The Care Economy

Why in news?

Care work is vital for economies in general and India needs to have a strategy and action plan for improved policies.

What is care economy?

- The care economy refers to the paid and unpaid labor and services that support caregiving in all its forms.
- Care work encompasses direct activities such as feeding a baby or nursing an ill partner, and indirect care activities such as cooking and cleaning.
- It also encompasses a range of sectors such as education, health, and social work involving teachers, nurses, community health workers, social workers, and domestic workers.

As per the ILO, India spends less than 1% of GDP on the care economy.

Why is there an increasing demand for care work?

- **Demographic transition**- Demographic transition in low- and middle-income countries will lead to a higher proportion of the elderly at the expense of the working-age population.
- **Urbanisation**- Urbanisation is changing the traditional joint-family structure to nuclear, single-parent, and transnational households, alienating them from community care bonds.
- **Climate change**- Climate change has caused water scarcity and rural food distress which increases care burden on women and children.

What is the significance of care economy?

- The importance of care work is covered in various international commitments such as the SDGs and the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Centenary Declaration.
- **Work balance**- ILO's report highlights the importance of maternity, paternity, and special care leave, which help balance women's and men's work and family responsibilities throughout their lives.
- **Employment**- According to the International Trade Union Confederation (2019), an investment of 2 % GDP in care in India would create 11 million jobs, of which 32.5 % would be garnered by women.
- **Health outcomes**- Workplaces that provide time, income security and space for undertaking care services such as breastfeeding, enable positive nutrition and health outcomes.
- **Aging in dignity**- Nurturing elderly care services will deliver the benefits of aging in dignity and independent living as the population grows older.

What is the status of care services?

- **Maternity leave-** Maternity leave is a universal human and labour right.
- India offers 26 weeks of maternity leave, against the ILO's standard mandate of 14 weeks.
- But, this coverage extends to only a tiny proportion of women workers in formal employment in India, where 89% of employed women are in informal employment as given by ILOSTAT.
- Paternity leave is not provided in many countries, including India.
- Globally, the average paternity leave is 9 days, which further aggravates inequity.
- **Child care**- India has a long history of mandating the provision of creches in factories and establishments but there is limited information on its actual implementation.
- Though childcare and anganwadi workers undertake important work, they lack recognition as workers and do not have requisite access to workers' rights and entitlements in India.
- **Domestic workers**- Important developments such as Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, minimum wage schedule in many States, etc. have been extended.
- However, domestic workers face challenges in accessing decent work.
- They became ad hoc care workers during the novel coronavirus pandemic without adequate social or health protection measures.
- According to the Government's 2019 estimates, 26 lakh of the 39 lakh domestic workers in India are female.

What is the need of the hour?

Women's unpaid work is valued at 3.1 % of GDP in India.

- **Action plan**- In consultation with the relevant stakeholders, the government needs to conceptualise a strategy and action plan for improved care policies, care service provisions and decent working conditions for care workers.
- **Public good**- Care work should be viewed as a collective responsibility and public good.
- **Investment**- Investing in a combination of childcare infrastructure and parental leave policies will have a higher maternal employment to population ratios.
- **Gender-inclusive economic growth**- Recognising AWWs, ANMs, ASHAs, domestic help, etc. as formal sector workers would allow their economic contribution to be counted in the GDP.
- ILO's 'Decent Work Agenda' principles emphasis on recognising the value of unpaid care work.
- **Reducing gender-based income inequalities**- India's average female daily wage was 59 % of the male wage in 1993-94 and improved to 72 %in 2018-19.
- **5R framework**- The ILO proposes a 5R framework for decent care work centred around achieving gender equality. It urges on
    1. Recognition
    2. Reduction of unpaid care work
    3. Redistribution of unpaid care work
    4. Rewarding care workers and decent work
    5. Representation in social dialogue and collective bargaining.

References

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