any policy level. We use the examples of EU employment policy and EU external relations policy to showcase the application and usefulness of our guide. Moving beyond the narrow framing of care as an economic sector allows us to position it as a transversal value and to argue for its centrality as a foundational logic of political life within and beyond the EU. We make several recommendations for the bolder inclusion of care in politics through, for example, advocating coherence between care economy policies and other policies, being vigilant to discourses of competitiveness and productivity, and paying attention to the devaluation of feminised values and work.

1. INTRODUCTION: BACK TO BASICS ON CARE

With this policy study, we seek to bring the discussion on care and policy back from its limited and limiting demarcation as a 'care economy' to its origin in feminist thought. While we are enthusiastic that postulates of feminist political economists to account for economic value of social reproduction have recently gained more traction in European politics, we argue that the discussion of care should be better connected to the entirety of feminist thinking, particularly feminist ethics. There, care is considered as a foundational but misplaced value, which should permeate society, rather than serve only as a sector of economic activities related to the provision of basic needs to children, sick, and elderly. We consider this problem of mistranslation or unfinished translation of feminist scholarship to policy a practical one: our policies would be better if we mainstreamed care in policy making. This is why we introduce a guide for how to holistically evaluate the place of care in a policy, a tool that can be used for any policy area and any policy level.

One of the fundamental claims of feminist scholars is that our current societal and economic models tend to privilege male-coded identities, norms and skills. This is particularly applicable to capitalist economies in which the focus is put on production rather than reproduction.¹ Traditionally, in this logic, a default worker is a man and women are either relegated to reproductive roles – as mothers and carers, without fair recognition or compensation – or expected to act as a man on the job market, or take on a second shift, taking on both productive and reproductive roles.² Social democratic models rectify these inherent gender inequalities of the capitalist system through a myriad of measures. They protect workers against gender discrimination in employment. They enable workers, men and women, to take leave from work to care for children and close family members. They compensate workers from the loss of income related to their care work.

In the European Union (EU) context, in recent years, 'care economy' has become a buzzword, not least thanks to the efforts of social democratic actors. With the adoption of the European Care Strategy in 2022, the EU consolidated its role as a particularly powerful actor in social protection of care work.

EU policies have the ambition and potential to provide better access to care services for millions of Europeans and fairer recognition and distribution of unpaid care work among them. In that sense, the EU responds to many of the postulates of feminist activists and scholars. On the other hand, by focusing on specific, technocratic measures of social policies and how they can work to the benefit of the existing economy, encapsulated as a 'care economy', we can lose sight of something more fundamental – the place of care in our societies – which should be a central concern in all our policies.

Our central message is therefore: care is more than a sector; care is a value. We make this point in the following steps. Firstly, we review and summarise policy discussions on care in European and EU policy circles, showing that they have adopted the understanding of care as an economic sector rather than a societal value. Secondly, we briefly discuss feminist scholarship on the ethics of care, introduce the concept of a 'care society' and contrast it with the concept of a care economy, as well as propose guiding questions for analysing a policy from a care perspective. Then, we use the examples of EU employment policy and EU external relations policy to showcase the application and usefulness of our guide. The analysis allows us to highlight where the consideration of care has been lacking in these policies. We comment on, among others, the place of care in the Union of Skills,³ where it is treated as a necessary evil to enable productivity, and in the Global Gateway initiative, which is lacking in the consideration of care towards the planet and other societies in its growth-oriented model of sustainability.

We conclude this policy study with recommendations. Our main proposal is for those involved in policy making to mainstream care outside of the bundle of care economy policies and to security, development aid, housing, environment, finance and other policy areas. The policy study can serve as a useful and accessible guide for conducting this task.

2. CARE IN EUROPE: FOCUSING ON ECONOMY, MISSING SOCIETY

The EU has increasingly discussed and debated how to include the care economy in its policy-making process. Initially, under the umbrella of social policy, the care economy gained more ground, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the significance of the care economy became more visible. The EU has acknowledged many challenges related to care in various initiatives, including through the recently developed European Care Strategy⁴ with strategies to improve the quality, affordability and accessibility of care services for caregivers and recipients. The EU Care Strategy acknowledges the disproportionate burden of care work on women and outlines ways to address this imbalance with the aim of closing the existing gender gap. In the European Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025), the centrality of unpaid and paid care work in the EU economy was highlighted.

These policies have substantively responded and developed in conversation with important critiques of how care work, paid and unpaid, has been treated in Europe. For many reasons, care work has been devalued in societies as non-work: unpaid or low paid, feminised and often relying on empathy or intrinsic motivations.⁵ A significant part of care work in the EU is performed by migrant workers, who are often employed in low-paid, precarious roles that are less attractive to the local labour force.⁶ These workers are often in particularly vulnerable situations and the work they perform may be illegal, involuntary or unsafe.⁷ Even pro-gender equal policies do not necessarily make the conditions for performing care in our societies much better. They may shift the disproportionate burden of care from native middle-class women to vulnerable migrant women.⁸ Regulations of the care economy sector are also at risk of contributing to profit-making, privatisation, financialisation and result in austerity measures.⁹

New EU policies on care work have been subject to scholarly analysis. The European Care Strategy was studied by FEPS at the moment of its adoption.¹⁰ The study offers an analysis of the positive developments welcomed by key stakeholders as well as lists blind spots of the existing policy. It also highlights that care should be recognised as an intrinsic value. Another analysis of the strategy comes from “A

new gender equality contract for Europe”.¹¹ There, similarly, Caracciolo di Torella argues that the strategy is a step in the right direction but only the first one.¹² While the contribution recognises that care permeates society as “the glue that keeps us together”, analytically it focuses on the European Care Strategy and related acts. Several other analyses look at EU policies on care work.¹³

EU initiatives come in the context of more concerted efforts around care in Europe and internationally. These initiatives, from the Nordic model in Scandinavian countries to the national care systems in Latin America, are part of a global movement to professionalise care work and offer subsidies to households that need care services. At the international level, organisations that have been increasingly focusing on the care economy and recognising its significance for sustainable development, gender equality and economic growth are mainly UN agencies, in particular the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Women, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In June 2025, the ILO recently published ILC.112/Resolution V, concerning decent work and the care economy, which once again underscored that “care is central to human, social, economic and environmental well-being, and sustainable development”.¹⁴ After mentioning the topical characteristics of this economic sector, it acknowledges that “significant gaps remain in public awareness, legislation, policies, funding and implementation”,¹⁵ but also highlights the ongoing efforts to bridge these gaps. UN Women has also conducted extensive research and produced exciting reports on the care economy with a global outlook, sometimes focusing more on domestic work or underscoring the changes to how families must navigate and, in a certain way, receive unpaid care work to make it to the end of the month, and so on. For example, “Progress of the world’s women 2019-2020: Families in a changing world”¹⁶ highlighted that globally women perform more than three quarters of unpaid care work and the discrimination that is still very high in many family laws around the world (e.g., in the case of divorce or widowhood). Interestingly, UN Women has also collaborated with the National Institute of Women in Mexico

(INMUJERES) to launch the *Alianza Global para los Cuidados* (Global Alliance for Care), an initiative during the Generation Equality Forum in 2021. This alliance is the first global multi-stakeholder that creates spaces to discuss and foster exchange on care, and it currently comprises 147 members, including members from governments, civil society, union associations, the philanthropic sector and academia. Lastly, the OECD has produced exciting and topical knowledge on the care economy and work. For example, it highlights how, on average, women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men, depending on the country.¹⁷ However, it is mainly under the umbrella of gender equality or family and childcare policies. Many other international organisations, such as the World Health Organization, the World Bank and the IMF, have recently focused on the care economy and its implications. Recent developments also include inter-regional initiatives such as EU-LAC Bi-Regional Pact on Care between the EU and 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries from November 2025.

