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Recognising the Right to Care as a Foundation for Human Flourishing: Agroecological Insights on a Critical Development Issue

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ABSTRACT



Care lies at the heart of human flourishing and is essential for sustainable environmental and socio-economic systems, yet it remains systematically unrecognized, undervalued and unequally distributed. This Comment examines the human right to care as a potential catalyst for transformative development policies through its capacity to confront and redress persistent inequalities while reinforcing connections between communities and the environment. By exploring feminist agroecology as one pathway for implementing the right to care and specifically “food care” in the context of developing capabilities, we argue that care is both instrumental to achieving other human rights and capabilities and intrinsically valuable for human flourishing.

KEYWORDS

Human right to care; capabilities; feminist agroecology; food care; care society; right to food

Introduction

Care lies at the heart of human flourishing and is essential for sustainable environmental and socio-economic systems, yet it remains systematically unrecognized, undervalued and unequally distributed. This Comment examines the human right to care as a potential catalyst for transformative development policies through its capacity to confront and redress persistent inequalities while reinforcing connections between communities and the environment. By exploring feminist agroecology as one pathway for implementing the right to care and specifically “food care” in the context of developing capabilities, we argue that care is both instrumental to achieving other human rights and capabilities and intrinsically valuable for human flourishing.

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The capabilities approach provides an additional theoretical justification to support the conceptualisation of care as a foundational human right by drawing attention to the importance of care for individual capabilities and functionings along with the need for broader public policy reforms to sustain the health, education and social security systems that underpin a “care society”.

The concept of the “care society” which emerged in the Latin American context brings together many strands of human rights and capability-based thinking to propose a new model of development that foregrounds ecological and social care as the keys to human and planetary well-being. We argue that feminist agroecological movements have long applied the principles being promoted as part of the care society paradigm. Our discussion of the agroecological praxis of food care is used to point to the existence of pathways for the care-based transformation of unjust economic and political systems.

The Comment concludes by calling for policy approaches that support care as a human right and as an essential element of human and environmental flourishing. The normative recognition of the right to care must also be accompanied by the realisation of comprehensive public systems for care provision that redistribute responsibilities across genders and between the state, market, communities, and families.

Understanding Care as a Human Right

Fisher and Tronto define care as “everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible”, encompassing our bodies, selves, and environment within a life-sustaining web (1991, 40). All humans engage with care – as recipients and providers – throughout their lives. As feminist social movements have demonstrated in many different contexts, practices of care combine elements of love, knowledge, resistance and mutual support that are vital for sustaining societies and ecosystems (Awry 2023; Portocarrero Lacayo 2024).

Since their inception, international human rights bodies have laid the groundwork for systemic approaches to care, recognising it as central to human development and flourishing. Core human rights principles – participation, accountability, non-discrimination, equality, empowerment, and dignity – are reiterated in treaties, jurisprudence, policies, and interpretive guidance on the human rights that underpin care systems. These norms provide general guarantees on substantive equality, non-discrimination, and the rights to participation and to be heard, while also addressing key dimensions of care. They encompass rights to work, education, health (including a healthy environment and sexual and reproductive health), food, social protection, development, legal capacity, independent living, and rest and leisure (OHCHR 2025).

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognised the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work on women and girls as a barrier to the full realisation of their rights and to sustainable development. It outlined policy and legal measures to recognise, reduce, and redistribute this work across sectors such as education, health, employment, family life, and environmental management. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda builds on this by highlighting the links between care and equitable social, economic, and environmental development (UNGA 2015; UN 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the global care crisis (Rodriguez Enriquez and Fraga 2021) and underscored the urgent need to strengthen care systems for the wellbeing of people and the planet (UN Women 2021; UN 2024). Human rights bodies have emphasised that the care crisis is inseparable from other challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change, armed conflict, and widening wealth, income and inter-national inequalities (UNWGDAW 2023). Addressing these interconnected social, economic and environmental crises requires a human rights-based transformation of care systems (OHCHR 2023).

In this regard, in 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recalled that care is a human right, noting that “without care, we cannot have a productive and dignified life or develop ourselves to our full human potential” and called for greater public investment in care services and infrastructures (OHCHR 2021). In 2022, the UN Human Rights Council held a high-level panel on transforming care and support systems, with emphasis on gender equality and intersectional discrimination. In 2023, it adopted a resolution affirming the centrality of the human rights to care and support (A/HRC/54/6), and the UN General Assembly proclaimed the first International Day of Care and Support (A/RES/77/317), recognising the importance of care work and the need for rights-based, inclusive systems. Also in 2023, the OHCHR submitted reports to the Council on community inclusion for persons with disabilities (A/HRC/52/52) and the transformation of care services (A/HRC/52/32). In 2025, the OHCHR presented a comprehensive study on international standards, promising practices, and ongoing challenges in advancing human rights in care and support systems (A/HRC/58/43).

