SIES Journal of Humanities | ISSN: 3048-9768 (Online)
Volume 2, Issue 1, 2025

Care as Resilience: Feminist Ethics in Crisis Times

Ms. Shivani Vartak

Assistant Professor of Logic, Children's Welfare Centre's College of Law, Mumbai- 400064

Email: vshivaani9@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how feminist ethics—especially the ethics of care—offers a powerful, context-sensitive understanding of resilience that differs from dominant, often individualistic or masculinist paradigms. It critiques the neoliberal framing of resilience as self-reliance and rugged individualism, and instead proposes care—as relational, responsive, and ethically grounded—as a foundation for collective and sustainable resilience during crises such as the pandemic, climate collapse, and social injustice.

Building on foundational work by Carol Gilligan and expanded by contemporary feminist thinkers, the paper argues that care is not merely an emotion or domestic responsibility, but a political and moral framework essential for survival and ethical agency. In contrast to prevailing models that celebrate autonomous adaptation, the ethics of care emphasizes relational autonomy, mutual support, and attentiveness to context and vulnerability.

The paper critiques dominant resilience discourse that makes invisible, the burden disproportionately placed on women, caregivers, and marginalized communities. Case studies from the COVID-19 pandemic, ecofeminist responses to environmental collapse, and care-based organizing in queer, trans, and Black feminist spaces illustrate how care fosters resilience not through heroic individualism but through collective solidarity, mutual aid, and embodied empathy.

Philosophically, the paper redefines moral agency in terms of interdependence and challenges prevailing notions of power as control. In doing so, it affirms care not as weakness, but as a radical and necessary foundation for surviving and transforming crisis. Ultimately, the paper contends that a resilient future depends on valuing care—ethically, politically, and structurally.

Keywords: *Care Ethics, Resilience, Feminist Philosophy, Moral Agency, Crisis Ethics*

Introduction

"Resilience" is everywhere today. We are told to build resilient economies, resilient minds, even resilient families. The word usually carries a sense of strength — the ability to endure,

recover, or "bounce back" from difficulty. But the moment we pause to reflect, resilience turns out to be more complicated than it first appears.

Philosophy, after all, has always asked how human beings live with fragility. The Stoics spoke of endurance in the face of misfortune. Christian thinkers valued patience in suffering. Modern psychology celebrates grit. All these visions understand resilience in some way as endurance — the power to withstand.

Yet that familiar picture is not the only one. To imagine resilience only as solitary toughness risks misunderstanding human life itself. No one truly survives or flourishes in isolation. We live in webs of relation: families, friendships, communities, ecologies. Resilience is not simply the story of one person who withstands adversity alone. More often, resilience is carried by networks of care that sustain us when our individual endurance falters.

This raises a central philosophical question: should resilience be understood as strength-in-isolation, or can it be reimagined as strength-in-relation? How this question is answered fundamentally shapes our understanding of human agency and moral responsibility, and it also influences how societies envision and respond to crises in the future.

Much of today's public language, shaped by neoliberal ideals, seems to take the first view. It praises those who cope privately, adapt silently, and demand little from institutions. But such a model hides the fact that survival almost always depends on others — often on the invisible labor of caregivers, women, and marginalized communities. By reducing resilience to an individual achievement, we miss the larger truth that human beings are, from the ground up, interdependent.

This paper seeks to rethink resilience through that deeper truth. It turns to feminist ethics of care, which has long argued that our moral lives are grounded not in separation but in relation. Thinkers such as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Joan Tronto show that attentiveness, responsibility, and compassion are not sentimental add-ons to ethics but its foundation. When applied to resilience, their insights suggest that survival in times of crisis is possible not through heroic isolation but through shared care.

Alongside feminist thought, I also look to Vedantic philosophy. The Vedantic vision of non-duality (*advaita*) teaches that the self is not separate but profoundly one with the whole. Its concept of dharma places emphasis on responsibility within a larger order, while compassion

(*karuṇā*) is recognized as the highest form of agency. Read together, Vedanta and care ethics invite us to see resilience not as "bouncing back" but as transforming together, grounded in interdependence.

This paper thus argues that resilience, at its best, is not mere endurance. It is an ethical and relational capacity — to adapt together, to sustain one another, and to reshape the conditions of life in times of crisis. In this paper, I critique the dominant model of neoliberal resilience, explore the care-ethical alternative, bring in insights from Black feminist traditions and Vedanta, and conclude by proposing resilience as a collective practice of care.

