



Care work for dependent elder people: recommendations for designing public policies that meet the challenges of the sector

POLICY BRIEF

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Executive Summary

Care Work has not historically been seen as a sector of economic activity in terms of generating employment or contributing to a country's GDP, as for decades, it has been undertaken by families, and more specifically by women.

However, Care Work has gradually emerged as an economic sector with huge potential for growth and the creation of jobs in the next few years, but its social, economic, and institutional organization is particularly complex. The sector has thus several challenges that must be addressed in order to make the most out of the business and employment opportunities it offers. Labour regulation and training of its workforce are two aspects in which public administration faces significant challenges.

Care Work is a social and economic activity based on providing care to people in a situation of dependency. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines Care Work as:

“Looking after the physical, psychological, emotional and developmental needs of one or more other people in the public and/or private sphere, both in the formal economy, the informal economy or unpaid form”

This definition highlights two questions: people have diverse needs throughout their lives, making them more or less dependent; and Care Work has become, in the most part, a service that involves the provision of labour, taking it outside the personal, private or family spheres, where it had traditionally resided. In recent decades, in our society, this has increasingly become a service provided as paid work.

This transformation of care from something that is provided within the family into a service, a sector of economic activity that generates job opportunities, entails a new reality: as Care Work becomes more relevant and socially recognised, demand for quality care for dependent people will grow. It is necessary to translate this major relevance and social recognition of Care Work into better working conditions for the sector. To this recognition the issue of the ageing population and higher life expectancy must be added. Also, labour market affiliation statistics show an increase in demand for Care Work professionals which is not only a current trend but one that will continue to consolidate over the coming years.





Care work: the challenges facing the sector

Caring for dependent elderly people entail several challenges need to be worked on through the design of public policies that meet these challenges and help improve the sector. From the point of view of care as an economic sector that generates job opportunities and creator of a labour market, these challenges can be divided into two areas: working conditions and the qualification of human resources.

• Improving working conditions

- The regularisation of the sector to reverse job insecurity and help legalise employment relations.
- Better remuneration.
- Including male caregivers in the category of care workers to reverse the sector's excessive feminisation.
- The underground economy and the social invisibility of Care Work, with the resulting impact on the working conditions of care workers.
- Considering the possibility of establishing a single collective agreement for the sector, something that does not currently exist.

• Qualifying human resources

- Making qualification processes more accessible, either through training or by recognising experience.
- Removing legal barriers to training and improving the online training available to ensure universal access for care workers. To achieve this, hybrid training formats with more flexible schedules and formats must be considered. The proposal is to create better work-life balance options to facilitate access to official training (certificates of professional standards) and help these workers build a career.
- Providing more resources for the recognition and accreditation of work experience.
- Establishing ongoing training in the sector as a matter of urgency.
- The need to identify specialisations in the sector that make it possible to pursue a career in terms of recognition and pay (specialisations in data processing, intensive care and high dependency, financial management and planning, etc.). These must then be included in the sector-specific collective agreement to be established.



The great social challenge in this sector is to make Care Work universal and dignified by means of public policies that support higher salaries, with labour legislation that ensure the promotion of care workers and a boost of qualification and training in terms of both availability and access.

Generic recommendations: public policies relating to Care Work for dependent elderly people

Care work entails fundamental challenges at both social and political levels. The Public Administration has four main tools that can help design interventions in this area: coordination, the ability to issue legislation, the job inspection function and public investment.

- Coordination between various levels of the Administration, as well as between different parts of the same area of government, is essential.
- The ability to issue legislation must reflect the innovative solutions resulting from the interaction between the Administration, the social and business sectors, and the field of knowledge. Listening to social agents is key, and ensuring that the formal mechanisms required for this dialogue are in place. However, leadership is needed - political will - to turn any agreements that may be reached into legislation, in spite of resistance to change. Forums for debate such as the one that the +RESILIENT project has helped create can be a model to be explored.
- The job inspection function in Care Work also needs to be redesigned and reinforced. This is a huge challenge, particularly with regard to Care Work in people's homes, which is often carried out outside the legal economy, and it cannot currently be subjected to labour inspections.
- The need to analyse how public investment in the sector is channelled and the extent to which it can be used to boost innovation.

Based on these points, there are various elements that can help design a set of public actions to address the greatest challenges facing the sector of care for dependent elder people in the 21st century.

