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Purple Economy Framework

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Purple Economy Framework

I. Introduction

The Purple Economy framework aspires to contribute to advancing an alternative feminist framework for a caring and gender equal economic and social order. Before proceeding onto explaining what this framework entails, I would like to first contextualize it against the evolution of the feminist discourse and conceptual thinking on gender inequalities in the economy, from originally centering on notions of unpaid work - domestic work, to notions of care work-caring labor-care economy, to future visions of a caring economic and social order (see Figure 1).

Origins of a gendered approach to the economy date back to Marxist discussions, distinguishing the sphere of market production (and productive labor) from the sphere of the household for reproduction (reproductive labor). This distinction is with respect to the distinct functions of these different types of labor for reproduction of capitalism as a system. ‘Productive labor’ produces surplus value and as such enables reproduction of capitalism as a mode of production. ‘Reproductive labor’ produces the conditions for labor to reproduce itself on a daily and intergenerational basis. Hence the notion of *reproductive labor* puts the emphasis on the macroeconomic and macro social function of this category of work: producing labor, as a major input into the production process and hence underlying capitalism as the main source of surplus value.

The early feminist economics discussions kick off from this basis, and point to the “*unpaid*” nature of this work, putting the emphasis on exploitation; questioning the mechanisms of dual exploitation of women’s unpaid work by men and by capital (parallel to exploitation of paid labor by capital). The concept of domestic/household work/labor, on the other hand, points to location of this labor process, emphasizing its exclusion from the public/market sphere. These conceptualizations enable the exploration of the linkages between the imbalanced gender distribution of unpaid domestic work (and hence the gender gaps in time-use) in the sphere of household production and the gender economic gaps observed in the market sphere. The social division of labor is diagnosed as the main source of gender economic gaps in employment, wages, income and wealth, power and decision-making.

The more recent evolution of terminology of *care work*, *caring labor*, puts the emphasis on the output of unpaid and domestic work: *Care*. Hence the conceptual framework is now expanded to go beyond the gender exploitative aspects of this category of work, to focus on its economic and social functions for contributing to wellbeing of individuals, households and communities. The emergence of the notion of ‘the *Care Economy*’ identifies that production of care through both *unpaid and paid care work* establish an entire economic sub-system. With the evolution of the conceptual framework from “unpaid-domestic work” to “care work, care economy”, it becomes possible to explore new terrains of interaction with the market economy, such as the conditions of *paid care workers*, the emergence of a *care crisis*, and what I call *the macroeconomics of care*: the linkages from the care economy to public investments, fiscal spending, employment creation, poverty alleviation, time poverty, productivity and growth.

The evolution of thinking to identify “care economy” as an economic sub-system also opened up a new discourse on forward looking feminist visions of what type of society and economy we want: *Purple Economy* (Ilkcaracan 2013), *Caring Democracy* (Tronto 2013), *Caring Economy* (UK Women’s Budget Group 2020), *Care Society* (UN ECLAC 2022). These entail calls for a new economic, political and social order.

In this paper, I focus on the Purple Economy, distinguishing it from other visions that put the emphasis on “care”. I argue that we need a simultaneous emphasis on “care” and “gender equality” in the current context of a gender backlash, that acknowledges the importance of care but justifies a caring economy/care society on the basis of a strong gender division of labor. Purple Economy framework, by contrast, puts simultaneous emphasis on the objectives of both a caring and gender equal economy (explained in the next section). By the way of using a symbolic color to depict an economy vision, it also implies the complementarities with a Green Economy and hence engages in an expanded notion of care to include also earthcare.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The next section explains the entry points and guiding principles of the Purple Economy Framework, which provides a basis for a critical evaluation of policy proposals on the agenda. Section III lays out the four pillars of a Purple Economy, which establish the strategic and complementary policy intervention areas. Finally, I discuss recent applied empirical work on investing in care, as a linkage between the first and fourth pillars (social care services infrastructure and enabling macroeconomic framework, respectively). The findings of these empirical policy simulations, make the linkages to macroeconomics of care, explore the returns to investing in care beyond gender equality, emphasize overlaps with macro objectives of full employment as well as a sustainable green economy. I point out the potential for building on this macroeconomic perspective on care for advocacy. The final section concludes with policy recommendations.