The political movement towards improvement and internationalisation of care policies is connected to data-gathering and research efforts. The OECD provides the Family Database, which includes cross-national family outcomes and policy indicators. In 2016, the World Bank launched the World Bank Gender Data Portal, where data on gender-related issues, including time spent on unpaid care work or labour force participation, can be found. FEPS, jointly with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), has launched the EU CARE Atlas, which, using the data provided by Eurostat, provides a clear and detailed picture of the care economy in Europe. There is a general acknowledgement that more needs to be done. One of the last points raised in the 112th ILO Session is indeed the need to develop internationally agreed statistical standards as the basis for the collection of detailed, comparable and harmonised data on the care economy, considering all relevant unpaid and paid care work.¹⁸

As evidenced, there is growing political interest in regulation, international cooperation and data collection on the topic of care in the EU. This trend responds to some of the concerns of feminist

movements and feminist scholars, particularly political economists. While we welcome and support it, in our view the conversation around the care economy should be a starting point and not an end point for considering care in policies. As we show in the next section, feminist scholarship speaks more broadly to the issue of care in our societies and more of this thought, particularly from areas such as ethics of care and feminist international relations,¹⁹ should be part of imagining policies. The conceptual delimitation of care as an economic sector, while allowing for operationalisation and measurement, misplaces the translation of feminist theory of care to policies. The prevalent policy discourse on the 'care economy' seems to be limiting for research itself, as analyses of the place of care in the EU do not go beyond sectoral strategies like the European Care Strategy and data points already defined as care at the policy level. In other words, how we define care impacts where we are able to see and investigate it. Existing policies and policy analyses therefore often examine the care economy in isolation, as a discrete sector, rather than as part of broader societal structures. This risks sidelining relationality, interdependence and the structural inequalities embedded in care arrangements. Without questioning the importance of data-driven and policy-relevant analyses, we argue that complementary perspectives are needed that move beyond policymakers' delimitations of what care is and could be. To this end, this policy study adopts a feminist ethics of care perspective – not only as a normative framework that re-evaluates care, but also as a political lens to rethink priorities, institutions and relationships. This approach shifts the focus from how care contributes to growth to how societies can be organised around care as a foundational principle.

3. FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE AND THE CARE SOCIETY

In this policy study, we draw on the legacy of feminist thinkers and scholars who were among the first to develop theoretical frameworks that placed care at the centre of moral and political life. Foundational contributions by Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto, Sara Ruddick, Nancy Fraser, Nel Noddings and others have shaped what is now known as the feminist ethics of care. This conceptual lens emphasises the centrality of relationships, interdependence, and care as key values in moral reasoning and social organisation.

Feminist ethics of care not only challenges the dominant patriarchal and neoliberal assumptions that often permeate policy discourse, including EU policy making, but also offer a profound normative alternative. It foregrounds values historically relegated to the private sphere or associated with feminised labour, re-signifying them as central to the organisation of just and sustainable societies.

Our analysis uses this feminist lens to interrogate how care is currently framed in key EU policy documents. Specifically, we question the predominance of the **care economy** framework – commonly found in EU discourse – and propose a shift toward a more holistic and value-centred approach, which has been taking ground mainly in the majority world, the **care society**. While these two terms may seem similar, they reflect distinct conceptual and political traditions and carry different implications for policy design.

The care economy is largely understood as a sectoral and functional category, referring to paid and unpaid labour in fields such as childcare, eldercare and healthcare. It is often quantified in terms of economic output, productivity and labour force participation, framing care as a means to enhance competitiveness and growth. In contrast, the care society is a feminist normative project. It reimagines economic and social systems by making care – not competition or productivity – the organising principle. Rooted in feminist ethics of care, this vision recognises the inherent value of care, not merely as an economic input but as a foundational human and ecological necessity. The two meanings of care, as in ‘care economy’ or ‘care strategy’, on one hand, and in ‘care society’ or ‘ethics of care’ on the other, become easily conflated, even though they denote different (although related) concepts (Table 1). This confusion is particularly enabled in the English language, as we denote these two concepts with singular signifier ‘care’. It is useful to think through the vocabulary provided by other languages to capture the conceptual difference. For instance, in some languages we think about ‘care economy’ as ‘*économie de soins*’ (French) or ‘*sektor opieki*’ (Polish) but about ‘ethics of care’ as ‘*éthique de la sollicitude*’ (French) or ‘*etyka troski*’ (Polish).

Table 1. Differences between 'care economy' and 'care society'.

Care economy	Care society
Sectoral/functional	Ethical/systemic
Interest-driven	Value-driven
Care occupations as 'necessary evil'	Care occupations as an intrinsic value
Integrates care into existing models	Reimagines the economic model itself
Recognises care as an economic input	Treats care as a foundational principle
Problematizes gender inequality to enable women's participation in labour	Problematizes gender inequality to challenge undervaluation of care and femininity
Often limits care activities to care for children, the sick and elderly	Treats care as permeating all human relationships
Focus on labour (paid/unpaid)	Focus on values, relationships, life-sustaining work

Source: compiled by the authors.

Importantly, the care society framework is grounded in the revaluation of care, both materially and symbolically. It insists that care is not only work but a worldview: an ethical and political commitment to relationality, reciprocity and interdependence. As such, care is both a value and a practice, and its marginalisation in mainstream policy discourse reveals the persistence of power structures that devalue feminised, racialised and informal forms of labour, as well as the emotional, reproductive and social dimensions of life. Carol Gilligan, in her foundational work, articulates the feminist ethics of care as:



A feminist ethic of care is an ethic of resistance to the injustices inherent in patriarchy – the association of care and caring with women rather than with humans, the feminization of care work, the rendering of care as subsidiary to justice – a matter of special obligations or interpersonal relationships.²⁰



Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define care more broadly as:



A species of activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web.²¹



These two definitions make three important notions visible and evident, as already highlighted by Thyssen in her policy study “Towards a care-led recovery for the EU?”:²² (1) everyone needs care; (2) care is relational; and (3) care is diverse and fragmented.

By looking at care in this way, it is evident that the dimensions, significance and centeredness of care in EU policy documents have often been minimal and mainly bound only to an economic dimension. Lately, care has been included in policy documents in its ‘care work’/‘care economy’ connotation, leaving the notion of a care society as a holistic and transformative paradigm aside. With the release of the EU Care Strategy (2022), there has been a shift from the view of care as just a private or emotional matter to a more political and social concern. Nevertheless, it seems that we are still very far from the ideal politicisation of care in EU policies and from the paradigm shift in which a holistic approach to care would entail ‘care mainstreaming’ across all EU policy fields, including the two – employment policies and external relations – studied in this analysis. According to Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot, “placing higher value on care policies and gender mainstreaming requires a sort of paradigm shift to acknowledge well-being and

human interdependence as preconditions for the EU resilience”.²³

While acknowledging that framing care in economic terms is a useful first step in EU policy making, it is equally important to advance a critical and transformative approach, informed by decades of theoretical scholarship. We focus on two policy areas – employment and EU external relations – where the value of care is particularly vulnerable to being sidelined.

Employment policies are shaped by neoliberal logics that prioritise productivity, competition and individual ‘upskilling’, framing people primarily as economic actors. This instrumental approach obscures the structural conditions that render care work invisible; precarious; and unequally distributed across gender, race and class, reinforcing its relegation to individual responsibility rather than collective, political concern. Similarly, EU external relation policies, including development, trade and foreign policy, often reproduce hierarchical and extractive dynamics, prioritising investment, security and geopolitical interests over solidarity, mutual responsibility or ethical interdependence. When care appears, it is frequently instrumentalised – as a soft power tool or technocratic social investment – rather than recognised as a principle of global justice and relational ethics.

Examining these two domains reveals how care politics is negotiated, distorted or displaced across policy fields. Moving beyond the narrow framing of care as an economic sector allows us to position it as a **transversal value**, shaping governance, relationality and justice, and to argue for its centrality as a foundational logic of political life within and beyond the EU.

Our material for analysis includes policy documents adopted by EU actors – primarily the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) – since 2020. We conduct a frame analysis guided by our analytical framework (Table 2), selecting 14 documents related to EU employment policies and 10 documents connected to EU external relations, for a total of 24 sources.

Table 2. Guiding framework for evaluating a policy from a care perspective.

1. Framing of care in a policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the need for care explicitly considered or made invisible? • Is care understood as a sector of economy ("paid care work and informal carers") or a systemic, foundational, societal value? • Why is care considered to be needed in a society? As an enabler of productivity and a necessary evil or as an intrinsic value?
2. Visibility of bodies, labour and power hierarchies in a policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is care valued in relation to other types of paid and unpaid work? Is it considered skilled or unskilled work? • Who is considered in need of care? No one, the most vulnerable – children and elderly – or everyone? • If it is, why is gender inequality in care considered a problem? Because of women's lower participation in production or because of men's lower participation in reproduction?
3. A political entity's role in relation to care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the entity act as a caring actor towards others, for example, by considering the needs and vulnerabilities of the disadvantaged? • Does the entity enable caring relations between individuals and societies?

While in our policy analysis we focus on employment and EU external policies, this guiding framework, grounded in a feminist ethics of care, can be used to assess all the different policy domains and policy levels. We highly recommend this exercise to practitioners and policymakers because, by analysing the current discourse around care in EU policy making, it becomes evident that the dominant policy paradigms marginalise the relational, reproductive and affective dimensions of society. They prioritise and reinforce a market-centric, hierarchical logic that hinders the potential to explore alternative imaginaries grounded instead

in interdependence, mutual responsibility and social sustainability.