Ultimately, the claim is simple: we do not endure alone, and we are not meant to. Resilience is not the opposite of vulnerability; it grows through it, in the care we extend and receive.

Dominant Frameworks of Resilience: A Critical Audit

When resilience is spoken of in today's public sphere, it often carries with it certain hidden assumptions. We are encouraged to "stand strong," to keep going no matter what, to carry on without complaint. Governments praise resilient citizens who endure economic austerity. Workplaces praise ~~prize~~ resilient employees who can absorb stress without asking for change. Even in personal life, the idea of resilience is tied to self-reliance — coping privately, bouncing back quickly, and moving on.

At first glance, there seems nothing wrong with this. After all, who would not admire someone who withstands hardship with grit? Yet when resilience is framed only as private endurance, it becomes less a virtue and more a burden. The resilient subject in this picture is imagined as an isolated individual, fortified against the world, carrying the full responsibility of survival on their own shoulders.

Philosophers of vulnerability, like Martha Nussbaum (2001), remind us that such an image is misleading. Human beings are not self-sufficient creatures. Our lives are shot through with dependency: we are born helpless, we fall ill, we age, and throughout it all, we rely on the care of others. The fantasy of the self as a sealed container, sufficient unto itself, runs counter to the very conditions of human existence. If resilience is defined through that fantasy, then it rests on shaky ground.

Moreover, a resilience discourse built on toughness alone has political consequences. It quietly shifts responsibility for survival away from institutions and communities, placing it entirely on individuals. If a poor worker struggles to make rent or a single mother cannot cope with care duties, the failure is framed as a lack of resilience rather than a structural injustice. In this way, "resilience talk" can become a tool that excuses neglect — praising those who endure silently while ignoring the unfair systems that create vulnerability in the first place.

Feminist thinkers have long noted this danger. Care work — raising children, nursing the sick, supporting the elderly, sustaining households — is what keeps societies alive, but it is rarely acknowledged in rhetoric about resilience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the resilience of "nations" or "economies" depended on countless acts of care, much of it unpaid and disproportionately performed by women. Yet these acts were not celebrated as resilience. The spotlight fell instead on the rhetoric of individual toughness and adaptation.

This erasure shows the limits of the dominant model. If resilience means only endurance in isolation, it leaves unspoken the truth that survival, in practice, is relational. What it hides is that resilience is almost always made possible by others: the parent, the friend, the nurse, the teacher, the stranger who offers help. A philosophical audit of this dominant framework reveals not strength but fragility in disguise.

We are left, then, with a question: if resilience cannot be adequately explained as lone endurance, what alternative vision can philosophy offer? How might we reconceive resilience in ways that recognize care, interdependence, and the shared vulnerabilities of human life?

Feminist Ethics of Care: Toward Relational Resilience

If the dominant picture of resilience is that of the solitary, self-sufficient individual, then feminist philosophy offers a strikingly different vision. From its beginnings, feminist ethics has questioned the assumption that the highest form of moral life lies in autonomy, detachment, or universal principles of justice. Instead, it has drawn attention to the ordinary, often invisible practices of care through which human beings actually survive and flourish.

Gilligan: A Different Moral Voice

Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) famously challenged the claim that moral development culminates in impartial rule-following. She noticed that many women, when

describing moral problems, did not speak in the abstract register of law or rights. They spoke instead about relationships: who will be hurt, who will feel abandoned, who needs attention. Gilligan showed that such a perspective was not moral weakness but a moral voice of its own — an ethic of care rooted in attentiveness to the particular.

What this implies for resilience is profound: resilience is not only the ability to stand apart and endure, but also the ability to remain connected, to respond, and to sustain relationships in the face of difficulty.

Noddings: Care as the Ground of Ethics

Nel Noddings (1984) developed this insight by describing care as not just one aspect of morality, but its foundation. To be human is to be born into networks of dependence — into being cared for and learning to care in turn. For Noddings, morality begins not in abstract duty but in the lived encounter of one person attending to another.

In this light, resilience is better understood as a shared project. A person may endure hardship not through sheer grit but because someone else listens, tends, sustains them. Resilience, then, is relational rather than solitary: it exists where care flows between people.