II. The Purple Economy Framework: Entry Points and Guiding Principles

The notion of the Purple Economy emerged initially as a catchphrase that is inspired by the popular use of ‘the Green Economy’ and using Purple, the symbolic color of women’s movements in many countries around the World (Ilkcaracan 2013). Over time, it developed into a feminist vision of an economic order that is both *gender egalitarian* and *caring* (Ilkcaracan 2016; 2017).¹ There is an emphasis on “and” because the Purple Economy framework warns against the trade-offs between the objectives of gender equality and caring. A feminist reading of “gender equal” or “caring” tends to perceive these two characteristics of an economy as one and the same. It assumes that an intervention for gender equality in the economic sphere needs to address the issue of care; and vice versa, that an intervention for a caring social and economic order will result in gender equality. The call for “a caring economy” by the U.K. Women’s Budget Group (2020) and for “a care society” by UN ECLAC (2022) resonates such an assumption. Looking at the national and international policy debates on care, however, we find that there is a variety of proposals which aim at one of these two objectives, do so usually at the expense of the other. This is a discourse caught between the conservative gender backlash on the one hand, and the dominant neoliberal paradigm on the other.

Policy interventions to make an economy caring may not necessarily serve towards making it gender-egalitarian. These are policies such as extended maternity leave (long periods of care leave exclusively for mothers), cash for care transfers targeting women (reminiscent of the wages for housework debate in the 70s), legislations enforcing employers to provide childcare centers for women workers, or labor market practices for flexible employment (part-time, home-based employment) for women workers towards the objective of work-life balance. Such interventions create the space for care but through measures assigning women to their caretaker roles, enforcing discriminatory gender norms. They usually emerge as conservative policy solutions to the dilemma faced by capitalism of needing more women in the labor force without challenging their conventional roles as caregivers.

¹ The Purple Economy framework has been adopted as an advocacy and training tool by women’s organizations, including the European Women’s Lobby (Brussels), the International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia-Pacific (Malaysia), Women for Women’s Human Rights (Türkiye).

In the opposite case, interventions to make an economy gender equal may not necessarily serve towards making it caring. These are policies which focus exclusively on incentivizing women to enter the market without any consideration of the time foregone for care work. Namely, employment subsidies to incentivize firms to hire women workers, support for women's access to jobs, training, career advancement, credit or entrepreneurship but without any support mechanisms for care work. This is a neoliberal approach to gender equality without challenging the prioritization of markets and competition over care and solidarity. The study by the McKinsey Global Institute, which reports that trillions of dollars can be added to global GDP if women were to adopt the same employment patterns (rates, hours and wages) as men is widely referenced as evidence of the economic gains from promoting gender parity in employment. Yet from the critical perspective of feminist economics, we need to question what happens to all the unpaid care work (globally over 16 billion hours per day as estimated by ILO 2018) when women close up the gap in paid work time with men, without requiring men and/or the state to fill in the gaps in unpaid care work. Such an approach may seem gender egalitarian, but does not account for the loss in welfare due to the care work foregone and the consequent "erosion of caring norms" to quote Himmelweit (2007).

We should note that these two approaches to policy (caring at the expense of gender equality vs. gender equal at the expense of caring norms) represent the tensions between the conservative backlash emerging at the tails of neoliberalism. This conservative backlash builds an argument against modernization and the "modern woman" (along with it they package feminism, the struggle for gender equality) on the basis that it derives us away from family and community values for solidarity and care. In fact, the culprit is unbridled neoliberalism, which embraces gender equality superficially, without leaving any space for care and solidarity.