In our final recommendations, we advocate for integrating care-sensitive indicators – such as time use, wellbeing and social cohesion – into competitiveness agendas and reorienting external relations around reciprocity and planetary care principles. This approach contributes to a broader effort to reframe policy priorities through a feminist lens attentive to care's ethical and political significance.

4. CASE STUDY 1: EMPLOYMENT POLICY AND CARE

In this part of the analysis, we investigate how the relationship between work and care is envisioned by the EU. We analysed 14 documents from the period 2019-2025 (see the annex). The material included the EU's most strategic documents on employment: the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan;²⁴ the European Skills Agenda;²⁵ and the newest Union for Skills.²⁶ We also included introductions to the EU's biggest initiatives in employment policy: Work Life Balance Directive;²⁷ Adequate Minimum Wage Directive;²⁸ A New Industrial Strategy for Europe;²⁹ Strategic Framework on Health and Safety;³⁰ Pay Transparency Directive;³¹ Attracting Skills and Talent;³² and the external policy on Decent Work Worldwide Communication.³³ We also included passages on work from the European Care Strategy³⁴ and gender equality instruments.³⁵

The word 'care' does not feature prominently across EU employment policies. When it does, it often appears as part of idioms such as 'care economy', 'paid care work', 'informal carers', 'long-term care' and 'care responsibilities', constructing care as an economic sector and an inconvenient necessity. Some documents, such as the "Communication on attracting skills and talent"³⁶ and the "Roadmap for women's rights",³⁷ devote separate sections to care (economy). Care is considered in positive terms and as of intrinsic value only in one of the policy documents: "Gender Equality Strategy".³⁸ Care is viewed here not only as a responsibility, but also as an entitlement, and it is considered that "caring for loved ones has a high economic and societal value". It is also the only document that explicitly considers caring as a legitimate choice.³⁹

Care is problematised and considered to be in need of addressing through EU policies primarily to enable labour. The societal need for care is therefore an obstacle to a higher-order goal – productivity. For instance, poor workplace health and safety result in reduced productivity⁴⁰ and responsibilities

are considered an 'obstacle' to upskilling as "time constraints, financial considerations, care responsibilities and motivation are some of the obstacles preventing adults from taking part in further learning".⁴¹ Reduced productivity becomes an even bigger problem in newer policies because of the need for the EU to remain competitive. Competitiveness is a central concept and value presented in the Union for Skills⁴² to which all the others are subordinated. The goal of elevating care responsibilities and upskilling is tied not to human flourishing but to the EU's competitiveness. While the goal of upskilling was linked to ameliorating quality of life in the EU's previous skills policy, as it established that "each person in the EU should be empowered and rewarded to up- and reskill",⁴³ this aim disappeared from the Union of Skills⁴⁴ and was replaced by the singular goal of competitiveness. It is not clear against whom the EU is supposed to be competitive (sometimes other OECD countries who "attract more talent" are mentioned; sometimes the context is a "global technological race") or for what purpose. Competitiveness, understood as domination for its own sake, becomes the opposite of care.

Gender segregation in care is problematised whenever care is mentioned. While sporadically the problem is considered as two-sided – women overprovide care while men underprovide care⁴⁵ – it is more often that women's relation to care is problematised. Women's disproportionate participation in unpaid care work is viewed as a problem because it is an obstacle to their labour participation.⁴⁶ The European Care Strategy highlights that care responsibilities affects women's "options to take on paid work", while investment in care "helps more women to join the labour market and yields more revenues for public budgets" and "have a beneficial impact on [...] mothers' return to work".⁴⁷ Gender segregation in occupation and overrepresentation of women in care-related professions is again viewed as a one-

way problem, the solution to which is more often to encourage women to enter male-dominated professions but not to encourage men to enter female-dominated professions.⁴⁸ For instance, the Union for Skills underlines that there is “an urgent need to address gender disparities” and recognises that “women remain underrepresented in many STEM fields, including in engineering and computer science, while men are underrepresented in sectors like health, welfare, and the teaching profession”.⁴⁹ However, the strategy then proceeds to only address gender inequality in STEM. While it develops specific targets for gender balance in STEM (at least 1 in 4 female students in STEM fields, at least 2 in 5 female students in STEM tertiary education, at least 1 in 5 female students in ICT PhD programmes),⁵⁰ there are no similar strategies to increase the number of men in female-dominated sectors.

Paid care work is considered necessary for the EU’s economy. The fact that the EU experiences and will experience significant labour shortages in the care sector is particularly problematised. The care sector is considered as one of the most vulnerable to labour shortages.⁵¹ In this context, poor working conditions in the care sector are acknowledged. As stated in the European Care Strategy 2022:⁵² “working conditions in the care sector are difficult and the wages are low, which partly explains the staff shortages in the sector”. Whenever working conditions in the care sector are discussed as in need of amelioration, it is not with the goal of the quality of workers’ lives but to “make the sector more attractive and therefore resolve the problem of labour shortages and improve productivity”.⁵³

Care is considered as an underappreciated skill or appreciated as a skill in some parts of EU policies. The Gender Equality Strategy acknowledges that “women’s skills are undervalued” but does not explain what skills or how to address this problem.⁵⁴ The Strategic Framework on Health and Safety critiques the consideration of health and care sectors as “light work”.⁵⁵ The Communication on attracting skills and talent gives significant space to the need that the EU attracts workers in “long-term care” but considers it a “low or medium skilled” occupation.⁵⁶ The European Skills Agenda,⁵⁷ adopted in the wake of COVID-19

pandemic, recognises the need for skilled care work. Health is one of the key sectors prioritised for upskilling. While the agenda focused on digital skills and STEM, it considered a wide spectrum of jobs as being of importance. It also recognises “transversal skills” as skills,⁵⁸ including “uniquely human skills such as empathy and adaptation to change”, which are especially important in view of the growing “silver economy and care economy”.⁵⁹ The European Care Strategy purports that care workers are in need of upskilling and that skills which are necessary for care work are changing.⁶⁰ These considerations of care-related skills as of value need to be contrasted with other policy documents. In “A New Industrial Strategy for Europe”,⁶¹ while a skilled workforce is considered essential for industrial competitiveness, skilled labour is imagined primarily as “scientists, engineers and technicians”. Although both the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (2021) and the Union for Skills (2025) problematise the labour shortage in the care sector, at the same time, they do not include this sector as requiring skills and in need of upskilling, in contrast to STEM-related work. The language of transversal skills disappears from the Union for Skills, the successor of the European Skills Agenda, and the EU’s newest and central employment policy. Instead, the document adopts a clear focus on STEM and vocational training. Nowhere in the document are care-related skills considered necessary for Europeans. There is therefore an incoherence between care-focused policies,⁶² which recognise the need for care-related skills, and the upskilling agenda in the care sector and employment policies.⁶³ Particularly disappointing is the fact that “A roadmap for women’s rights”⁶⁴ makes an explicit link to the Union for Skills and states the need for upskilling to be considered from a gender-sensitive perspective. In the Union for Skills, this comes to mean an objective to encourage women to enter male-dominated sectors like STEM but not to value feminised work like work requiring care-related and transversal skills and female-dominated sectors like the care sector.

In employment policy, the EU takes the role of a provider of care over those who have significant obstacles to providing labour or experience precarity, discrimination and exploitation in their working lives.

This idea of extending care over certain vulnerable groups is central to the adoption of several flagship initiatives in the EU's employment policy. The Pay Transparency Directive is supposed to extend care over women who do not receive fair remuneration for their work.⁶⁵ With the Platform Work Directive (2021), the EU provides care over vulnerable platform workers due to the challenging and rapidly changing circumstances of their work. Within its skills policy, the EU considers those who are disadvantaged and therefore "not able to realise their full potential" through upskilling or reskilling, for example, women, migrants, residents of rural areas and those with low socio-economic status. The EU sees itself as obliged to extend extra help to these groups. The EU's care extends beyond Europeans and reaches externally to those at risk of child labour and forced labour.⁶⁶ Through these policies, the EU noticed the needs of specific groups and took differentiated actions, acting in the logic of ethics of care rather than rigid ethics of principles. However, on occasion, the goal of lifting up those who have obstacles to their full participation in production is linked explicitly not to their wellbeing but to increased productivity,⁶⁷ a self-interest goal that defies the caring logic. Moreover, care, when considered, is limited to the most vulnerable groups, which are disadvantaged due to structural discrimination and precarity. Only in relation to health and safety regulations and adequate minimum wages are all workers' rights discussed, and the EU acts as a carer for the European working population by safeguarding it.