Tronto: Care as Political Life

Joan Tronto (1993) expanded this perspective beyond the personal to the political. She argued that care is not a private virtue for families alone but the very fabric that holds societies together. Feeding, healing, teaching, maintaining — these are the activities that sustain collective life. Tronto's moral moments of care — attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness — highlight that societies cannot function without care and thus must recognize it as a collective responsibility.

Applied to resilience, this means that communities and nations are not resilient simply because individuals endure alone. They are resilient when care is organized, valued, and distributed fairly. Inattention to care — whether in the neglect of healthcare systems, the undervaluing of education, or the invisibility of caregiving labor — erodes genuine resilience.

From Individual Toughness to Relational Autonomy

Together, Gilligan, Noddings, and Tronto challenge the equation of resilience with toughness. They shift the focus from individual autonomy to relational autonomy: the idea that true agency

comes not from separation but from being embedded in networks of care. Instead of a fortress-self who resists adversity alone, the resilient self becomes the one able to give and receive care, to remain responsive even when vulnerable.

Philosophically, this is a radical reimagining: it proposes that our strength is inseparable from our vulnerability, and that resilience is not the denial of dependence but its ethical fulfilment.

Resilience Through Traditions of Care: Philosophical Reflections

Philosophy, while often abstract, is deeply enriched when it listens to the wisdom of lived experience, especially from those who have long embodied resilience through care in conditions of marginalization. Black feminist, queer, and ecofeminist thinkers offer invaluable insights into resilience that goes beyond endurance, rooted instead in practices of care, solidarity, and transformation.

Black Feminist Care as Survival and Resistance

Black feminist philosophy challenges dominant narratives of resilience by foregrounding the role of care within communities that have historically been oppressed and excluded. Audre Lorde (1988) famously insisted that self-care is not a luxury but an act of political warfare—a means of survival in a world structured to diminish Black lives. Here, resilience is inseparable from the communal practice of care: tending to oneself, supporting others, and nurturing collective strength.

Bell Hooks (2000) further develops this theme by linking love to resilience. For Hooks, love is a political act, a practice of enduring care that actively resists systems of domination. In her view, resilience is not stoic toughness but the ability to cultivate love and care as forms of freedom and healing.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) articulates how Black women's experiences have generated what she calls "standpoint knowledge" that centers care, interdependence, and resistance against dehumanization. This knowledge situates resilience as relational, embodied, and inseparable from ethical obligations to community. Black feminist thought teaches us that resilience is collective: it is cultivated through shared stories, care networks, and mutual aid.

Queer and Trans Care Networks: Chosen Families and Mutual Support

Queer and trans communities often encounter exclusion from traditional family support structures and broader society. In response, they have nurtured "chosen families" — kinship networks based on care, mutual respect, and solidarity rather than biology. These networks are sites where resilience unfolds not through solitary courage but through interconnected care.

Philosophically, this challenges dominant ideas of what counts as family, autonomy, and support. It illustrates how resilience thrives in relationships that are flexible, attentive, and responsive to vulnerability. Care here is radical and transformative: it reconstructs social bonds and resists normative pressures that isolate or exclude.

Ecofeminist Care: Nurturing the Earth as Collective Resilience

Ecofeminism draws attention to how the exploitation of the natural world parallels the oppression of women and marginalized groups. From its perspective, resilience is not only a human concern but an ecological one. It is the capacity of communities to live in harmony with their environment through practices of care, stewardship, and respect.

Movements like the Chipko tree-hugging campaign in India exemplify this philosophy: resilience grows from the interdependence of people and nature and from caring acts that protect life itself. Ecofeminist care reveals resilience as an ethical relationship that transcends human exceptionalism, reinforcing that survival depends on caring for the whole earth community.

These traditions teach that resilience always has a relational, embodied, and ethical character. Resilience is not about isolated strength but about sustaining life through webs of care—whether in Black communities resisting systemic racism, queer networks crafting safe spaces out of exclusion, or ecology-minded activists protecting the planet.

They show us that resilience is a collective achievement sustained by ongoing attention and response to vulnerability. Without such care, the very idea of surviving adversity loses its meaning. With it, resilience becomes an occasion for transformation—both personal and social.

