



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

**UNPAID, UNDERVALUED,
UNSUSTAINABLE: INSIDE THE CARE
ECONOMY'S INVISIBLE WORKFORCE**

WORK MATTERS

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Unpaid, Undervalued, Unsustainable: Inside the Care Economy's Invisible Workforce

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The world's most important economy does not sit on a stock exchange. It is the care economy, and it is in trouble. The care economy includes all paid and unpaid work from parents looking after children, to daughters caring for ageing parents, to underpaid workers in day-care centres, nursing homes, and hospitals. It includes taking care of people with disabilities and sick family members. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines it as encompassing both direct and indirect care, in both households and markets. It is the invisible infrastructure that keeps every other sector afloat, yet it remains undervalued, underfunded, and overwhelmingly carried on the backs of women and girls. Every day, more than 16 billion hours are spent on unpaid domestic and care work around the world, the equivalent of 2 billion people working full-time with no pay.

Women in Trinidad & Tobago are still doing the overwhelming share of unpaid care work. The Central Statistical Office's time-use data show that women perform over twice as much unpaid domestic and caregiving labour as men, mirroring global patterns reported by UN Women. Unfortunately, unpaid care is not counted in national GDP, yet if Trinidad & Tobago valued/measured that labour the way UNDP does globally, (equivalent to roughly 9% of GDP), it would be appreciated that there is a high economic weight that women carry on their backs every day.

Trinidad & Tobago lacks comprehensive, modern legislation governing early childhood care and education (ECCE) outside the state-run centres. As such, thousands of families depend on informal caregivers. Without enforceable national standards, parents are left to "hope for the best," and the burden of childcare defaults back to mothers. In addition, Trinidad and Tobago has an ageing nation. The 2021 Census confirmed significant growth in T&T's population

aged 60 and over, and projections indicate that seniors will form nearly 1 in every 4 citizens in the coming decades. Yet, Trinidad & Tobago has no national long-term care law, no regulated framework for home-based elder care, no minimum standards for private elder-care facilities, and no formal support or compensation for family caregivers. This means elderly parents are often cared for at home by daughters, daughters-in-law, or granddaughters, unpaid, untrained, and unsupported.

When the caregiving load gets too heavy, many women leave the labour force entirely. This is not just a family issue; it is an economic issue. It reduces productivity, shrinks the tax base, and increases national dependence ratios. Despite Trinidad & Tobago being one of the first Caribbean countries to ratify the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189), enforcement remains weak. Many domestic workers, mostly women, still lack written contracts, consistent minimum wage enforcement, paid leave, occupational safety protections, and access to NIS or paid maternity benefits. The gap between policy on paper and protection in practice is wide. When the people who provide essential care cannot count on basic labour rights, the entire system becomes unstable. Current legislation offers maternity leave but does not mandate equal, meaningful paternity leave for fathers. Without policies that normalise shared caregiving, women will continue to shoulder the bulk of early childhood care, deepening gender inequality in the labour market.

The absence of care-focused laws has real consequences. In Trinidad & Tobago, it shows up as women turning down promotions or full-time roles, caregivers burning out while trying to juggle work and family, under-regulated private care markets, increased child vulnerability in unregistered centres, overwhelmed public health and social services, and rising elderly dependency without adequate support

systems. By failing to legislate care properly, billions in economic and emotional costs are quietly transferred onto women, families, and low-paid workers. Fixing the care economy requires political will and legislative courage. Some of the most impactful reforms include a Long-Term Care & Ageing Act which defines minimum standards for elder-care facilities, caregiving services, inspections, and training; A Family Caregivers' Support Law which outlines providing stipends, tax credits, or pension contributions for citizens providing unpaid care; Strengthened enforcement of Domestic Workers' rights under Convention 189, ensuring contracts, minimum wages, occupational safety, and NIS inclusion; Equal parental leave legislation which mandates leave for both parents and incentivises shared caregiving, and the Integration of unpaid care into national planning and budgeting because care should be treated as economic infrastructure, not an afterthought.

Trinidad and Tobago cannot diversify the economy, boost productivity, or strengthen families while the care system remains outdated and unsupported. Care work, both paid and unpaid, is the silent scaffolding that holds up every other sector. Yet caregivers in Trinidad & Tobago are asked to do everything with too little support, too little recognition, and too little legal protection. It is time for Trinidad & Tobago to modernise its laws, protect its caregivers, and finally build a care economy strong enough to support the society it sustains.