EU employment policies rarely explicitly address and regulate relations between individuals. The EU is not a proactive actor in realising the value of care within European society. The need for humans to care for each other, its societal value and the political dimension are not made visible,

and therefore, assumed to be unimportant or not relevant to EU policy making. On the contrary, human relations are imagined and reinforced as being in constant competition rather than as mutual care (e.g., the Union for Skills 2025). There are some rare examples of the EU acting as an enabler of caring relations between humans. For instance, the EU fulfils this role by proposing pension credits for care-related career breaks,⁶⁸ and thus, economically enabling workers to care for those close to them. EU policies, such as the EU Care Strategy, recognise the human need to care for those closest and the most vulnerable: children; the sick; and elderly. Care is, however, not understood as something that extends to all human relations.

Overall, through its employment policy, the EU promotes a care economy but not a care society. Care is primarily considered as a sector of economy that enables other, more valued, economic activities. A lack of care is problematised due to its detrimental effects on overall production; women's over-participation in care is centred as an obstacle to their labour participation and human relations are imagined as competitive rather than caring. While the European Care Strategy (2022) presented, to some extent, a change of discourse by highlighting the societal value of care, newer policies like the Union of Skills (2025) represent a turn away from this understanding.

5. CASE STUDY 2: EXTERNAL ACTION AND CARE

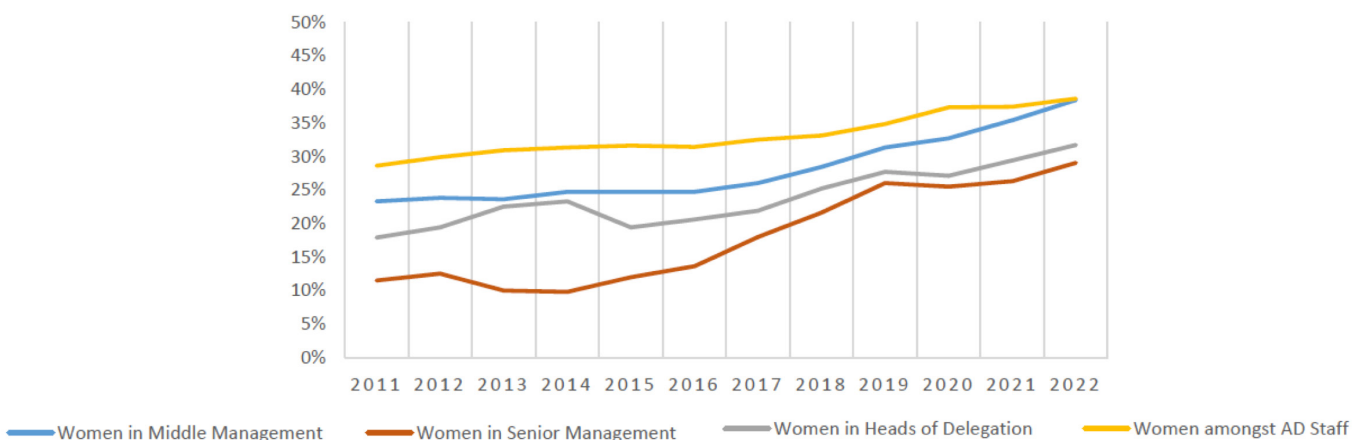
The EEAS, created by the Lisbon Treaty (2007) and launched in 2010, serves as the EU’s diplomatic arm, tasked with ensuring coherence in foreign and security policy and representing the Union globally. Its mandate extends beyond diplomacy to development, humanitarian aid, crisis response, and actions on climate and human rights.⁶⁹ Overall, the EEAS aims to consolidate EU external action – particularly through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – while projecting EU norms abroad. As Catherine Ashton, the first High Representative, noted, the EU’s foreign policy should reinforce the Union’s self-image as a “civilising force” and “normative power”.⁷⁰

Women leaders such as Ashton, Helga Schmid – Secretary General of the EEAS from 2016-2020 – and Federica Mogherini – former HRVP from 2014 to 2019 – have, in specific yet limited ways, contributed to promoting gender equality within the EEAS. Ashton’s early appointments helped set a precedent for gender-sensitive practices, while Schmid supported women’s professional development, building on tools such as the EEAS Gender and Equal Opportunities Strategy 2018-2023.⁷¹

However, feminist scholars highlight that the CSDP – and by extension the EEAS – remains embedded in an institutional culture often mislabelled “gender-neutral”.⁷² Security and defence structures have been shaped by masculine norms of hierarchy, rationality and control, which complicate the integration of gender perspectives. Despite long-standing commitments to gender mainstreaming since the 1998 Treaty of Amsterdam, the EEAS has lagged behind other EU domains in operationalising gender equality and care.

At its creation, gender mainstreaming frameworks were already established in EEAS but inconsistently applied.⁷³ Scholars such as Chappell and Guerrina argue that while the institution acknowledges gender rhetorically, implementation remains superficial. Gender is often limited to staffing – for example, increasing women’s representation in missions (see Figure 1⁷⁴) or in the creation of the Gender Advisor Office in 2015 – rather than shaping strategic culture or operational priorities. They further argue that the EEAS acts as a “gendered normative actor”, meaning that it deploys gender discourse strategically rather than driving transformative change.⁷⁵

Figure 1. Evolution of the share of women in management and Administrator (AD) posts.



Source: EEAS Human Resources Report 2022.

This perspective and brief institutional background introduction are crucial to understanding the deeply gendered policy structures in which feminist, often women, leaders navigate when promoting efforts toward transformative change. Moreover, while it is evident that gender equality remains the primary institutionalised entry point for a specific feminist discourse within EU external action, this narrow focus sidelines broader feminist concerns with interdependence, vulnerability and care. Since this policy study centres on care, the following section examines how the EEAS has framed, mobilised or neglected care within its external action, allowing us to assess both the potential and limits of embedding transformative care perspectives in EU foreign policy.

A total of ten documents were analysed, mostly published from 2020 onward, except for the EEAS Gender and Equality Opportunity Strategy 2018-2023, which was included to provide a framework for institutional practices. The other nine documents (see the annex for a complete list) focus on external relations. The analysis is structured in three layers: care within the institution; care in multilateral and regional arenas; and care in select bilateral agreements, highlighting both novel and selective references in EU external policy.

5.1 Care within the institution: The EEAS from within

The EEAS Gender and Equal Opportunities Strategy (2018-2023) aimed to promote an “inclusive workplace which values the contributions of all colleagues, regardless of physical ability, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or parenting and caring obligations”.⁷⁶ On paper, this vision signalled a commitment to equality and diversity, positioning care as being provided by the EU to its staff through inclusion initiatives. However, when examining how this commitment was operationalised, a more complex – and at times contradictory – logic emerges.

The strategy proposed, for instance, the creation of the Equal Opportunities Officer and explained that

the latter should have been supported by a network of “volunteering colleagues”,⁷⁷ including senior staff, to help raise awareness, monitor progress and drive implementation as Equality Ambassadors. The use of “volunteering” here is revealing: it reproduces the same logics that underpin informal and unpaid care work, where responsibility is moralised rather than institutionally recognised or remunerated. In this sense, the EEAS appears to reproduce internally the very patterns of undervaluation and invisibility that characterise care work more broadly. Moreover, when reading the three main objectives of the strategy, it is important to highlight that while the first two – (1) gender equality and (2) an open and inclusive working environment – fall squarely within what might be called a gender and social policy frame, they both seem, in substance and in sequencing, to serve the third and final objective – (3) promoting flexible and result-oriented working conditions that incorporate work-life balance. This ordering suggests a hierarchy of priorities in which equality and inclusion are not pursued as ends in themselves but as means to achieve greater productivity, efficiency and – indeed – results. Care thus seems to become valuable not for its social or relational importance but as a means of optimising institutional performance.

This productivity- and economic-interest-driven logic is made even more explicit in several passages of the strategy. When discussing “caring obligations” or “caring responsibilities”, the text acknowledges that women remain the primary caregivers in EU societies. However, at the same time, it attributes women’s “inactivity” to this burden of care, noting that nearly 20% of inactive women cite caring responsibilities compared to only 2% of men. The framing is quite evident: care is positioned as a cause of inactivity (from the labour market), and therefore, as an obstacle to (women’s) productivity, rather than as an active and socially essential form of work. Moreover, the document further reinforces this economic rationale by claiming that gender equality is “not just a question of fairness, but also an economic imperative”, emphasising the economic loss due to gender employment gaps that cost the EU around €370 billion per year.⁷⁸

It cannot be denied that, at the practice level, the strategy introduces measures that go beyond pure productivity concerns. It calls for a “mindset shift throughout the EEAS from a result-oriented to a more trust-based approach”, encouraging male staff to take family-related leave and promoting greater access to flexible working arrangements. These initiatives gesture toward a more relational and trust-centred institutional culture. Nevertheless, their ambition remains limited: care is recognised only insofar as it supports better work-life balance, not as a principle capable of transforming how the institution conceives labour, interdependence or collective wellbeing. Therefore, the strategy’s ambiguous use of language across the document, while sometimes progressive in tone, falls short of envisioning care as a political and ethical value that could reshape the EEAS’s organisational ethos. As the EU projects itself outward, these same logics travel, shaping how care is framed in its multilateral and regional engagements, where equality and social reproduction are often positioned as instruments of stability and development rather than socio-political value in its own right.