Regional human rights mechanisms, particularly those in Latin America and the Caribbean, have been at the forefront in advocating for the human right to care from a feminist perspective. The *Buenos Aires Commitment*, adopted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in 2022, calls on duty bearers to develop gender equitable and environmentally sustainable policies to move towards a “care society” (ECLAC 2023). The human right to care is defined as

... the right to provide care, the right to receive care, and the right to care for oneself, [which] form part of the human rights now recognized in international covenants and treaties, which every human being enjoys, irrespective of his or her vulnerability or

dependency status. Based on the principles of equality, universality and social and gender co-responsibility, these rights make possible the sustainability of human life and care for the planet. The right to care implies guaranteeing the right of each person [...] recognizing the value of care work and guaranteeing the rights of persons who provide care, beyond the stereotyped assignment of this function as women's responsibility and promoting institutional co-responsibility among its providers. (ECLAC 2022, 24).

Some countries have begun to establish the right to care in domestic legal frameworks. Mexico City's 2017 Constitution affirms that every person has the right to care that sustains their life and provides material and symbolic elements to live in society. Authorities should establish a care system that provides universal, accessible, relevant, sufficient and quality public care systems and policies. Similarly, Ecuador's 2008 Constitution recognises unpaid care work as productive and commits the state to a labour system aligned with caregiving needs. These provisions create a legal basis for policies that frame care as a right and define state responsibilities in ensuring supportive infrastructures and services.

Government and inter-governmental programmes on the right to care have been developed in response to demands from feminist civil society actors as care has been a core aspect of their transformative agendas for decades (Santana Torres 2020). Acknowledging the right to care as a human right moves the focus from the "private sphere" of the family to squarely situate social and environmental care as matters of public policy and state responsibility.

Complementary Approaches: Capabilities as a Framework for Understanding Care as a Human Right

The capabilities approach offers a broad and flexible framework to further anchor care in global policy frameworks as a foundation for human development and well-being (Robeyns 2018). Care intersects with and enables nearly all of the central capabilities identified by Martha Nussbaum as essential for human flourishing: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; relationship with other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum 2000). It also holds that individuals should be in a position to freely choose the type of care and support they receive to function and lead meaningful lives (Horrell et al. 2020). The capability approach further supports public policies promoting equitable intra-household distribution of care, and public provisioning and financing of social security and care infrastructures.

Additionally, a capability perspective allows us to move beyond a dichotomous approach to care as either a burden or a benefit (Horrell et al. 2020). This is particularly important in light of the multiple affective, epistemological

and political dimensions of care that feminist social movements are highlighting through their praxis (Awry 2023; Portocarrero Lacayo 2024). These richer understandings of care demonstrate that providing and receiving care are integral aspects of flourishing human and non-human lives while recognising that current arrangements for care often constrain capabilities, particularly for women and groups that experience intersecting forms of oppression as a result of factors including their race, migration status, class, age, ability, geographic location or sexuality.

The kinds of interdependence underpinning care relationships invite us to expand the capability framework to consider where freedoms and choices are situated beyond the individual. The care society “treats eco-dependence (human dependence on nature) and the interdependence of people and care as a necessity, a work in progress and a right” (Garcia, Ponte, and Scuro 2023, 166).

Patriarchal, racist, capitalist and other oppressive power systems mean that frequently the choices of the less dominant group are constrained by those with greater power (Federici 2018). Gender equality requires that care be shared at the household level, as well as between the collectivity and the individual. Redistributing care work increases the ability of women, gender diverse persons and people from traditionally marginalised groups to engage in political activities. Due to its focus on governmental actors, the capability approach has been critiqued for failing to consider the crucial political role of social movements in collective struggles for justice (Dean 2009). Positioning care as a human right with mutually reinforcing state and non-state duties for its implementation expands the potential reach of a capabilities perspective on care as an element of human flourishing.

