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Forgotten heroes

How the world is failing to care for its carers — again

Nearly five years ago, as the world grappled with a once-in-a-century pandemic, care workers stood on the frontlines, risking their health and often their lives to care for others. The scenes are etched into our collective memory: exhausted nurses collapsing in hallways, community health workers delivering aid to the most vulnerable, home caregivers holding the hands of patients whose loved ones could not be by their side. In those dark days, these workers were hailed as heroes — applauded from balconies, praised by politicians and splashed across front pages. But today, as we observe the UN's International Day of Care, we must ask: what happened to the promises made to these workers?

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a powerful, almost universal recognition that our healthcare and care systems were broken. Governments around the globe spoke of the need to 'care for the carers', making commitments to address the chronic issues that had long plagued the sector. These promises included better working conditions, fair pay, safe staffing levels, and a commitment to eliminate violence and harassment, particularly gender-based violence and harassment. But as the immediate threat of the pandemic receded, so too did the urgency to fulfil these commitments. What began as a rallying cry for change has, for many care workers, ended in disillusionment.

The cost of inaction

Today, care workers are again invisible, their struggles drowned out by other headlines. Many remain in dangerous understaffed environments, working long hours without support. In the United States, most home caregivers, who support the elderly and disabled to live with dignity, continue to be paid poverty-level wages, with no benefits or guaranteed hours. In Europe, nursing assistants are overburdened and undervalued, with more than half reporting they've considered leaving the profession due to unsustainable conditions, according to a recent UNI survey. In countries like the Philippines, Nepal and India, community health workers – who provide critical services to underserved populations – are still treated as informal labourers, without the protections that come

with formal employment.

The cost of inaction is devastating for caregivers and caretakers alike. When we ignore the needs of care workers, we undermine the entire healthcare and aged care systems. Burned-out workers lead to declining quality of care, and persistent staff shortages threaten the very sustainability of essential health and aged care services. Every family with a loved one in need of care feels the impact of this neglect. Governments and employers must act — not with more applause, but with the meaningful reforms that care workers need.

Transforming the healthcare sector

Formalising all care work is essential to ensuring these workers are no longer treated as disposable, without benefits or security. Safe staffing levels must be mandated to protect both care workers and patients. Addressing harassment and gender-based violence requires real enforcement and support systems. Most importantly, care workers must have the right to unionise and advocate for their rights without fear of retaliation. When care workers are unionised, they have the power to fight for both themselves and the people they care for.

We are starting to see how, despite the difficulties around the world, care workers' unions are making real progress in transforming the sector. In Pennsylvania, SEIU Healthcare successfully lobbied for mandatory safe staffing regulations in aged care facilities, a monumental step in protecting both workers and residents. In Chile, the union FENASSAP secured the 'Right to Rest' law, giving care workers 14 days of rest after enduring the strain of the pandemic. In Japan, a UA Zensen union survey revealed that 74.2 per cent of care workers experienced harassment, prompting the Japanese Ministry of Health to introduce a manual for countermeasures against harassment in nursing homes and establish consultation desks in each prefecture to address these pervasive issues.

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These examples show the centrality of the right to form a union and bargaining collectively. Unions are crucial to improving care work and ensuring that the promises made to care workers during the pandemic are kept.

We need a global wake-up call. The heroism we witnessed during the pandemic wasn't a fleeting moment; it was the reality of what care work looks like every day. Our society still depends on these workers to hold communities together, to care for our loved ones and to ensure that we can all live with dignity. Fulfilling the promises made in the darkest days

of the pandemic isn't just about keeping our word — it's about building the resilient health systems and communities we need for the future. Caring for those who care for us is not an option; it is an ethical imperative.

It is time for governments, employers and society at large to act — not with more applause, but with the meaningful changes that care workers have been fighting for: formal employment, safe staffing levels, professional training, union representation, and freedom from violence and harassment. Caregivers can't wait because we know that our communities are only as strong as those who care for them.



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