Vedantic Perspectives on Care and Resilience

Philosophical traditions from around the world have long concerned themselves with the challenge of living well amid change, suffering, and uncertainty. The Indian Vedantic tradition,

in particular, offers rich resources for rethinking resilience through its teachings on the nature of the self, duty, and compassion. Bringing Vedanta into conversation with feminist ethics of care allows us to enrich the philosophical grounding of resilience as relational and transformative.

Advaita Vedanta: The Self as Interdependence

Advaita, often understood as "non-duality," posits that the deepest reality is a unity called Brahman, and that the individual self, or Atman, is ultimately not separate from this whole (Radhakrishnan, 2009). This insight dissolves the sharp boundaries between self and other that underlie much Western thought.

In this view, resilience cannot be a matter of isolated self-reliance because the self is not fundamentally alone or separate. Instead, it is always already connected to all beings. To harm others is, ultimately, to harm oneself. This interconnectedness suggests a form of resilience grounded in recognizing our shared being, which aligns closely with feminist care ethics' emphasis on relationality and mutual responsibility.

Dharma: Contextual Responsibility as Ethical Ground

Central to Vedantic and wider Indian philosophy is the concept of dharma — often understood as "duty" or "right action." Yet dharma is not a set of rigid rules but a fluid, context-sensitive responsibility that sustains social and cosmic order (Vivekananda, 1989). It calls on each person to act in harmony with their relationships and circumstances.

Dharma resonates with care ethics in that both stress attentiveness to context and the needs of others rather than abstract universal laws. Acting according to dharma involves being responsive to the particularities of one's situation, something essential for resilience in the face of unpredictable crises.

Karuṇā: Compassion as Ethical Agency

Compassion—*karuṇā* in Sanskrit—is revered in Vedantic and Buddhist thought as the highest expression of ethical life. It is not mere pity but a profound recognition of shared vulnerability, inspiring active care and transformation.

This echoes the feminist ethics of care's insistence that moral agency is relational and requires empathy and responsiveness. Compassion, in this sense, is both a wellspring and a practice of

resilience. It enables beings to endure suffering not by turning away but by engaging it with open heartedness.

Philosophical Dialogue and Synthesis

By placing Vedantic teachings alongside feminist ethics of care, we see a powerful convergence. Both traditions reject the isolated, autonomous self in favour of an interdependent self embedded in webs of relation. Both affirm that resilience is not mere endurance, but an ethical engagement grounded in care, context, and compassion.

This intercultural dialogue enriches the philosophical foundations of resilience, offering a model grounded not only in social interdependence but also in metaphysical unity. It reminds us that resilience must be as much about transforming our understanding of self and other as about adapting to external challenges.

Redefining Resilience: From Endurance to Collective Transformation

For many, the word resilience conjures the idea of "bouncing back." It suggests returning, after hardship, to a prior state of equilibrium. This image offers comfort; it promises continuity despite disruption. Yet, when we look more closely, we see its limitations, especially when applied to people and communities facing ongoing oppression and systemic injustice.

What, then, does it mean to truly be resilient?

If resilience is only about returning to what was, then it risks restoring the very conditions that caused suffering. Marginalized communities, in particular, have little interest in simply "bouncing back" to exclusion or uncertainty. Resilience for them is — and has always been — about transformation: about forging new relations, new systems, and new possibilities for living and thriving together.

Moving Beyond the Myth of the Self-Sufficient Individual

The traditional model of resilience as isolated endurance, much like the rugged individual, is inadequate for this transformative vision. Human beings are deeply interconnected. Our survival depends on others' care as much as on our own strength. When adversity strikes, no one really "goes it alone." It is through relationships of mutual aid and empathy that resilience takes shape.

Understanding resilience as collective means acknowledging these ties. It invites governments, institutions, and societies to take responsibility for cultivating care infrastructures — healthcare systems that prioritize well-being, social policies that uplift caregivers, educational environments that nurture empathy, and economies that value cooperation over competition.

Collective Care as the Heart of Resilience

Resilience, then, is a practice — a practice of care. This care includes listening deeply, supporting others in vulnerability, healing from harm, and nurturing the conditions for growth. These are not sporadic acts but ongoing commitments that sustain communities.

Such care challenges dominant cultural narratives that equate strength with emotional stoicism or unyielding independence. Instead, it celebrates resilience as the capacity to be vulnerable, to rely on others, and to engage with suffering compassionately.