As Ingrid Robeyns notes, the capabilities approach should be viewed as an open-ended evaluative framework rather than a fixed theory (Robeyns 2018). This aligns with the theoretical framing provided by Martha Nussbaum who argues that human rights and capabilities are complementary in that human rights provide legal and moral imperatives for action while capabilities can assist in realising rights by highlighting the need for greater systemic support for areas of governance that underpin services and infrastructures that are essential for care including health, education and social security (Nussbaum 1997, 2007)

In this sense, the human rights-based care society paradigm along with a capability perspective requires new development metrics that redefine progress as the sustenance and continuation of life in all its forms. By integrating human rights, ecological regeneration, and intergenerational justice, it offers a roadmap for dismantling the “three traps” of low growth, high inequality and institutional fragility identified by ECLAC in its care society framework (ECLAC 2022). The care society emphasises investments in public and community-based care infrastructures and services along with the participation and

representation of care-givers, recipients of care and civil society in the design and implementation of care policies (Garcia, Ponte, and Scuro 2023).

Implementing the Human Right to Care in Practice: Agroecology and “Food Care”

Agroecology, as both a way of life and a political movement, aligns closely with the principles of the care society and offers an alternative transition pathway towards “good living” and food sovereignty rooted in collective rights and equitable access to commons (ECVC 2023; FOEI 2024). The foundational Nyéléni Declaration (2015) frames agroecology as central to food sovereignty, emphasising solidarity with nature, and the need for local, democratic governance and control over food systems (IPCFS 2015). Although the Declaration does not explicitly mention care, feminist movements advocating for food sovereignty and agroecology consistently highlight its centrality to the achievement of both goals. Intersectional feminism is a key precondition for just agroecological transitions, as underscored in the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism (CSM) vision paper on feminist agroecology.

As care work is vital for both human life and the planet, it must be shared as a responsibility of all: individuals (of all genders) and governments. The practice of agroecology will spread as soon as the shared responsibility of care work and the recognition of women’s rights are consolidated. [...] it is key that women self-organize and support each other in these transitions, in order to shed light on and counter their oppression. (CSM 2019)

Feminist Agroecology: Principles and Practice

Feminist agroecology centers the values of life, relationships, trust, care, and balance in food systems. It recognises women and gender-diverse people as key agents in building just food and nutrition systems and a healthy environment. Their everyday practices – preserving seeds, growing diverse and healthy food, caring for communities, providing nourishing meals and protecting biodiversity – are foundational to agroecology and food sovereignty.

In this way, feminist agroecology promotes care as a shared value among all community members through diverse, self-sustaining, and collective farming systems (CSM 2019). Feminist agroecology also reclaims traditional agricultural knowledge and ways of relating to bodies, territories, and ecosystems. Revaluing the spiritual, emotional and affective dimensions of care for humans and the environment also form key components of the political agendas of feminist agroecological movements (Portocarrero Lacayo 2024). At a broader level, biodiverse agroecological systems restore ecosystem functions, support food security, and strengthen resilience to climate and market shocks.

Feminist agroecology challenges patriarchal structures in agriculture and makes visible the often-overlooked care work that sustains food systems, advocating for its recognition, redistribution, and remuneration. Feminist agroecology also defends community control over seeds, land, and knowledge, resisting privatisation and corporate capture, and affirms food sovereignty as a collective right (LVC 2021). It acknowledges the intersecting inequalities that have long limited women's and gender-diverse people's access to land, resources, and decision-making.

Feminist agroecology operationalises the care society model by placing relationships of care for people, communities and ecosystems at the core of development strategies, moving beyond profit-driven models to prioritise individual and collective well-being, equity, and sustainability. By challenging patriarchal, racist and neo-liberal gender norms and redistributing power, feminist agroecology advances the rights of women and gender diverse persons along with their autonomy and leadership, thereby contributing to broader social justice goals (LVC 2021). It fosters collective spaces – such as feminist cooperatives and agroecological networks – that enable shared learning, solidarity, and democratic governance of food systems. Feminist agroecology is one pathway towards the realisation of a number of human rights and capabilities as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to gender equality (SDG 5), zero hunger (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3), and climate action (SDG 13).

In this sense, feminist agroecology is not merely about the technicalities of organic food production. It reimagines farming as an act of care – through ecological stewardship, intergenerational knowledge transmission, non-human care along with the collective infrastructures that support food sovereignty and social care.

Food Care: Linking Care, Nutrition, and Food Sovereignty

Civil society groups from Latin America – many working within a feminist agroecological paradigm – have recently argued that the recognition of “food care” is fundamental to the realisation of the human right to adequate food. In the request by a number of civil society organisations to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights for an Advisory Opinion in January 2023, “food care” is defined as “the unpaid care work related to food processes”, which is “all the work that women do to reproduce and sustain life that relates to food and the guarantee of the right to food” (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2023, 3). FIAN Colombia's report about the human right to food and adequate nutrition, takes this idea further, noting that the knowledges and practices related to food care form the foundations for human and planetary life (Romero Niño 2021, 216).

