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SOUTHERN CENTRE FOR INEQUALITY STUDIES

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66th THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF LABOUR ECONOMICS ANNUAL CONFERENCE

19-21 January 2026 . Symbiosis School of Economics, Symbiosis International (Deemed) University, Pune, India

Care and Climate Change

JANUARY 20, 2026

Background

The intersection of care work and climate change has emerged as a pressing global concern because climate shocks and environmental degradation are intensifying the already disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women and marginalised communities. Unpaid care consists of the direct care that includes the essential labour involved in looking after children, the elderly, the sick, and the indirect care work that comprises the domestic chores required for running households, and securing basic necessities such as water and fuel. Unpaid care work in both forms, is a foundational pillar of economies and societies, yet it remains largely invisible in policy and economic measurement frameworks. Globally, women perform about 76% of all unpaid care work, undertaking hours of labour that, if valued at market rates, would represent a substantial share of the global economy but go unrecognised in traditional economic indicators like GDP.[1]

Climate change compounds these structural inequalities. Extreme weather events, rising temperatures, droughts, flooding, ecosystem degradation, and resource scarcity increase the time and effort required for essential tasks such as water and fuel collection, food provisioning, caregiving during illness, and rebuilding homes after disasters. In many low- and middle-income countries, climate stress adds hours to women's daily workloads, intensifying time poverty and reducing opportunities for paid employment, education, and political participation. Evidence increasingly shows that climate change not only deepens existing gender gaps but also creates new forms of vulnerability by amplifying care burdens. Climate-induced resource scarcity and disaster displacement can also expose women to heightened risks of gender-based violence and reduce their opportunities for paid work, education and political participation.

Despite this clear evidence of gendered vulnerability, climate policy frameworks have traditionally treated gender and care as peripheral concerns, failing to systematically account for how climate action affects care systems or women's unpaid labour. This omission means that mitigation and adaptation strategies intended to address environmental risks can inadvertently intensify care burdens, deepen inequities, and overlook the potential of women as agents of change if their capacities and leadership are not fully recognised. It was within this context that the Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality and the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies convened a dedicated discussion on the **care–climate nexus at the 66th Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE).** Some of the emerging insights and actionable policy recommendations from the panel have been summarised below:

Framing the Care-Climate Nexus

The discussion began by emphasising that the relationship between care and climate cannot be understood as a simple overlap between two separate domains. The idea of a "care–climate nexus" signals the existence of deeply intertwined systems: economic, ecological, and social structures that mutually shape one another. Rather than asking whether climate policy should integrate care, or care policy should

[1] World Health Organization: WHO. (2024, October 28). International Day of Care and Support: Time for Gender-equitable Investment to Better value and Recognize care Workers. https://www.who.int/news/item/28-10-2024-2024-international-care-day?

integrate climate, the panel underscored that both must be embedded within a broader rethinking of the economy itself. If the economy is understood as a subsystem of nature, then care and ecology are foundational, not supplementary.

Drawing on feminist ecological thought, including the work of Maria Mies, the discussion highlighted a central paradox: women have historically sustained ecosystems and social reproduction, yet they are among the most severely affected by climate breakdown. This contradiction reflects structural undervaluation. Both nature and care work sustain the monetised economy, yet remain invisible within GDP-based frameworks. As a result, economic systems generate both environmental degradation and care deficits, producing reinforcing cycles of depletion.

A recurring theme was the distinction between additive and transformative approaches. Adding women into existing economic or climate models tends to frame them as vulnerable victims without interrogating structural drivers. A transformative approach, by contrast, redefines the economy itself through the lens of social and ecological reproduction. Climate change, from this perspective, is not merely an environmental problem with gendered effects; it is evidence of chronic underinvestment in regenerative systems.

The panel also engaged critically with emerging climate finance paradigms. The growing emphasis on blended finance and market-led solutions risks reducing both care and climate to investable niches rather than systemic public goods. Just as climate finance has become increasingly financialised, there is concern that financing for care may follow a similar path, prioritising scalability and returns over universality and equity. Participants stressed that regeneration of ecosystems, communities, and people require rebuilding economic systems around care rather than subordinating care to financial logics.

