

IFSW Policy Position Paper – FINAL Draft v7

Title:

A Social Work Approach to Co-creating Human Rights-Based Care and Support Systems

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Issues or Concern Statement

This policy paper highlights the critical role of social workers, grounded in ethical, eco-social and human rights principles, in promoting and advocating for comprehensive, rights-based care and support systems. These systems are essential to addressing growing inequities in care and support arising from: the systemic undervaluation of paid and unpaid care work; policy frameworks prioritizing market efficiency over social and ecological wellbeing; and the insufficient recognition of care and support as a human right.

Care and support services are not consistently embedded in social protection systems, significantly constraining their ability to respond to the complex challenges of contemporary life (A/HRC/58/37, paras. 15, 43(i)). Traditionally framed as top-down, state-led interventions, care and support systems frequently operate in isolation from broader social protection mechanisms, weakening their responsiveness to social, economic and environmental interconnections. Care and support encompass not only service delivery but also the relational, collective, and interdependent rights and responsibilities that sustain life, dignity, autonomy and social cohesion. In practice, this means that systems which fail to integrate these

elements risk perpetuating cycles of disadvantage, leaving marginalised populations without meaningful access to essential supports.

The concept of “care and support” is deliberately chosen over “care” or “care economy” alone, as it includes both the practical work of sustaining well-being and the support necessary to enable autonomy, participation and equal citizenship for people requiring care. While the “care economy” is often used to describe paid and unpaid work in society, this framing risks prioritizing market valuation over human rights. Furthermore, this framing excludes essential support roles. From an eco-social and social justice perspective, as articulated in the **People’s Charter for an Eco-Social World (2022)**, care and support systems cannot be reduced to economic efficiency or institutional management. By contrast, care and support systems, particularly when grounded in the principles of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), recognize collective responsibility, social reproduction, and human and ecological well-being as central objectives (ILO, n.d.).

In line with the ILO, care work can be understood as:

"paid and unpaid, direct and indirect work delivered through public and private sectors, including non-profit organizations, the social and solidarity economy, and households. It includes care providers and recipients, as well as employers and institutions offering care services. Care work involves activities and relationships that sustain quality of life, nurture human capabilities, foster agency, autonomy, and dignity, and develop the opportunities and resilience of both caregivers and care recipients" (ILO, n.d.).

Care and support work is performed across two broad but interconnected categories:

- **Paid care and support workers**, including health, social, and personal support workers, who deliver essential services in formalized settings and under professional standards. They assist people to exercise autonomy, engage socially, and access rights to ensure that recipients can meaningfully participate in society and access services equitably.
- **Unpaid caregivers**, often family or community members, whose labour is critical to social cohesion but frequently undervalued and heavily gendered and racialized. These individuals often face economic disadvantage, social

isolation, and a lack of recognition despite the critical role they play in sustaining lives.

Social workers can practice across both categories in personal and professional capacities and roles, advocating for the rights of all parties providing care and support, those receiving it, and social workers themselves to ensure that systems do not privilege efficiency over human rights, dignity and well-being. Their work is inherently relational, connecting policy frameworks, institutional structures, and community knowledge with individual experiences of care.

Social workers also address structural inequities affecting care and support workers, including low pay, precarious employment, unsafe working conditions and limited social protections. They advocate for fair employment, professional autonomy, reflective supervision, and safe and healthy workplaces. This also includes promoting a robust care infrastructure that includes policies such as paid family and medical leave, affordable childcare, home and community care, and improved wages and conditions for care workers (McCulloch & Poo, 2021). Simultaneously, they promote the rights of recipients of care and support, including independent living, community inclusion, accessibility, legal capacity, and protection from violence or neglect (OHCHR, 2024; IFSW & OHCHR, 2025). Social workers' dual focus on the welfare of providers and recipients ensures that care systems are sustainable, just and resilient.