The Purple Economy framework, in line with feminist principles, warns against these trade-offs, avoiding either scenarios, and puts forth a vision of a gender-equal and caring economic order as two distinct characteristics: It calls for interventions aimed at sustaining, expanding and improving the space for care without reproducing gender and intersectional inequalities. It rests on simultaneous perspectives of caregivers and care receivers as guiding principles:

- equality in care giving through co-responsibility between the state and households, between women and men; and
- equality in care receiving through universal access to quality care, prioritizing the requirements of care for people and earthcare over the priorities of the market.

Purple Economy calls for interventions to improve women's engagement in the market on equal terms with men, as much as calling for interventions to improve men's and state's engagement in caregiving to the same extent as women. Such a framework calls for a reconsideration of the one of the components of the 5R framework, namely "reduce (unpaid) work". Rather the approach suggests we need to enhance the space for more and better care.

III. Four Pillars of the Purple Economy: Strategic Policy Intervention Areas

The Purple Economy stands on four pillars, each of which builds upon important work by feminist economists on unpaid and paid care work, gender analysis of care services and time-use, labor markets, rural development, and the macroeconomy (Figure 2). This is a policy framework weaving together the already existing feminist economics insights and claims into a consistent whole, identifying the main entry points for a caring and egalitarian economic and social order. The four pillars are:

1. Investing in a universal social care services infrastructure;
2. Regulation of labor markets and Social Protection for work-life balance, decent jobs and gender equality;

3. Investing in time-saving and sustainable physical infrastructure and ecological agriculture in rural settings;
4. Creating an enabling macroeconomic environment for inclusive and sustainable economies.

A universal social care services infrastructure access to quality care services by all underlies the principle of equality in caregiving through co-responsibility between the households and the state. It entails healthcare services including long-term care, education including early childhood care and preschool education, social services for the vulnerable segments of society such as women at risk of violence, immigrants, people with disabilities. It is called an infrastructure because it constitutes a macro institutional network of widely accessible childcare centers, schools, universities, hospitals, clinics, health centers, active living centers for center-based services and professional home-based services catering to the elderly and disabled. And like physical infrastructure it enables an economy to function more productively. Since care services sectors have the highest sectoral employment multipliers, investing in such an infrastructure is also the source of substantial job creation. As such the Purple Economy is also a response to the economic crisis and jobless growth through Purple Jobs, akin to the Green Economy and Green Jobs. It should also be noted that *Purple Jobs* are also *Green Jobs* as they constitute local service sector jobs with relatively low emissions and waste. Moreover, it points to the risks that efforts to green our economies, when not accompanied with effective care policies, are likely to further deepen the gender gaps through increasing women's unpaid workload through the time required for earthcare; and through women's limited access to green jobs. *Figure 3* sketches out the complementarities between the Purple and Green Economy frameworks.

Regulation of labor market for work-life balance and decent jobs with equal gender incentives underlies the principle of equality in caregiving through co-responsibility between women and men. The regulatory interventions under this pillar target dual earner, dual carer families and problematizes work-life balance as an issue not only for women but also for men in employment. Hence the emphasis is on regulations for increasing the ability and willingness of men to undertake care work through measures such as paternity leave, flexible remote work for men with care responsibilities, and reduced working weeks. In a recent simulation on South Korea, Ilkkaracan and Memis (2022) find that the reduction of regulatory labor market hours has the potential to facilitate an increase in men's unpaid care work time. The demand for a shorter work week is another policy proposal that overlaps with the green economy. This pillar also entails interventions for decent pay and work conditions for care workers and for elimination of gender discrimination in labor markets.

An ecologically-sound, physical infrastructure for rural communities recognizes the additional care work burdens faced by women in underdeveloped rural-agricultural settings such as collecting firewood, carrying water, producing and processing food for self-consumption. It calls for efficient time-saving physical infrastructure such as improvements in rural water, energy, transport infrastructure to reduce indirect care work. Moreover, in recognition of the implications of climate change for rural areas and the key importance of access to food for care, this pillar calls for green investments in sustainable agriculture.

An enabling macroeconomic environment emphasizes the importance of a macroeconomic framework for undertaking of the interventions under the first three pillars. It calls for abandonment of the conventional framework of macro policy focusing exclusively on GDP growth to be replaced by an alternative framework where the priority objective becomes building inclusive, sustainable and resilient economies. In this alternative framework growth is seen only as one of the tools to achieve the macro targets of inclusiveness, sustainability and resilience.