5.2 Multilateral frameworks: Care in the EU’s global discourse

When examining how care enters EU global and regional diplomacy, it becomes clear that its presence remains marginal, often subordinated to more dominant narratives of gender equality, sustainable development and economic growth. Among the multilateral policy frameworks, the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025) – “Together Towards a Gender Equal World” – stands out as the document where the notion of care appears most visibly. Drafted by the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, it includes 12 mentions of “care”, “caring” and “caretakers”. However, on two occasions, the term “care” appears in sectoral contexts, such as obstetric or maternal care, linked to the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights in humanitarian settings.

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic played a pivotal role in forcing greater recognition of the importance of care; the document specifically mentions the “disruption to access to care” and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women. However, as shown later in the analysis, this acknowledgement did not translate into a sustained or transformative reconfiguration of how care is conceptualised within EU external actions. Once again, care was absorbed into pre-existing frameworks of human rights, sustainable development and economic empowerment, without unsettling the neoliberal and growth-oriented logic that organises these domains.

Within the EU’s human rights and sustainable development discourses, care is acknowledged primarily as a shared responsibility between women and men. The Gender Action Plan calls for non-discriminatory, inclusive social protection schemes and advocates extending labour rights to informal and precarious workers. Nevertheless, crucially, it silences the structural inequalities that shape who performs care work and under what conditions. There is no explicit mention of migrant care workers or the transnational hierarchies of race, class and citizenship that sustain global care chains. The missing link between migrants and care work is also present in the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, where we can read that one of the priorities should be “the improvement of working conditions of migrant workers, including by eradicating all forms of forced labour and exploitation”, but without mention of migrant care workers. This absence reflects what Nancy Fraser has described as the neoliberal appropriation of feminist claims:⁷⁹ the discourse on empowerment and equality is selectively mobilised to legitimise market expansion and flexible labour, while the systemic injustices of social reproduction remain unaddressed.

In the same document, care is primarily framed as a means to combat and respond to forms of violence against children and persons with disabilities,⁸⁰ which should definitely be supported, but still misses the

point that care permeates all human relationships (as included in the guiding framework). Examples of this framing can be found in recommendations such as “support the development of quality alternative care and the transition from institution-based to quality family- and community-based care for children without parental care”.⁸¹ This framing also resonates with broader EU commitments to promoting “decent work” and eradicating all forms of forced labour and exploitation, including child labour. At the other end of the spectrum, the Action Plan also highlights care as essential to “the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons at all times”, emphasising the need for accessible and sustainable long-term care. While these objectives are both legitimate and necessary, they reveal a recurrent feature of the EU’s care framework – namely, that care is conceptualised as something required only by the most vulnerable: children; persons with disabilities; older people; or women in vulnerable positions. This same logic is reinforced in the European Care Strategy,⁸² which states that “the way we value care should reflect the way we want children, older persons, persons with disabilities and carers to be valued”. Although it is crucial to acknowledge the different positions and intersectional identities of those affected by

social and structural inequalities, this perspective ultimately confines care to the realm of vulnerability and dependency. In contrast, what is needed is a reconceptualisation of care as a societal and holistic practice, and as a shared responsibility that sustains the social fabric rather than an individualised response to need.

In its multilateral references, the EU situates gender equality within established frameworks, such as those of the ILO and the UN, citing conventions such as ILO No. 100 and No. 111, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, when translated into practice – especially within trade and partnership agreements – explicit care-related provisions are virtually absent. Even where gender equality clauses exist, as we see in the next and final section of the analysis, they tend to be soft, voluntary and non-binding. The EU’s trade diplomacy thus reproduces a pattern that Fraser would once again call progressive neoliberalism:⁸³ the symbolic inclusion of gender and care concerns within a framework that ultimately reinforces economic competitiveness and global market integration (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot from the EU Gender Action Plan III ‘Together Towards a Gender Equal World’ document, published 25 November 2020.



Estimates show advancing gender equality could add about **EUR 11 to 21 trillion** to global GDP by 2025

From a feminist ethics perspective, this logic diverges sharply from Joan Tronto’s conception of care as a moral and political practice that is fundamental to sustaining life and democracy.⁸⁴ For Tronto, care is not a residual activity to be distributed more efficiently, but a relational practice that shapes the very boundaries of justice and citizenship. In this sense, even when the EU commits to “building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies” through the “support of decentralisation, transparent, inclusive, participatory and accountable local governance” and the “promotion of active

citizenship and full participation of all, without discrimination, in public or political life”,⁸⁵ important questions remain about how such participation can be genuinely realised without accessible and sustainable care infrastructures.

A further revealing silence emerges in EU flagship initiatives such as the Global Gateway – officially drafted by the European Commission but in which the EEAS also has a key role as coordinator and co-implementer – defined as the EU’s strategy for “sustainable and trusted connections that work for

people and the planet”.⁸⁶ The document presents the initiative as a €300 billion investment framework designed to tackle global challenges – from climate change and environmental protection to health security and competitiveness – by strengthening global supply chains. Nevertheless, despite its human-centred rhetoric, care is not mentioned even

once throughout the text. More strikingly, in the Global Gateway’s factsheet summarising its six key guiding principles (Figure 3), even gender equality – a value the EU routinely places at the core of its external identity – is absent from the list of priorities, or at least not explicitly mentioned.

Figure 3. EU Global Gateway Factsheet summarising key guiding principles for investments.



Moreover, the strategy’s differentiation between hard and soft infrastructure is particularly telling. In the document, we can read that “the European model is about investing in both hard and soft infrastructure, in sustainable investments in digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research”. Thus, while “hard infrastructure” refers to investments in digital, climate and energy, “soft infrastructure” may include sectors often associated with care – such as health, education and research. This binary categorisation can reinforce a gendered hierarchy of value in which the material, technological and market-oriented domains of “hard infrastructure” remain central to the EU’s external investments while the social and relational dimensions that sustain life are relegated to a softer, less strategic sphere. This differentiation could reproduce a toxic long-standing association

between care, femininity and social reproduction, perpetuating their subordination to the masculine-coded realms of production, trade and security.

The Global Gateway exemplifies how the EU’s sustainability and connectivity agendas continue to exclude care – not only as a policy priority but also as a conceptual category through which to rethink the meaning of “connection” and the need for care in protecting the environment, one of the “most pressing global challenges” addressed in the strategy.⁸⁷

In summary, within the EU’s multilateral frameworks, care is discursively present yet politically marginal. It is invoked within human rights and sustainable development narratives but remains confined to the logics of productivity, empowerment and growth.

The EU's approach reflects a tension between feminist language and neoliberal governance. While adopting the vocabulary of transformation, it leaves intact the hierarchies and economic structures that sustain global inequalities in care. Bridging this gap would require a shift from viewing care as an ancillary policy issue toward recognising it as a central political principle, one that redefines what global justice and partnership mean in the first place.

5.3 The EU's geopolitical self-positioning on care

The EU's external action is often grounded in the narrative of being a normative and gender power: a moral actor that promotes democracy, equality and human rights through its foreign and security policies. This geopolitical imaginary relies on a self-ascribed identity of ethical leadership, one that "teaches care" and exports equality standards to the rest of the world. Through this framing, care becomes externalised: not a relational practice through which the EU engages with others, but rather a norm to be diffused, codified and regulated.

In its policy documents – such as the Global Gateway, the Strategic Compass and the Gender Action Plan III – the EU repeatedly asserts its intention to build partnerships "based on shared values" and "mutual interests". However, these formulations remain embedded in an ethics of principles, anchored in universalist notions of equality and sustainability that leave little room for differentiated, situated understandings of care. High Representative Borrell's insistence on "resolute engagement grounded in our core principles"⁸⁸ reproduces a moral hierarchy in which Europe is positioned as the enlightened carer. In contrast, others are recipients of guidance, modernisation or capacity-building.

This self-representation resonates with the EU's broader geopolitical narrative of "strategic autonomy" and "open but assertive" partnerships (as outlined in the EU's 2021 trade policy⁸⁹). Since von der Leyen's announcement of a "geopolitical Commission",⁹⁰ the EU's engagement with the

world has been increasingly framed in terms of competition, resilience and technological sovereignty. In this context, caring relations are imagined as compatible with strategic interests – care becomes instrumental, a language of soft power and legitimacy rather than a relational ethic.