Recognizing care and support as a human right is increasingly reflected in international and regional law. [The Advisory Opinion of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights affirms the right to care](#), emphasizing its interdependence with rights to decent work, social security, health, education, and non-discrimination. Social workers use these rights as a framework to advocate for policies that are inclusive, equitable, and rights-based, ensuring that the perspectives of both recipients and providers are central to system design.

The central aim of this paper is to provide guidance to social workers, IFSW members and key stakeholders on co-creating comprehensive and human rights-based care and support systems. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing unpaid and paid care and support work, ensuring the participation and

protection of all rights-holders, embedding care and support in social protection and public service systems, and promoting sustainable, inclusive, and participatory models through SSE and community-led approaches. This approach highlights the ethical and practical need to recognise care as a shared societal responsibility, while addressing its deeply gendered distribution across households, labour markets, and policy systems.

Background

Global care and support systems face mounting pressures from demographic shifts, climate change, economic inequality, rise in global conflicts and displaced peoples, technological change, austerity-driven fiscal strategy undermining essential public services (Bahadur, 2025). These pressures exacerbate the undervaluation and inequitable distribution of care and support work, disproportionately affecting women, migrants, Indigenous peoples, marginalized communities, and persons with disabilities.

Demographic and Environmental Pressures: Aging populations, youth outmigration, and the increasing prevalence of chronic illness, disability, and intensive care needs create higher demand for both formal and informal care and support. Climate change exacerbates these pressures through displacement, environmental hazards, and food insecurity, which further strain household and community care networks (WHO, 2025). Pollution-related illness, displacement, and loss of livelihoods increase unpaid and underpaid care work. Disasters, including floods, wildfires, and extreme heat, disproportionately affect those already reliant on care and support, revealing critical gaps in preparedness and service continuity.

Economic and Labor Contexts: Women comprise approximately two-thirds of the formal care workforce and perform an estimated 76% of unpaid care work (ILO, 2019). Migrant workers often face precarious employment, low pay, and exclusion from social protections, forming global care chains that shift caregiving burdens across borders. Social protection mechanisms frequently fail to align with care and support services, limiting the effectiveness of both (A/HRC/58/37). This misalignment leaves care work undervalued economically and socially, contributing to workforce

attrition, burnout, and inequitable service distribution. The systematic underfunding and privatization of care and support services reflect broader neoliberal policy frameworks that prioritize fiscal austerity, corporate profit, and market competition over human and ecological wellbeing. These political choices deepen global and local inequalities and undermine the realization of care as a human right.

Intersectional Vulnerabilities: Gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, race, ethnicity, Indigenous status, migration status, and socioeconomic background intersect to determine who provides and receives care. Without visibility and recognition in policy frameworks, equitable care systems cannot be achieved. Basic infrastructure including water, sanitation, electricity, accessible transport, and housing is crucial to reduce the time-intensive nature of unpaid care and support work (UN Women, 2025). Moreover, access to digital infrastructure, education, and labor-saving technologies further determines the quality and inclusivity of care provision and participation.

Culturally Grounded, Community-led Models: Indigenous and collectivist traditions, such as Buen Vivir (Latin America) and Ubuntu (Southern Africa), exemplify communal and rights-based approaches to care and support, which also include treaty rights. SSE initiatives, including social cooperatives and community-led enterprises, demonstrate sustainable, high-quality care provision, decent work, fair employment, and participatory governance (Groupe SOS, 2025; Center for Family Life, n.d.). These models illustrate that care and support systems grounded in local knowledge, collective responsibility, and social justice can achieve both economic sustainability and human rights outcomes, offering lessons for mainstream social protection policies.

Rights-based Recognition: National policies, such as Canada's caregiving benefits and Finland's Economy of Wellbeing Action Plan, provide financial support, flexible arrangements, and infrastructure to recognize unpaid and underpaid care work. The 5Rs framework Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute, Reward, Represent/Participate offers a comprehensive approach to designing equitable care and support systems, addressing unpaid labor, workforce recognition, and inclusion of recipients in policy decisions (UN, 2024). Each element of the framework emphasizes the ethical, social,

cultural, and economic dimensions of care, linking rights with practical measures that enhance both quality of life and social cohesion.

