



## The Asia Foundation

# STRENGTHENING CARE ECONOMIES in the Asia-Pacific

Women's equal access to economic opportunities is imperative for future growth and prosperity in Asia and the Pacific. The participation of women in the labor force is also critical to women's advancement and achieving gender equality in the region. This is true for low, middle, and high-income countries. For example, in India, including just 50 percent of non-working professional women in the economy would add \$440 billion (about \$1,400 per person in the US) USD to India's GDP. Getting women into the workforce is a key priority. However, research has shown that one critical barrier for women to enter the labor force is **the double burden of care and household responsibilities that disproportionately fall on women**. This burden is particularly acute in Asia.

To advance women's economic security and opportunities, there is an urgent need to establish a robust care economy ecosystem that redistributes the burden of care through effective care policies and investments in promising care delivery systems. This focus will also contribute to providing those in need of care with genuine options and choice. Understanding the state of care in each country is crucial to inform care policies, delivery and justice, however current data is very limited. Only 21 out of 58 countries in Asia and the Pacific have one data point to measure unpaid care.

Moreover, policymaking on care is difficult because:

1. The right policy **differs not just by country**, but even within different municipalities within one country
2. The focus on the care economy is so nascent that there are **no ready-made large-scale interventions** that governments can adapt, and
3. There is **little coordination** on care policies, delivery and justice within governments.

When there is a focus on care as an issue, it sits across multiple government functions including gender, labor, health, social protection, education, with little coordination among agencies.

## Our Approach

The Asia Foundation's approach to building resilient care ecosystems centers on three key pillars:

**1**

Elevate the care agenda at a national level through influencing care policy, program delivery, and advocacy

**2**

Improve coordination and collaboration between diverse stakeholders within the care ecosystem

**3**

Build the evidence and global knowledge base around care to inform the design and delivery of effective care delivery that increases choice for carers and those needing care

## Pillar 1: Elevate the Care Economy Nationally

In **Thailand**, the Foundation is working to increase access to childcare, recognizing the critical role that affordable and accessible childcare services play in enabling women's labor force participation, as workers, leaders, and entrepreneurs.

Recognizing the gap in government-provided childcare for children aged six months to two years, the Foundation has engaged with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to support the expansion of childcare service provision. This includes promoting policies that strengthen the capacity of childcare centers to deliver high-quality services. Through recent partnerships, the Foundation is also coordinating with Yunus Thailand and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to develop and strengthen private sector-led affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare options.

In **Mongolia**, the Foundation is spearheading efforts to integrate the care agenda into policy discussions. With existing care policies fragmented and underfunded, the Foundation is driving public awareness campaigns and organizing policy dialogues with high level stakeholders, including the National Statistics Office, the National Committee on Gender Equality, Women for Change, and the Mongolian National Feminist Network. These efforts have culminated in the development of comprehensive policy recommendations and a roadmap for advancing care policies in Mongolia, bridging the gap between policymakers, civil society organizations, academia, and the public.

In **Malaysia**, the Foundation worked with the federal government to conduct a four-week Care Economy Policy Lab to design policy and regulatory frameworks for professionalizing care work. The Foundation is also working with Selangor state government to provide technical inputs toward a Care Economy Framework. In this project, The Foundation's approach involves engaging stakeholders from the private, public, and civil society sectors to elevate and influence the national care policy agenda.

In the **Pacific Islands**, the Foundation led a pivotal discussion in June 2023 on the care economy at the Pacific Update, the premier forum for discussion of economic, social, political, and environmental issues in the region. The forum included the Hon. Sashi Kiran, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection. The Foundation subsequently partnered with the Fiji National University to conduct research on Fiji's care economy, with a focus on care-related migration. Preliminary findings were presented at a convening in September 2023, with the final report scheduled to be launched in 2024.

In **Sri Lanka**, with funding from Global Affairs Canada, the Foundation is working to strengthen the rights of carers through policy development at national and subnational levels and strengthening the capacity of government officials and local women's organizations to build a stronger care ecosystem. An advocacy campaign will raise public awareness of unpaid care work and the gendered inequalities associated with care, to influence norms change and the redistribution of unpaid care work.

## **Pillar 2: Improving Coordination and Collaboration Between Diverse Stakeholders in the Care Ecosystem**

Fostering collaborative efforts within the care ecosystem across local, regional, and global spheres is also key. In 2022, the Foundation organized the **Bali Care Economy Dialogue ahead of the G20 summit** in Indonesia. This three-day conference highlighted critical challenges around care, particularly in the aftermath of Covid-19 and other regional conflicts and convened nearly 80 representatives from governments, civil society, and the private sector to brainstorm strategic preconference equitable care provision. Building on the Bali convening, the Foundation hosted a pre-conference for **Women Deliver 2023** in Kigali, Rwanda, in collaboration with partners including the Center for Global Development, WeProsper Coalition, International Center for Research on Women, and the International Labour Organization, to elevate the need for stronger care policies and intersectional movements for care justice.

By convening 100 participants across the public, private, and civil society sectors, the Foundation participated in a high-level discussion on translating care policies into actionable and measurable recommendations. Also, the Foundation convened a session at the **2023 APEC Women and the Economy Forum**, which included U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Dr. Geeta Rao Gupta, on how to translate care policy insights into action for improved care policy and care delivery, emphasizing the need for investments to catalyze innovation and collaboration for action.

## **Pillar 3: To Build the Evidence Base on Care**

To address the dearth of evidence on care and advance data-driven decision-making, The Foundation is working with partners to conduct research and policy analysis related to care across diverse dimensions. In 2022, to inform the agenda of The Bali Care Economy Conference, the Foundation published its first white paper on the care economy *Toward a Resilient Care Ecosystem in Asia and the Pacific*, which synthesizes existing evidence on care and highlights critical gaps for which further discussion are required. The white paper was followed by a regional *Roadmap for Action on the Care Economy in Asia and the Pacific* which translates the insights and findings from the white paper into concrete recommendations and next steps.

The Women Deliver 2023 Pre-Conference on the Care Economy led to the creation of a synthesis document on *Strengthening Care Policies and Intersectional Movements for Care Justice*, providing a clear set of recommendations and next steps for global stakeholders in the care economy, highlighting the need to invest in a sustainable care economy, enhance coordination and communication, and to accelerate policy change across the care ecosystem.

The Foundation, along with its partners from the Women Deliver Conference are now developing a **Global Roadmap on the care economy** to sustain momentum for care policies, delivery, and justice with clear metrics to capture impact.