The SCIS Care-Climate Conceptual Framework [2]

Researchers from the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies presented a systems-based framework linking feminist economics and climate scholarship. The framework identifies three interconnected forms of care: direct care (physical and emotional care of people), indirect care (household and provisioning activities that enable direct care), and local/environmental care (stewardship of communities and ecosystems). Extending care beyond domestic spaces into environmental domains reframes it as central to social and ecological reproduction. Environmental care, in this context, refers to activities that sustain and regenerate ecosystems and common resources, including managing and conserving water sources, protecting forests and biodiversity, maintaining common lands, engaging in sustainable agriculture and resource use, and participating in community-level practices such as waste management and ecosystem restoration that support collective well-being and long-term ecological balance.

The framework distinguishes between the monetised "productive" economy and the largely invisible reproductive economy of care and nature. Both are systematically undervalued. This invisibility is

[2] Phalatse, S., Taylor, J., & Valodia, I. (2025, January 1). The Care-Climate Nexus - a conceptual framework. https://hdl.handle.net/10539/43918

reinforced by structural features of economic and governance systems- where only market-based activities are counted and prioritised in policy and investment, while unpaid care work and ecological contributions remain unmeasured and overlooked in decision-making. Climate impacts intensify unpaid care burdens, particularly in contexts with weak social infrastructure, reinforcing gendered inequalities.

Importantly, the framework moves beyond conceptualisation to empirical inquiry, testing how care burdens increase under climate stress and how policies can either mitigate or exacerbate these dynamics. It emphasises that climate mitigation and adaptation policies often ignore care systems. For example, mitigation strategies such as mining for renewable infrastructure can displace communities and increase unpaid care burdens, while adaptation investments such as large-scale water infrastructure projects or irrigation schemes may fail to reduce time poverty if they do not ensure last-mile access or consider who within households is responsible for water collection and management.

The framework calls for a systems approach integrating economic, social, and environmental domains. A more caring economy would create positive feedback loops supporting human well-being and their productivity while respecting ecological limits. Merely tweaking existing models is insufficient; structural transformation is required.

Climate Governance, Vulnerability, and Adaptation

The global climate regime has evolved since the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, increasingly recognising gender and health dimensions. In India, the addition of a health mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change reflects acknowledgement of human impacts, though a dedicated gender mission remains absent.

However, global climate politics is currently unstable. The withdrawal of the United States from multilateral climate processes and emerging measures such as the European Union’s carbon border adjustments demonstrate geopolitical fragmentation. Within this volatility, centring vulnerability becomes even more urgent.

The discussion distinguished between physical risks (extreme weather and disasters) and transition risks (costs arising from mitigation commitments such as net-zero targets). Both generate vulnerabilities, particularly for workers, farmers, fossil-fuel-dependent communities, and women. Transition investments divert domestic resources, creating trade-offs with human development spending.

Participants argued that conventional welfare measures such as the Human Development Index fail to incorporate ecological health or climate vulnerability. Without measuring ecological damage and vulnerability systematically, policy cannot allocate resources effectively.

Adaptation emerged as a critical domain for embedding care. Unlike mitigation, adaptation is inherently bottom-up and community-driven. Recent COP discussions have proposed adaptation indicators across sectors including health, agriculture, water, and poverty alleviation. While gender is not always explicitly articulated, adaptation frameworks offer space for care-responsive planning. Embedding women’s representation from the outset in decision-making processes is essential to ensure that adaptation strategies reflect lived realities, address unpaid care burdens, and avoid reinforcing existing inequalities. Effective adaptation therefore requires decentralised governance, measurable indicators, inclusive participation and fiscal support for states, potentially through integrating climate vulnerability into Finance Commission transfers.

Environmental governance more broadly was identified as weak. Degradation of forests, air quality, waste systems, and ecosystems persists partly because ecological damage remains unaccounted for in national income systems. Embedding care and ecological accounting into fiscal frameworks is essential to meaningful reform.

Private Sector, Entrepreneurship, and Climate Finance

The conversation then shifted toward implementation and intervention design. Evidence of gendered climate impacts is well established: climate change increases unpaid care burdens, constrains women's economic autonomy, and deepens poverty and food insecurity. The question is how to translate conceptual frameworks into effective and scalable programmes.