By contrast, an ethics of care would imply attentiveness to power asymmetries, the multiplicity of needs and the interdependence that characterises global relations. It requires recognising that "care" cannot be exported as a fixed standard but must be co-constructed in dialogue with those historically positioned at the margins of global governance. This is precisely what regional feminist frameworks such as the Montevideo Strategy for the Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean, drafted and published by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), have articulated – placing care at the centre of social and economic transformation, not as an add-on to growth but as its ethical and material foundation.

Recent developments in EU-LAC cooperation illustrate both the promise and limitations of translating these ideas into concrete policy. On 9 November 2025, a Bi-regional Pact on Care was signed between the EU and 16 Latin American countries. The pact reflects a more advanced discourse on care and represents a first attempt to shift from a care economy toward a care society. For instance, point 4 recognises care as "both a need, a responsibility, a co-responsibility, and an essential element for social justice and human dignity, as well as for sustainable and inclusive economic and social development".⁹¹ Point 8 goes further, describing a care society as one that "embraces self-care, mutual care, and environmental protection, grounded on a comprehensive approach that seeks to ensure the sustainability of life and the planet".⁹² Nevertheless, official statements by HR/VP Kaja Kallas suggest a partial retrenchment: she frames care primarily in terms of the challenges posed by rapid population ageing and the growing demand for caregivers, reverting to the concept of a "care economy" rather than a broader societal transformation.⁹³

This tension between ambitious normative commitments and more conventional policy framings becomes evident in the EU's recent bilateral trade and partnership agreements. Agreements with Chile (2023), New Zealand (2023) and Kenya (2024) are celebrated as "next-generation" accords that integrate sustainability and gender equality considerations, and they are often

presented as evidence of a more "caring" approach to globalisation. The EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement, which entered into force in February 2025, includes a dedicated chapter on "cooperation related to gender" (Article 45, Figure 4), though in practice this chapter primarily focuses on women's empowerment rather than a comprehensive ethics of care.

Figure 4. Article 45 of the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement, February 2025.

- Article 45*
Cooperation Related To Gender
1. Cooperation shall contribute to strengthening policies and programmes that improve, guarantee and extend the equitable participation of men and women in all sectors of political, economic, social and cultural life. Cooperation shall contribute to easing women's access to all necessary resources for the full exercise of their fundamental rights.
 2. In particular, cooperation should promote the creation of an adequate framework to:
 - (a) ensure that gender and gender-related issues can be taken into account at every level and in all areas of cooperation including macroeconomic policy, strategy and development operations; and
 - (b) promote the adoption of positive measures in favour of women.

The EU-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force in May 2024, also explicitly introduces gender-responsive trade provisions (Article 19.4) that promote women's economic empowerment and "inclusive economic growth", while remaining vague about what "inclusive" means in practice (Article 19.4, point 2). Lastly, the EU-Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement, which entered into force on July 2024, frames itself as a tool for "sustainable and equitable development" with reference to "gender equity" only once in the section regarding "Fisheries" and how to focus particularly on the "capacity of women traders involved or intending to engage in fisheries" (Article 89, EU-Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement 2024). In any of these three 'new generation agreements', we find the word "care" explicitly, so, unsurprisingly, any care provisions have been included. Moreover, the structural logic underpinning all three agreements

seems to remain grounded in market access and regulatory convergence with EU standards. Gender-related clauses are often placed within "trade and sustainable development" chapters that lack binding enforcement mechanisms and use language that remains very vague, making these new progressive additions more symbolic than transformative.

These agreements also illustrate how the EU's ethical principles continue to dominate its external economic relations: gender equality – and, by default, care – are invoked as universal principles of good governance, rather than as relational practices that might require the EU itself to transform its modes of engagement. The asymmetry lies not only in economic power but also in epistemic authority – where the EU defines what "caring" and "inclusive" trade looks like, often without genuinely incorporating the lived experiences or

policy innovations of its partners. Rather than fostering reciprocal engagement, these agreements reproduce a logic in which the EU's principles must be emulated and aligned with – an extension of normative power through the language of care. If the EU seeks to embody a genuinely feminist and caring international role, it must move beyond performative

inclusions or epistemic impositions. This shift would entail learning from frameworks like the Montevideo Strategy, grounding care in interdependence and co-responsibility, and practising what it preaches: an ethics of care that is dialogical, situated and attentive to the material and epistemic inequalities that shape global relations.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several recommendations that follow from our research. Our main proposal is for those involved in policy making, no matter the policy area or policy level, to **apply this guide to analyse the place of care in policies and mainstream the value of care in policy making**. Moreover, we suggest following actions:

To progressives at all policy levels:

- **Interrogate policy proposals on whether they help us build care societies.** Whether you work on security or environment, care is relevant for your file and either encouraged or discouraged as a societal value. Be suspicious of whether a policy is meant to make humans flourish or serves other goals, such as competitiveness or productivity, in a way that is decoupled from societal wellbeing. Progressive ideas are sometimes emptied of their intentions because of the need to make them palatable to wider audiences, for example, by showing that gender equality 'works' for the economy. However, we should not forget the initial aim of the policies and consistently evaluate whether they serve this goal.
- **Make the devaluation of femininity a core policy concern.** As claimed by feminist scholarship, devaluation of care is linked to the inferior position that femininity occupies in our societies. Our goal should not be, or at least not only be, that women become 50% of engineers, but that feminised sectors, skills and ethics become equally valued and remunerated.
- **Object to the framing of care as a necessary evil.** Care should not only be considered when it presents a challenge to production. We should not aim for societies in which care is eliminated or outsourced so women can participate in

production, but rather for societies in which production is decentred so both men and women can and are encouraged to participate in care.

- **Consider care as something that extends beyond children, the sick and elderly.** Care can be present or absent in relations between all human beings, not only the vulnerable and their carers. Moreover, we can also think about relations between nations and our relationship with the environment as being based on care or not.
- **Advocate for a care society not only for a care economy.** We should not disregard the wins achieved in the context of the care economy. However, we must also be clear that adjustments to the persistent overvaluation of production do not make caring a socially valued activity to the extent it should be. We can draw on the wealth of feminist scholarship, especially in the area of ethics of care, to make this point, and we should make it accessible and translatable for policy making. Sectoral discussions about a care economy and the now mainstream understanding of this concept can become springboards for talking about the intrinsic and over-encompassing value of care in our societies. The current right-wing resurgence can make us feel that this is not the time for building and expanding on but defending what we have achieved. We are of the view that for people to believe in and choose progressive politics we need to continue showing its transformative potential and ambition.

To progressives at the EU level:

- **Continue to support the European Care Strategy and other care economy policies.** The last mandate of the European Commission brought

us game-changing consideration of care in EU policies. In the less favourable climate, it should be observed that the existing social model is not watered down.

- **Advocate for coherence between care economy policies and other policies.** Our analysis shows a striking difference between the consideration of care in care and gender equality policies and in employment policies, for example, in the Union of Skills, which does not consider upskilling in a gender-sensitive way nor address the care sector. Arguing for coherence between policies can help prevent such mismatches in the future.
- **Be vigilant of the increasing focus on and discourse of competitiveness in the EU.** The goals of competitiveness and productivity, for their own sake, are contrary to the goal of building caring societies. Whenever policies are justified in the logic of competitiveness, interrogate what is this competitiveness for.
- **Support transversal skills and care-related jobs in EU employment policies.** The current focus on AI and technological sectors seems to drive the focus on STEM-related skills and jobs as deserving support. In this context, we should not forget what was clear during the COVID-19 pandemic – care sectors jobs are essential for society and need to be appreciated.
- **Strengthen and promote mutual learning and active listening on care across world regions.** The EU should cultivate horizontal, reciprocal exchanges with regions across the world, moving beyond hierarchical or extractive forms

of cooperation. Thus, the EEAS should expand the approach initiated by the EU-LAC Bi-regional Pact on Care by creating structured “Care Dialogues” in other regional partnerships (e.g., AU-EU, EU-ASEAN), mandating EU delegations to consult feminist, indigenous and community-based care actors systematically, and supporting peer-learning missions and small pilot projects through NDICI-Global Europe. These steps would embed active listening and equal exchange into everyday foreign policy practice, thereby developing policies that reflect diverse global experiences in building care societies.

- **Integrate care and social wellbeing as guiding principles in EU external agreements.** The EU should ensure that future external agreements reflect a shared commitment to social wellbeing, a fair distribution of care and strong public care systems, rather than prioritising economic gains alone. This can be operationalised by incorporating social protection and care provision benchmarks into partnership frameworks; reinforcing labour and gender equality commitments; and using Team Europe Initiatives and Global Gateway investments to support public care services, community-based models and social infrastructure that strengthen societies on both sides.
- **Pay attention to the place of care in gender equality strategies and policies.** The last Gender Equality Strategy gave consideration to the unequal distribution of care between men and women and the EU’s tools for impacting this problem. This level of ambition should be elevated and not rolled back.