- More **legal and financial measures to encourage families to legally hire** professional care workers to provide care at home are needed. Recruitment has also been affected by the Platform Economy, with examples of both good and bad practices. Although there are already recruitment measures in place (subsidising social security costs, providing information and support in relation to administrative procedures, and giving access to information), these need to be deeper and wider. Otherwise, there will be no significant reduction in the number of care workers working without an employment contract in the underground economy, and this is one of the issues that must be addressed by the sector. The proposals being considered therefore include, among others:



- Creating a Catalonia-wide tool to coordinate and control the sector from the point of view of recruitment but also in relation to employment conditions and the requirements relating to training or experience for working in this area. One possibility would be to create a Catalan Agency for the Care Sector.
 - Increasing recruitment through third-party intermediaries, ensuring it is transparent, has clear and well-regulated channels and ensures that professionals are qualified.
 - Providing the intermediation process with financial resources involving grants for the recruitment processes during the first years of implementation.
 - Establishing mechanisms for coordination with the administrations in charge of immigration legislation to, among other things, expedite processes and make it easier to recruit, give official approval to academic qualifications or regularise the situation of people working in the underground economy.
- The **idea of "professional career"** must be recovered by recognising the many years of experience of a great number of professionals in this sector and their specialist knowledge, creating distinct professional categories. This has led to the proposal of some actions that could entail:
- Strengthening skills' accreditation programmes, which have the potential to play a key role.
 - Making the need for continuous training in the sector a legal requirement in order to promote better pay for workers and make companies more competitive.
 - Adding professional profiles from other areas of the social sector to the field of Care Work.
- Changes in the way companies in the sector operate to establish transparency and decision-making mechanisms that take workers into account (good governance) must be promoted. It is thus proposed, among other things:
- To design mechanisms to change the profile of care workers, as this is a highly feminised sector with many workers in an irregular situation and very few young people. An institutional campaign could be a useful tool for this purpose.
 - To focus on the fact that **there are currently various collective labour agreements and social protection systems in force, and less ambiguous regulation is needed.** Establishing a **single collective labour agreement** for the sector could be a step forward in this regard. Putting in place a single collective labour agreement for the care work sector, with clear standards, is therefore seen as a significant step forward. Administrations could play a mediating role and facilitate communication between employers' organisations and unions to achieve this change.
 - Care work is based on a dual dimension at the crossroads between the social and healthcare sectors. Within the regularised market, however, the applicable collective



labour agreement is the one for the social sector, and the applicable remuneration is therefore lower than that paid to healthcare workers. These two sectors should therefore be made equivalent under the category of care work.

There are two key alternatives for organising the provision of Care Work. On the one hand, there is the private market, with different types of companies providing care services: commercial or social initiative companies. And then there is the public sector, which can either create a service for dependent elderly people and manage it directly or put the management out to tender for different types of companies to bid for. With the increase in demand for Care Work in society, this has become the primary option.

As to organisations that provide professional services, measures have to be put in place to make them aware of the need to improve working and training conditions for their staff, and give them resources to:

- Foster continuous training for their staff to improve the quality of service and help raise wages.
- Create, as far as possible, specialisations that enable workers to pursue a career within those same companies.
- Promote the incorporation of ESG (environmental, social and good governance) criteria while placing workers' needs at the centre.
- Support new initiatives by entrepreneurs wishing to create organisations in this sector under a cooperation system or with ESG values.

In general, there is the need to invest resources to raise awareness about the sector and reverse its invisibility in order to highlight the social function of Care Work, its importance in the economy and the need to turn it into a dignified professional career and put an end to its feminisation.

Specific recommendations: professional skills and training needs

In relation to specific skills, the so-called soft skills and hard skills can be differentiated. Soft skills refer to a set of intangible personal qualities, traits, attributes, habits, and attitudes that can be used in many different types of work. Examples of soft skills include: empathy, leadership, sense of responsibility, integrity, self-esteem, self-management, motivation, flexibility, sociability, time management and making decisions. The term is also used in contrast to hard skills which are considered more technical, very specific in nature and particular to an occupation, and which can be taught (generally) more easily than soft skills¹.

¹ Source: UNESCO International Bureau of Education, IBE Glossary of Curriculum Terminology, 2013.