Engagement with private sector actors, especially small and women-led enterprises, suggest that the gap is not necessarily a lack of innovation at the intersection of care and climate, but rather a lack of recognition, framing and enabling support systems. Many entrepreneurs are already developing solutions in areas such as clean water, clean cooking, renewable energy, and local service delivery that directly reduce care burdens while contributing to climate mitigation and adaptation. However, these ventures are typically framed as responses to immediate market needs rather than being explicitly recognised or supported as part of a broader care-climate agenda. As a result, they often remain outside targeted policy attention, appropriate financing or ecosystem support aligned with their dual impact. Bridging this gap requires not only helping entrepreneurs articulate the care-climate dimensions of their work, but also strengthening enabling environments through policy engagement, regulatory sandboxes, access to climate finance, and institutional support. At the same time, caution was expressed regarding financialised climate instruments such as blended finance and debt-for-nature swaps. Climate finance tends to flow toward large corporations and capital-intensive projects, neglecting micro and small enterprises where many women are concentrated. This creates gendered exclusions, for instance, large-scale renewable energy projects often receive substantial subsidies and credit, while women-led micro-enterprises providing clean cooking or water solutions struggle to access similar financing. In such cases, the benefits of climate investments are unevenly distributed, while the responsibility of coping with environmental and economic stress continues to fall disproportionately on women's unpaid labour. The concept of maladaptation, highlighted in the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report, was invoked to underscore that poorly designed climate responses can worsen both environmental and social outcomes. Infrastructure-heavy or technocratic solutions may, often prioritised in current financing models may increase inequalities and unpaid care burdens. Climate solutions must therefore be evaluated not only for their emission outcomes, but also for their impacts on care impacts and social equity.

Voice, Agency, and Community-Led Adaptation

A strong emphasis was placed on voice and agency. Policies affecting tribal, indigenous, or climate-vulnerable communities must avoid top-down imposition. Historical experiences such as decentralised forest management experiments studied by Bina Agarwal demonstrate that women-led decision-making can balance ecological goals with unpaid labour realities more effectively than uniform national schemes.

Women's vulnerability is not inherent but historically produced. Strengthening women's collectives and community institutions enhances both environmental stewardship and social resilience. Adaptation planning, when genuinely bottom-up, can embed care considerations organically. Conversely, programmes that frame women as instruments of service delivery without adequate voice or resources risk overburdening them and undermining community cohesion.

The discussion acknowledged class dimensions of vulnerability. Poorer women bear disproportionate climate impacts. Effective integration of care and climate therefore requires coordination between state, market, and community actors, with decentralisation enabling context-sensitive responses while fiscal frameworks ensure resource flows.

Actionable Recommendations

- A transformative integration of care and climate requires embedding ecological limits and social reproduction into macroeconomic frameworks. National income accounting should incorporate ecological degradation and unpaid care work, moving beyond GDP-centric metrics and revisiting indicators such as the Human Development Index to include climate vulnerability.
- Climate mitigation and adaptation policies must be systematically evaluated for their care impacts. Policy appraisal tools should assess displacement, unpaid labour burdens, and distributional consequences before implementation, preventing maladaptation and gender-exploitative outcomes.
- Adaptation should be strengthened as a bottom-up, care-responsive domain. States and local governments require dedicated fiscal transfers linked to measurable climate vulnerability indicators. Community-led planning processes must ensure women's meaningful participation in decision-making rather than symbolic inclusion.
- Climate finance mechanisms including multilateral funds and national green financing tools should explicitly allocate resources to care burden-reducing infrastructure such as water, clean energy, and public care services. Safeguards must prevent over-financialisaton and ensure equity over profitability.
- Support ecosystems for micro, small, and women-led enterprises operating at the care–climate intersection should be expanded. Regulatory sandboxes, concessional finance, public procurement pilots, and capacity-building initiatives can enable scalable, locally grounded solutions.
- Finally, governance reform is essential. Strong environmental regulation, ecological accounting, and accountability mechanisms must underpin all climate and care interventions. Regeneration not merely growth or transition should become the organising principle of development strategy.


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THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF LABOUR ECONOMICS
ANNUAL CONFERENCE
Roundtable on
CARE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

This brief has been authored by Vidhi Singh and reviewed by Bidisha Mondal. It is based on the insights that emerged from the panel organised by IWWAGE and SCIS, WITS University on "Care and Climate Change" at the 66th Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics at Pune, Maharashtra on 20th January, 2026.

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