CONCLUSION

The framework outlined in this policy study calls on the EU to *take care, seriously*. The pun in the title was chosen not only to make the brief punchier or more appetising to a broader audience, but also to send a strong, urgent message. Care can no longer be consigned to a peripheral concern or a sectoral issue; policymakers and practitioners should consider and value care as the foundation of a just, equitable and resilient society. The progressive EU now stands at a crossroads. While the current “care economy” discourse has highlighted the economic value of care work and has provided the starting point for debates around care, it risks remaining limited if treated as a technocratic or incremental measure. Still, it also risks reinforcing systemic inequalities, gendered divisions of labour and exclusionary structures.

To truly transform society, the EU must go beyond measuring and monetising care and embrace a broader vision, a *care society*, where care guides social, political and economic decision-making and that foregrounds solidarity, equity and interdependence. Our framework demonstrates that moving toward a care society is not simply aspirational; it provides concrete guidance for integrating care values into policy design, program implementation and institutional reform. In practice, this means designing policies that address the root causes of care inequities, rather than merely improving conditions within the care sector.

By urging the EU to *take care, seriously*, we call for courage, boldness and vision. This is a moment to move beyond safe, technocratic solutions and commit to transformative change that places care at the centre of societal life. For practitioners, the framework offers inspiration for innovative programs grounded in care principles; for policymakers, it provides a lens for evaluating and reimagining reforms that advance justice, sustainability and social cohesion.

This policy study aims to be a reminder that care is not an afterthought, an economic footnote or a temporary policy trend, but a principle that should guide the very design of our societies. It is time to take care, seriously.

ANNEX

Employment policy

- 1 “Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU”. COM(2017) 253 final. European Commission, 26 April 2017.
- 2 “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. COM(2020) 152 final. European Commission, 5 March 2020 (parts on employment).
- 3 “A new industrial strategy for Europe”. COM(2020) 102 final. European Commission, 10 March 2020 (parts on employment).
- 4 “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”. COM(2020) 274 final. European Commission, 1 July 2020.
- 5 “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on adequate minimum wages in the European Union”. COM(2020) 682 final. European Commission, 28 October 2020.
- 6 “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”. COM(2021) 102 final. European Commission, 4 March 2021 (parts on employment).
- 7 “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms”. COM(2021) 93 final. European Commission, 4 March 2021.
- 8 “EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027: Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work”. COM(2021) 323 final. European Commission, 28 June 2021.
- 9 “Commission sets out strategy to promote decent work worldwide and prepares instrument for ban on forced labour products”. European Commission, 24 February 2022.
- 10 “Communication: Attracting skills and talent to the EU”. European Commission, 11 July 2022.
- 11 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, 7 September 2022 (parts on employment).
- 12 “Commission work programme”. European Commission, 11 February 2025 (parts on employment).
- 13 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission, 5 March 2025.
- 14 “A roadmap for women’s rights”. European Commission, 7 March 2025 (parts on employment).

External relations policy

- 1 “EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III – an ambitious agenda for gender equality and women’s empowerment in EU external action”. JOIN(2020) 17 final. European Commission, 25 November 2020.
- 2 “The Global Gateway”. JOIN(2021) 30 final. European Commission, 1 December 2021.
- 3 European Commission. (2022). *Communication on decent work worldwide: For a global just transition and a sustainable recovery* (COM/2022/66 final). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0066>
- 4 **European Commission (2020) EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2020-2024)** <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0005>
- 5 European Commission, & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. (2020, April). Joint communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.
- 6 “EEAS Gender and Equal Opportunities Strategy 2018–2023”. European External Action Service, November 2017.
- 7 “EU–Chile Free Trade Agreement”. OJ L. European Union & Republic of Chile, 2024.
- 8 “Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union, of the one part, and the Republic of Kenya, member of the East African Community, of the other part”. *Official Journal of the European Union L* 2024/1648, 1.7.2024.
- 9 “EU–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement”. European Commission, 2023.
- 10 “Joint Declaration on a Bi-regional Pact on Care between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean”, Santa Marta, 9 Nov. 2025.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Folbre 1994; Fraser 1996; Elson 1991
- 2 Hochschild, A. (2012) *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin).
- 3 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission, 5 March 2025.
- 4 European Commission 2022
- 5 England 2005
- 6 Katona & Zacharenko, 2021
- 7 Greener 2013
- 8 Lane & Jordansson 2020
- 9 Dowling 2021
- 10 Thyssen & Mach 2023
- 11 Peto, Thissen, Clavaud 2025
- 12 Caracciolo di Torella 2025
- 13 Zacharenko and Elomaki 2022; Zacharenko 2023; Daly 2025
- 14 ILO 2024.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 UN Women 2019
- 17 OECD 2017
- 18 ILO 2024
- 19 Hutchings, K. (2000) “Towards a feminist international ethics”. *Review of International Studies*, 26: 111-130; Robinson, F. (1999) *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory and International Relations* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press).
- 20 Gilligan, C. (2011) “Interview with Carol Gilligan”. *Ethics of Care*, 16 July.
- 21 Tronto, J. C. and B. Fisher (1990) “Toward a feminist theory of caring”, in E. Abel and M. Nelson (eds) *Circles of Care* (New York: SUNY Press), pp. 36-54.
- 22 Thissen, L. (2022) “Towards a care-led recovery for the European Union? A feminist analysis of the national recovery and resilience plans”. Policy study. Foundation for European Progressive Studies, December.
- 23 Caracciolo di Torella and Masselot 2020
- 24 “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”. COM(2021) 102 final. European Commission, 4 March 2021.
- 25 “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”. COM(2020) 274 final. European Commission, 1 July 2020
- 26 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission.
- 27 “Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU”. COM(2017) 253 final. European Commission, 26 April 2017.
- 28 “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on adequate minimum wages in the European Union”. COM(2020) 682 final. European Commission, 28 October 2020.
- 29 “A new industrial strategy for Europe”. COM(2020) 102 final. European Commission, 10 March 2020.
- 30 “EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027: Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work”. COM(2021) 323 final. European Commission, 28 June 2021
- 31 “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms”. COM(2021) 93 final. European Commission, 4 March 2021.
- 32 “Communication: Attracting skills and talent to the EU”. European Commission, 11 July 2022.

- 33 “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on decent work worldwide for a global just transition and a sustainable recovery”. COM(2022) 66 final. European Commission, 23 February 2022.
- 34 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, 7 September 2022.
- 35 “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. COM(2020) 152 final. European Commission, 5 March 2020; “A roadmap for women’s rights”. European Commission, 7 March 2025.
- 36 “Communication: Attracting skills and talent to the EU”. European Commission.
- 37 “A roadmap for women’s rights”. European Commission.
- 38 “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. European Commission, p. 16.
- 39 Ibid, p. 16.
- 40 “EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027: Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work”. European Commission, p. 1.
- 41 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission, p. 3.
- 42 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission.
- 43 “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”. European Commission, p. 2.
- 44 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission.
- 45 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, pp. 12, 16; “A roadmap for women’s rights”. European Commission, pp. 3-4.
- 46 “Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU”. European Commission, pp. 1, 2; “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. European Commission, pp. 2, 3, 5; “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”. European Commission, p. 9, 10, 25; “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, pp. 2, 3, 5, 7; “A roadmap for women’s rights”. European Commission, p. 1.
- 47 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, p. 2-3.
- 48 “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. European Commission, p. 12; “A new industrial strategy for Europe”. European Commission, p. 11; “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission, pp. 7, 8.
- 49 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission, p. 7.
- 50 Ibid, p. 8.
- 51 “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”. European Commission, p. 29; “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, p. 9; “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission, pp. 9-10.
- 52 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, p. 9.
- 53 Ibid, p. 23.
- 54 “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. European Commission, p. 9.
- 55 “EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027: Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work”. European Commission, p. 13.
- 56 “Communication: Attracting skills and talent to the EU”. European Commission, pp. 17-19.
- 57 “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”. European Commission, p. 2.
- 58 Ibid, p. 14.
- 59 “European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience”. European Commission, p. 1.
- 60 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission, pp. 3, 15.
- 61 “A new industrial strategy for Europe”. European Commission, p. 11.
- 62 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission.
- 63 “Union of Skills communication”. European Commission.