IV. Applied Policy Simulations on Investing in Care

Some recent empirical work on investing in the care economy show the intersections between the first and fourth pillars of the Purple Economy framework (Figure 4). This strand of empirical work typically employs a macro-micro modeling approach to conduct policy simulations on economic returns to public investments in the care economy, primarily in terms of job creation, job creation favoring demand for women’s labor hence reducing gender gaps also through a demand side mechanism, income generation and reduction of income and time poverty.² To this end, they assess public budget allocations and fiscal spending patterns from a gender and care budgeting perspective. The findings underscore that purple investments in the care services sectors has the potential to generate millions of jobs (purple jobs) for women and men across the world. As mentioned above, this strong potential for job creation is based on the labor-intensive nature of direct care work and hence the high employment multiplier of the care services sectors. Through this potential for substantial employment creation, other positive outcomes follow such as poverty reduction, simultaneously alleviating income and time poverty. As an outcome of these debates, a recent report by the UN Secretary General (2021) entitled *Our Common Agenda* calls on member states for investments in three areas for decent job creation: invest in green, care and digital sectors.

Purple Economy hopes to communicate this vision to a wider audience by resonating the already well-known concept of the green economy and also by pointing to the parallels and complementarities with the Green economy. A starting point for the Green economy is internalization of the costs of reproducing nature/ecological balances into production and consumption activities towards the objective of ecological sustainability and wellbeing. In a similar vein, the starting point for the Purple Economy is internalization of the costs of care into production and consumption activities towards the objective of sustainability of care, of caring labor and wellbeing.

V. Concluding with Policy Recommendations

Calls for a caring economy, a care society or a Purple Economy, present feminist forward looking alternatives for transforming our economies by putting care and gender equality at the center, embracing life and acknowledging the interdependencies across all living species and our environment. The encompassing framework of the Purple Economy also notes the complementarities of interventions towards gender equality and caring economies with other social and economic objectives such as jobs generation, unemployment reduction, poverty alleviation and elimination of intersectional inequalities.

Emerging policy recommendations are as follows:

- i. Utilize emerging alternative feminist frameworks such as a Purple Economy, Caring Economy and Care Society for advocacy;³
- ii. Refine the 5R framework towards an emphasis for enhancing the space for more and better care;
- iii. Beware of the trade-offs that specific policy proposals entail between the objectives of ‘caring’ versus ‘gender equal’; eliminate any policy proposals that do not embrace both objectives simultaneously;
- iv. Explore the potential of the four pillars of the Purple Economy as a comprehensive and integrated approach to building a policy framework on care and gender equality;
- v. Build advocacy efforts upon the complementarities between the alternative feminist frameworks (as in no. i. above) and progressive macroeconomic policy proposals for full employment and for a green economy;
- vi. Utilize the evidence emerging from applied feminist economics research on the multiple economic and social returns to investing in care.

² For some of the seminal studies on the jobs generation potential of investing in care see Antonopoulos and Kim 2008; Antonopoulos et.al. 2010, Ilkharacan, Kim & Kaya 2015; 2019; de Henau et.al. 2016, 2017; and for an exhaustive review see: Ilkharacan 2021.

³ Note that translation of “caring economy” or “care society” into various languages are limited by lack of equivalent words that convey the same meaning as in English.