Digital Inclusion: Digital technologies increasingly shape care and support systems through telehealth, digital monitoring, artificial intelligence, and platform-based service delivery. While these tools can enhance access and efficiency, they also pose risks of exclusion, surveillance, data misuse, and the erosion of relational care. Social workers advocate for rights-based digital governance, universal digital access, and ethical technology design that prioritizes dignity, autonomy, and human connection.

Conflict, Displacement and Humanitarian Crises: In contexts of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises, care and support systems are often disrupted or destroyed. Women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities face heightened risks of neglect and violence. Social workers play a critical role in rebuilding rights-based care systems and care infrastructure in emergencies and ensuring that humanitarian responses prioritize dignity, participation, and long-term social protection.

Policy Statement

Social workers co-create equitable, rights-based care and support systems by linking individuals, communities, institutions and knowledge systems, promoting civic participation, and advocating for sustainable and socially just practices. Their work strengthens relationships between governments, community organizations, and local networks, ensuring policies reflect lived experience, equity, and inclusion.

Social Workers as Facilitators: Social workers connect the lived experiences of care and support providers and recipients with policy and service delivery mechanisms, ensuring local knowledge informs institutional practices. They support intergenerational and community dialogues, facilitate collective decision-making in designing care and support systems, and reinforce recognition of care and support as both a human right and a foundation for social cohesion.

Organizing and Supporting Care and Support Workers: Social workers advocate for the rights of all providers, including paid workers and unpaid caregivers eligible for compensation or support. This includes safe, healthy, and fair working conditions; professional autonomy and reflective supervision; access to social protections, pensions, respite services, and labor-saving technologies; and rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly. Recognition must extend to domestic workers, volunteers, peer supporters, and marginalized caregivers, as well as care recipients whose rights are interdependent with those of providers.

Protecting the Rights of Those Requiring Care and Support: Social workers work in partnership to safeguard the rights of care and support recipients, promoting self-determination and community inclusion, accessibility, legal capacity and protection from violence or neglect. Human rights-centered systems balance the needs of recipients with fair conditions and decent work for providers, ensuring no compromise of care quality or access due to workforce protections.

Civic Learning and Participatory Governance: Social workers empower communities to participate in shaping policies, linking grassroots movements with formal governance. Participation extends beyond citizens to include migrants, refugees, and stateless persons, ensuring inclusive and equitable representation. Participatory governance must move beyond consultation toward shared decision-making and accountability. This includes establishing co-governance structures, participatory budgeting processes, and independent monitoring mechanisms that enable care recipients and providers to influence resource allocation and service standards.

Policy Advocacy and Reform: Social workers translate community knowledge into actionable insights, advocating for community-led initiatives, strengthened social protection, public financing, and infrastructure for care and support, and integration of ecological, social, and economic considerations in system design. Social workers learn from, and amplify community-led local, regional and global policy and program successes and facilitate connections between communities interested in adopting these initiatives in their own localities. In doing so they also hold governments accountable and advocate for needed changes.

Co-creating Professional and Community Wellbeing: Recognizing that wellbeing of care workers is interdependent with that of recipients, social workers promote decent work, ethical, safe, and healthy work environments, reduction of labor-intensive unpaid care work without diminishing service quality, and professional development, peer networks, and public recognition for care work.

System Reform: Comprehensive system reform requires embedding a variety of systems of care and support within social protection systems, public financing to avoid commodification, accountability mechanisms for rights violations, and investment in accessible infrastructure, services, and workforce capacity.

Impact of this Policy

IFSW and members will aim to:

- Advocate for the recognition of care and support as a human right and public good at national and international levels.
- Ensure inclusive participation of providers, recipients, and communities in care and support system design.
- Promote gender equality, decent work, social justice, and ecological sustainability as pillars of a care and support system.
- Support social workers in building peer networks, collaborative practice, and knowledge exchange.
- Strengthen partnerships across government, civil society, and community organizations and Indigenous Peoples to create integrated, resilient care and support ecosystems.

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