Focusing on the main training needs that are emerging as being the most in demand, which have the characteristics of both soft and hard skills, but which do not always have supply, these are:

- **Self-care:** Care work has an emotional component. You need empathy to deal in a professional manner with the various situations that can arise in care work. These often affect caregivers from a psychological point of view, compromising their ability to continue doing their work, their mental health, and the quality of the work itself. Care workers who provide their services at the person's home can sometimes be subjected to different types of aggression and therefore need the tools to deal with such situations. It is necessary to provide more guidance and training both to prevent such situations from arising in the first place and to deal with them either at the time or after the event, exercising the employment rights of workers who provide home care.
- **Mental health:** Working with dependent people often entails dealing with individuals who are suffering from mental health problems, cognitive impairment, or possible dementia, making the provision of care even harder. Mental health is a broad field that requires specific training in order to ensure that the dependent person receives quality care, and the care worker has confidence in their own skills.
- **Death and managing grief:** Caregivers are often affected by the death of a dependent person and must be able to manage their grief through emotion and empathy. Firing the care worker is often the only action taken when someone dies. In residential settings, the management of grief is necessary when treating and supporting someone.
- **Palliative care:** When the dependent person goes into an irreversible health situation, the nature of the care work changes. Palliative care is given in end-of-life situations. This requires the carer to know more about this particular area, which can include both the provision of healthcare and emotional support. In addition, the worker must know how to offer the person a dignified death process, in their own home, for example, respecting the decisions taken in advance and agreed with their family, among other matters. This is similar to the professional skills required to treat a long-term chronic illness.
- **Suicide / euthanasia:** This is an issue that requires training both because of its legal repercussions and because it is already an existing end-of-life option and will become more common in the future. Care workers in particular need to know how to treat dependent persons who have unsuccessfully tried to take their own lives or those who keep trying.
- **Hospital discharges:** In some cases, the dependent person goes back to their usual environment - home or care home - after being discharged from hospital and will need new types of care that the current caregivers are not trained to provide. An example



of this is patients who have had a stroke, which can cause dysphagia (likelihood of choking when swallowing), a condition that requires round-the-clock care and a very specific but little-known type of diet with food that is easy to swallow.

- **Person-Centred Care Model (PCC Model):** This is considered the most advanced paradigm in the field of care work because it places the dependent person at the centre, ensuring that the care they receive is in accord with their preferences and decision-making ability. This model involves organisational changes to the provision of care and new skills that must be included in training. Empathising with the dependent person is the key skill for moving forward in the PCC Model.

There are also a number of skills related to the day-to-day management of Care Work itself that can contribute to its improvement in the medium and long term.

In the field of soft skills, the following are found:

- Socio-analytical skills: includes the ability to collect, manage and analyse information and understand the social context and identify social needs to contribute to the improvement of the sector from an internal perspective.
- Digitized data analysis skills to help diagnose various problems.
- Project management skills: understanding of change management, internal resource management, and in-depth knowledge of the organization (e.g., case management, digitalization of management, or care planning, among others).
- Team management: development of skills related to team building, leadership and organization of tasks.

And among the hard skills there are:

- Interdisciplinary skills: assessment of the contribution that the combination of skills from different sectors and fields (socio-humanistic and technological, for example) can make to Care Work.
- Need for knowledge of legal and public policies in the field of care for better execution of daily tasks.
- Knowledge of business management: financial, organizational and administrative skills, among others.

Cross-cutting aspects of training in the care sector:

The care sector still faces significant challenges regarding access to training (due to legal barriers to access and a lack of online training opportunities) and more means are needed for the recognition of work experience. Since it is not possible to move forward with the professionalisation of the sector without qualifications, it is proposed to work on the following cross-cutting aspects:



- Training structure: The care sector does not currently have a hierarchical structure, and training proposals should take this fact into account to improve the employability of the people who work in this area. Training structured around skills, in a horizontal rather than vertical manner, as is common in most sectors.
- Fostering entrepreneurial skills, entrepreneurship, and intrapreneurship: entrepreneurship has to be seen as having two separate facets. These are, on the one hand, entrepreneurial skills in the sense of internal entrepreneurship (initiative and proactiveness, the ability to identify needs, adapt the service and so on); in other words, the skills associated with the ability to organise one's work; and, on the other, the skills relating to the organisation of one's work under cooperative business systems in the Social and Solidarity Economy.
- Promoting the use of new technologies and digital skills as an essential support tool in the tasks of the care sector in dependent elderly people.
- Providing training in a flexible manner to make it more accessible for care workers. This includes greater variety of schedules and formats (in person and online and increasing the mechanisms for recognising skills based on experience).
- Linking Vocational Training care courses to real workplaces from the start to ensure that formal training is practical and linked to work experience.
- To continue advancing in the improvement of Care Work in dependent elderly people, it would be necessary to promote a clustering of the sector, and not to leave aside the work done in recent years within the framework of the + Resilient project. The consolidation of a group that promotes the necessary actions proposed in this document, and detects future areas for improvement in care, is a very valuable tool.



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