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Figure 1: A Framework for the Care Economy: Unpaid and Paid Care Work

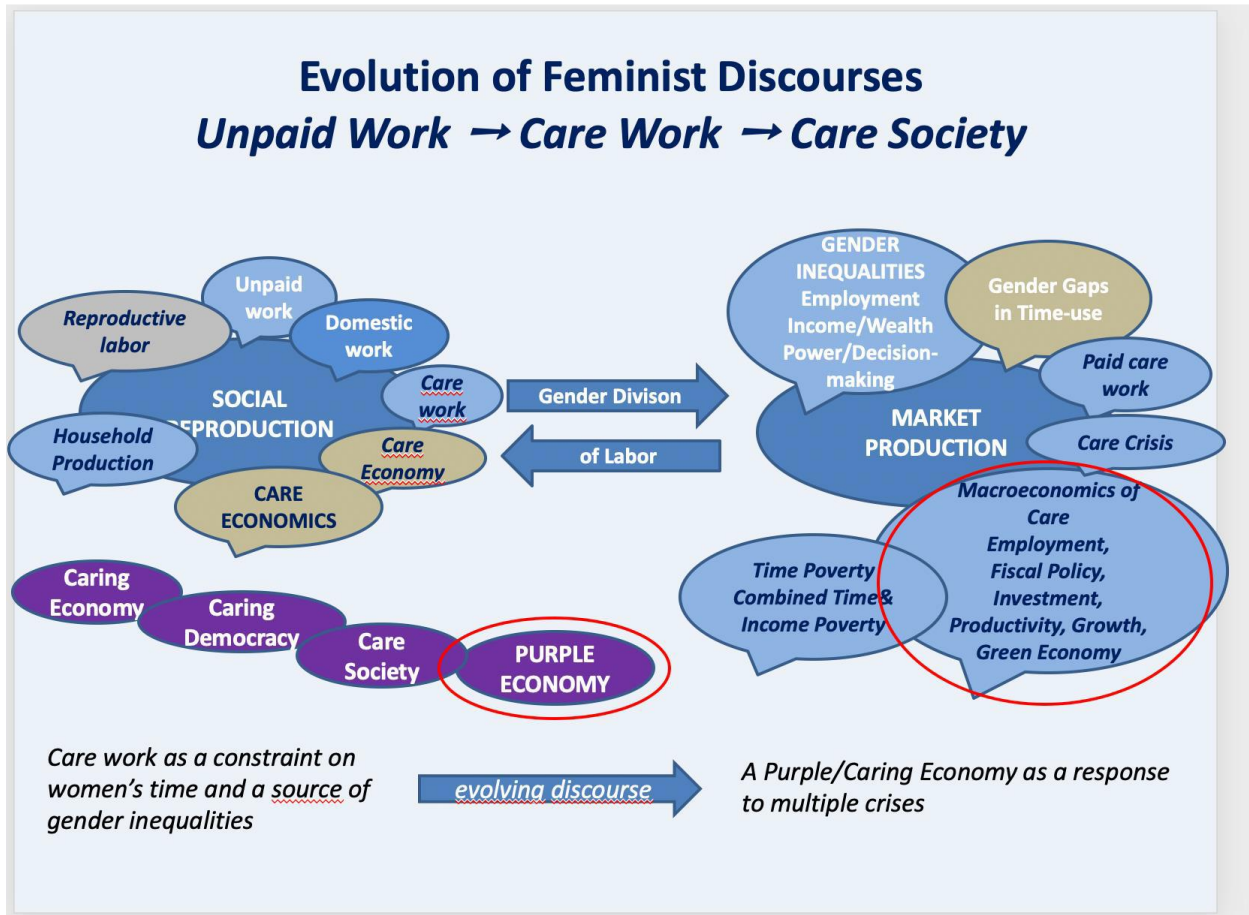


Figure 2: The Purple Economy – Strategic Policy Intervention Framework

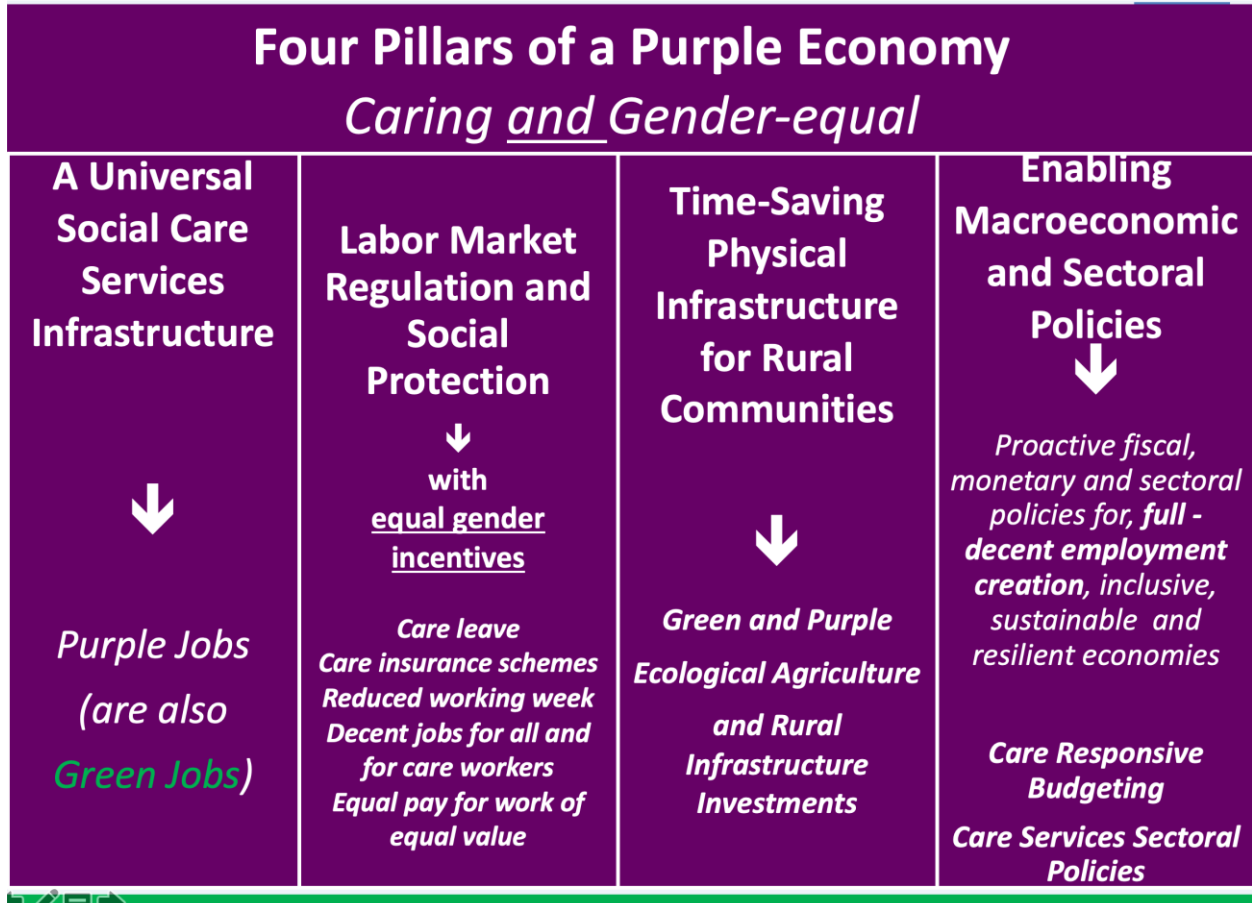


Figure 3 - Complementarities between the Purple and Green Economy

<i>Complementarities</i>	<i>Green Economy</i>	<i>Purple Economy</i>
a response to ... <i>also to the economic crisis</i>	the environmental crisis - sustainability of provisioning	the crisis of care - sustainability of provisioning • <i>Purple Jobs are also Green Jobs</i> • <i>for gender equality in a Green Economy Purple Interventions are indispensable</i>
acknowledges that beyond consumption of commodities, human well-being depends on access to	healthy ecosystems	quality care
accounts for	the value of nature	the value of unpaid care work
organized around internalization of ... into the production and consumption patterns	environmental costs	the costs of caring labor
aims at elimination of ... through redistribution of costs	inter-generational inequalities	inequalities by gender, class, origin
calls for a reordering of priorities from consumption	to nature	to nurture
from GDP growth	to sustainable and equitable growth (or even de-growth)	

Figure 4 - Applied Policy Simulations on Investing in Care

