

Care Workers on the Frontlines of the U.S. Climate Crisis

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Introduction

Feminist economists, activists and care worker-led movements have long argued that care is not one small sector in our economy but foundational to it: the labor that sustains peoples and communities' health and well-being is the invisible scaffolding for all other forms of work. Yet care work remains systematically underpaid, undervalued, and exploited.

Goal of the Project

Feminist climate justice demands that **we transform the conditions** under which both paid and unpaid care work is performed, uprooting the systems of oppression that exploit this critical work that sustains all of us. It also demands that **we listen to the expertise and experience of care workers** themselves, as frontline responders in the climate crisis and as workers who know what they need to thrive in a warming world.

Methodology

1 This study employed a review of gray literature and semi-structured interviews with care workers to collate testimony, build evidence, and support clear recommendations for policy makers.

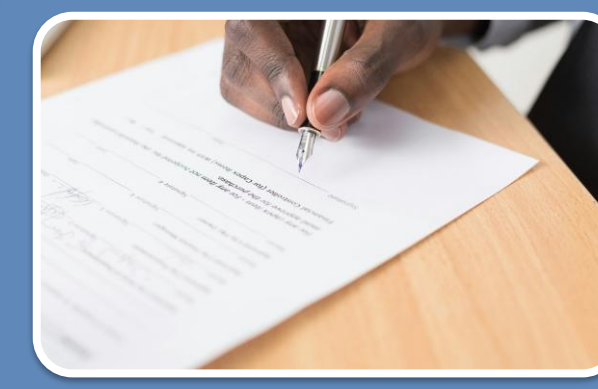
2 Participants are being recruited by the Women's Environment & Development Organization and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. Recruitment is ongoing.

3 Challenges to recruitment: current political climate; fears around immigration status; shifting priorities at agencies.

Challenges to Advancing Care Workers Rights in the U.S.



Lack of benefits, such as healthcare and retirement plans



Inability to contest working conditions for fear of job loss or no written contracts



Abusive work contexts; threats of deportation/retaliation



Exclusion from federal protections by the Fair Labor Standards Act for almost 75 years



Care work remains undervalued and underpaid due to racist and sexist beliefs that care work is not real work



Low union membership; weakened collective bargaining power

"[Immigrants] can't go back to their home countries. And they can't stay. So, they are like in the middle of the sea not knowing which damaged shore to take. You have people who have lost their jobs. They don't even want to work because they don't know what will happen to them at their job sites. They can be picked up at any time."

"Having health insurance would really be of good help; [...] first off, we don't have enough money... It will never be enough for people like me who have kids."

"Sometimes we are forced to remain indoors [at work]..." [because of air pollution]

Care Jobs as Green Jobs

Many care jobs like home health aids, elder care, and childcare are low-emissions and community-based. These types of jobs almost never qualify for green job incentives or receive government support to expand pay, trainings, and access to hiring. The care sector may also offer meaningful and viable pathways for workers transitioning out of the fossil fuel industry.

Climate Impacts on Care Workers

Demand for care work increases post-disaster. Care workers are often at the frontline of these disasters without being afforded the resources or protections typically given to other frontline responders and workers, such as firefighters, doctors and nurses, and EMTs.

According to research by the Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California, during the 2018 Woolsey Fire in Malibu, California, domestic care workers took on the following tasks:

- Helped employers prevent flames from reaching their homes
 - Assisted with evacuation
 - Cleaned up dry bush
- Hosed down rooftops and patios
 - Set up makeshift fire lines

Care workers reported doing these tasks without proper personal protective equipment, training, or information as to how their health could be impacted. Care workers felt they could not deny these requests as they feared losing their jobs, and they needed the income to support their own family members.