A food care approach recognises that from saving seeds, planting, cultivating and harvesting to preparing and sharing food, relationships of care are imbricated within all food systems. Indeed, it has been noted that breastfeeding may

be regarded as the “first act of food sovereignty” (CSM 2019). The concept of “food care”, then, proposes a wholistic vision that integrates knowledges and practices connected to the right to adequate, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food with environmental stewardship and the right to participate in the governance of food systems at every scale.

Food care, which has long been part of the advocacy programmes of feminist movements (Awry 2023), has only recently been recognised within international norms and policies on the rights to food and care. The concept of food care opens up space for new, critical questions that were previously unasked, such as what role the different dimensions of the right to food and closely related human rights guarantees such as the rights to land, work and social security, play in discussions, conceptualizations, and policies surrounding care and the right to care?

Feminist social movements are arguing that there is a need to “de-commodify” current approaches to agroecology and the care economy. In this sense, the idea of food care being promoted by transnational social movements can be used as a catalyst for normative innovation that enables the expansion of the right to food and the emerging right to care.

Conclusion

The recognition of the right to care marks a transformative step toward addressing persistent inequalities and building more sustainable, just societies. Framed through the capabilities approach, care emerges as essential for human flourishing, while current care systems often constrain capabilities – especially for women and marginalised groups. Realising the human right to care entails legal recognition, democratised policy-making, robust public care systems, and alternative metrics to define progress. Instruments such as the Buenos Aires Commitment, UN Human Rights Council resolutions, and the advocacy of transnational social movements have helped to integrate care into human rights-based public policies, emphasising its inter-connected human and environmental dimensions.

Civil society actors such as the CSM Working Group of Women and the Nyéleni movement that are promoting a feminist, agroecological transition are also playing a key role in highlighting the possibilities for structural transformations through their practices of communal care for social and ecological systems. The example of food care through feminist agroecology demonstrates how the right to care can be implemented in practice, promoting relationships of reciprocity, equality, love, solidarity and respect between people and with the natural world. These approaches emphasise the importance of community, exchange, and mutual support, as well as the need to challenge gender, racial and class-based inequalities in care responsibilities (ECVC 2023; Federici 2018).

Despite these advances, the legal, political, affective and epistemic dimensions of food care remain underexplored. Further research is needed to understand how to formally recognise the knowledges embedded in food care – especially Indigenous and traditional knowledges – without appropriating them. For instance, how can biodiversity knowledge tied to food and medicine be protected against commodification under the guise of “recognition”? What mechanisms should be developed to ensure that this knowledge remains in the hands of communities while also informing public policies?

As researchers contributing to the SWIFT project, we focus on feminist agroecology as a transformative pathway to confront and redress structural inequalities in rural territories. From this vantage point, and building on the interlinkages between care, agroecology, and collective rights, we have identified a number of areas for future research:

- How might food care as a human right and as a set of capabilities be integrated as legal and policy principles within processes of food systems transformation?
- What metrics or indicators can be used to capture care-based value systems in agroecological practices?
- How might care responsibilities be more equitably redistributed across gender, class, and racial lines within food systems?
- How do we uphold the autonomy of knowledge systems rooted in lived, place-based experiences while ensuring that these voices and experiences are used to inform and reform wider policies and governance structures?
- How do we acknowledge the intangible affective and spiritual dimensions of human and non-human care relationships in ways that are supportive and non-exploitative?

The transformative potential of care lies in its ability to challenge existing unequal power structures and this is particularly important in the face of multiple interconnected crises-including climate change, growing inequality, and armed conflicts (Fraser 2016). In recognising care as a human right and as a common good that requires alternative models of development, we can create the conditions for all people as well as non-humans to live flourishing lives.

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Larissa da Silva Araujo also works on the SWIFT project, where she contributes to research about human rights frameworks on women's and gender diversity rights in agricultural territories in Europe, as well as undertakes qualitative research with agrarian associations in the Swiss context. She did her PhD in the Graduate Institute's Anthropology and Sociology Department and her thesis examine the praxis of *sumak kawsay* (good living) amongst the Kayambis in Northern Ecuador, collaborating with women undertaking agroecological transitions for healing bodies and territories. During her PhD., she was a visiting scholar at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill and a fellow of the Latin American Council for Social Sciences (CLACSO) in the Research Program for Agroecological Systems in the Andes.

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