- 64 “A roadmap for women’s rights”. European Commission, p. 5
- 65 “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms”. European Commission, p. 1.
- 66 “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on decent work worldwide for a global just transition and a sustainable recovery”. COM(2022) 66 final. European Commission.
- 67 “The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan”. European Commission, p. 17.
- 68 “A Union of equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025”. European Commission, p. 11.
- 69 Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007, OJ C 306, 17.12.2007
- 70 Manners, I. (2002) “Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2(40): 235-258. DOI: 10.1111/1468-5965.00353
- 71 Duke, S. (2014) “Reflections on the EEAS review”. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 1(19), 23-44. DOI: 10.54648/EERR2014002
- 72 Guerrina, R., T. Haastrup, K. A. M. Wright et al. (2018) “Does EU studies have a gender problem? Lessons of researching Brexit”. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2(20): 252-257; Kronsell, A. (2015) “Sexed bodies and military masculinities: Gender path dependence in the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy”. *Men and Masculinities*, 3(19): 311-336. DOI: 10.1177/1097184X15583906
- 73 Kronsell, A. (2012) *Gender, Sex and Post-national Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- 74 According to the EEAS Human Resources Report 2022, the service continued to pursue gender balance in management positions through targeted actions to promote women’s leadership while maintaining merit-based recruitment. By the end of 2022, women represented 36.4% of all managers, 44.4% of middle managers at headquarters and 30.6% of senior managers – an increase from 24.2% the previous year. The proportion of women Heads of Delegation also rose slightly, from 29.5% in 2021 to 31% in 2022.
- 75 Chappell, L. and R. Guerrina (2020) “Understanding the gender regime in the European External Action Service”. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2(55): 261-280.
- 76 “EEAS Gender and Equal Opportunities Strategy 2018–2023”. European External Action Service, November 2017.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 “EEAS Gender and Equal Opportunities Strategy 2018–2023”. European External Action Service.
- 79 Fraser, N. (2016) “Contradictions of capital and care”. *New Left Review*, 100: 99-117. DOI: 10.64590/nt2
- 80 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, 2020
- 81 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, 2020
- 82 “A European Care Strategy for caregivers and care receivers”. European Commission.
- 83 Fraser, N. (2013) *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso Books); Fraser, N. (2016) “Contradictions of capital and care”.
- 84 Tronto, J. C. (2013) *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: NYU Press).
- 85 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, 2020
- 86 “The Global Gateway”. JOIN(2021) 30 final. European Commission, 1 December 2021.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 “The Global Gateway”. European Commission.
- 89 “Trade policy review – an open, sustainable and assertive trade policy”. COM(2021) 66 final. European Commission, 18 February 2021.
- 90 “A stronger Europe in the world”. European Commission, 2019.
- 91 EU-LAC Pact on Care, 2025.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 “Press statement: EU–LAC Bi-regional Pact on Care”. European External Action Service, 9 November 2025.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY,
AUTHORS,
ABOUT FEPS &
PARTNERS**

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allwood, G. (2014) "Gender mainstreaming and EU climate change policy". *European Integration Online Papers*, 1(18): 6. DOI: 10.1695/2014006
- Chappell, L. and R. Guerrina (2020) "Understanding the gender regime in the European External Action Service". *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2(55): 261-280.
- "Regional progress report on the Montevideo strategy for the implementation of the regional gender agenda within the sustainable development framework". ECLAC, 30 December 2019.
- Duke, S. (2014) "Reflections on the EEAS review". *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 1(19), 23-44. DOI: 10.54648/EERR2014002
- "Trade policy review – an open, sustainable and assertive trade policy". COM(2021) 66 final. European Commission, 18 February 2021.
- "A stronger Europe in the world". European Commission, 2019.
- "EEAS human resources report 2022". European External Action Service. European Union, 2022.
- "Press statement: EU–LAC Bi-regional Pact on Care". European External Action Service, 9 November 2025.
- Fraser, N. (2013) *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso Books).
- Fraser, N. (2016) "Contradictions of capital and care". *New Left Review*, 100: 99-117. DOI: 10.64590/nt2
- Gilligan, C. (2011) "Interview with Carol Gilligan". *Ethics of Care*, 16 July.
- Guerrina, R., T. Hastrup, K. A. M. Wright et al. (2018) "Does EU studies have a gender problem? Lessons of researching Brexit". *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2(20): 252-257.
- Hochschild, A. (2012) *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin).
- Hutchings, K. (2000) "Towards a feminist international ethics". *Review of International Studies*, 26: 111-130.
- Kronsell, A. (2012) *Gender, Sex and Post-national Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kronsell, A. (2015) "Sexed bodies and military masculinities: Gender path dependence in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy". *Men and Masculinities*, 3(19): 311-336. DOI: 10.1177/1097184X15583906
- Manners, I. (2002) "Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2(40): 235-258. DOI: 10.1111/1468-5965.00353
- Manners, I. and R. G. Whitman (eds) (2000) *The Foreign Policy of EU Member States* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- Masselot, A. and E. Caracciolo di Torella (2010) *Reconciling Work and Family Life in EU Law and Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Niemann, A. and C. Bretherton (2013) "EU external policy at the crossroads: The challenge of actorness and effectiveness". *International Relations*, 3(27): 261-275. DOI: 10.1177/0047117813497306

Robinson, F. (1999) *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory and International Relations* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press).

Thissen, L. (2022) "Towards a care-led recovery for the European Union? A feminist analysis of the national recovery and resilience plans". Policy study. Foundation for European Progressive Studies, December.

Tronto, J. C. (2013) *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: NYU Press).

Tronto, J. C. and B. Fisher (1990) "Toward a feminist theory of caring", in E. Abel and M. Nelson (eds) *Circles of Care* (New York: SUNY Press), pp. 36-54.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



MONIKA DE SILVA

Dr Monika de Silva is an international relations scholar and a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Gothenburg. She executes research projects on EU-Global South relations and postcolonial justice and on contestation of gender equality. She is interested in normative contestation in European internal and external relations amidst global power shifts, with a particular focus on diplomacy, human rights, global justice, legal norms, and gender and sexuality. Her professional experience includes work in the European External Action Service, the Council of Europe, and the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She holds a PhD in political science (University of Gothenburg), an Advanced MA in international relations and diplomacy of the EU (College of Europe), and a Master of Law (University of Warsaw). Her work has been published in outlets such as *International Studies Quarterly*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, and *Politics & Governance*.



ISABEL HERNANDEZ PEPE

Isabel Hernandez Pepe is a PhD candidate in Transnational Governance at the Scuola Normale Superiore and the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna. Her work explores how feminist foreign policy plays out in practice, and why progressive ideas often collide with power hierarchies and institutional routines. With a transnational background between Europe and Latin America, Isabel engages closely with policymakers, diplomats, and feminist activists, and cares about connecting research, policy, and real political struggles. She holds a B.A. in Global and Latin American Studies (summa cum laude) and an M.A. in International Public Affairs (cum laude).

ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

FEPS is the European progressive political foundation and the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Our mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



Avenue des Arts 46
1000 Brussels, Belgium
info@feps-europe.eu
www.feps-europe.eu
@FEPS_Europe

ABOUT KARL RENNER INSTITUT

The Karl Renner Institute is the political academy of the Austrian Social Democratic movement.

It is a forum for political discourse, a centre for education and training, and a think tank on the future of social democracy.

In this capacity, it aims at establishing a discourse between experts from various fields and the Austrian Social Democratic Party in order to develop and realize new political positions generating a forum for political discussion and thus helping to introduce social democratic positions into the public discussion; training representatives of the Austrian Social Democratic Party so that they are optimally prepared for their present and future tasks; fostering the organizational development of the Austrian Social Democratic Party in order to open up and modernize party structures.

To this end, the Karl Renner Institute and its nine regional offices (one in each of Austria's federal provinces) organise a broad range of activities: Publications, debate evenings, seminars and lectures, appealing at a politically interested public; special conventions and seminars, targeted at experts, teachers and educators; workshops and consultations for officers, parliamentary representatives and employees of the Austrian Social Democratic Party

 **Renner**Institut

Karl-Popper-Straße 8,
1100 Vienna (Austria)
post@renner-institut.at
www.renner-institut.at
@RennerInstitut

In the European Union (EU) context, in recent years, 'care economy' has become a buzzword, not least thanks to the efforts of social democratic actors. With the adoption of the European Care Strategy in 2022, the EU consolidated its role as a particularly powerful actor in social protection of care work. With this policy study, we seek to bring the discussion on care and policy back from its limited and limiting demarcation as a 'care economy' to its origin in feminist thought. We briefly discuss feminist scholarship on the ethics of care, introduce the concept of a 'care society' and contrast it with the concept of a 'care economy'. We propose a guiding framework for analysing a policy from a care perspective. This framework can be applied to a policy in any policy domain and at any policy level.

POLICY STUDY PUBLISHED IN MARCH 2026 BY:



RennerInstitut

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



Copyright © 2026 by FEPS