Reshaping Cultures and Structures

To bring care-centered resilience to life, we need both cultural and structural change. Culture shapes how we value vulnerability and connection. If societies celebrate toughness to the exclusion of tenderness, they will fail to recognize the real sources of resilience.

Structurally, resilience requires investments in the often-invisible labor of caregiving and community-building. This means fair wages and protections for care workers, accessible healthcare, environmental stewardship, and political systems responsive to the needs of all.

When care is visible and valued, resilience becomes a shared resource — a collective capacity grounded in ethical responsibility and relationality.

Ethical Interdependence as the Core of Resilience

Philosophically, this vision redefines resilience as ethical interdependence. It moves away from viewing vulnerability as weakness or failure and sees it as the site where human connection is most profound.

Resilience is no longer about solitary endurance but about living well together, responding to vulnerability with care, and transforming hardship into new forms of flourishing. It roots resilience in responsibility — responsibility that connects the individual to the community, the self to the other, the present to the future.

This redefinition opens pathways to justice, healing, and sustainability. It helps us imagine societies that do not demand silent endurance from the vulnerable but cultivate collective strength through empathy and care.

Case Study: COVID-19 and Care-Based Resilience

The global COVID-19 pandemic harshly illuminated both the limits of neoliberal resilience and the vital importance of care as the foundation of true resilience. Across the world, individuals and communities faced unprecedented challenges—illness, isolation, economic and social disruption. The question of how to endure and adapt was not theoretical but urgent and unavoidable.

The Limits of Individual Resilience

Early public messaging emphasized "personal responsibility" and the need to be "resilient" amid the crisis. While financial responsibility and careful use of resources must be actively promoted, it is equally important to ensure that such caution does not result in the denial of essential support or opportunities. Institutional decision-making should therefore balance prudence with adequacy, ensuring that necessary academic, administrative, and student-related requirements are effectively me.

Philosophically, such rhetoric echoed the problematic view of resilience as solitary endurance, foregrounding self-sufficiency while sidelining collective obligations. Calls to "stay strong" and "carry on" masked the profound vulnerabilities shared by the entire human community, obscuring how much survival depended on mutual aid and institutional care.

Care as the Ground of Survival

As the pandemic unfolded, it became clear that true resilience arose not from isolated toughness but from networks of care and relational support. Healthcare workers' dedication underscored the centrality of caregiving labor—often invisible, socially undervalued, and disproportionately borne by women. Families and communities improvised mutual aid—sharing resources, providing emotional support, and organizing to meet basic needs.

These acts of care sustained those most vulnerable and allowed societies to weather waves of disruption. They illustrated that resilience is relational: it depends on attentiveness, responsiveness, and shared responsibility.

COVID-19 exposed the ethical necessity of care as central, not peripheral, to resilience. It revealed how the illusion of rugged individualism collapses amid collective crisis. The pandemic forced a reckoning with our interdependence and the limitations of models that celebrate detachment over connection.

This case confirms the arguments of feminist care ethics: survival is a collective achievement grounded in care. Vedānta does not conceive the individual as an isolated, self-sufficient entity. Instead, it understands reality as non-dual (advaita), where all beings share a common metaphysical ground—Brahman. The apparent separateness of individuals is attributed to avidyā (ignorance), while true knowledge reveals the interconnected and relational nature of existence. As the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* declares, *"Sarvaṁ khalvidaṁ brahma"*—all this indeed is Brahman (6.2.1). This implies that the welfare of one cannot be fully separated from the welfare of others, since all participate in the same underlying reality.

The Vedāntic notion of ātman as identical with Brahman (*tat tvam asi*) further reinforces the idea of intertwined fate. When the self is understood not as a private possession, but as universally shared, ethical responsibility naturally extends beyond the individual. Harm to others is, at a deeper level, harm to oneself; likewise, the flourishing of others contributes to one's own well-being. This ontological unity grounds an ethics of mutual care and responsibility, rather than radical individualism.

The pandemic's lessons urge a reorientation of policy and culture toward recognizing and valuing care labor, investing in health systems, and nurturing community solidarity. They call for abandoning narratives of individual resilience alone and embracing a richer, ethical vision that sees resilience as sustained by care grounded in mutuality and compassion.

Conclusion

In a world marked by climate crises, pandemics, and social upheavals, resilience is more crucial than ever. Yet if we understand resilience only as individual toughness or silent endurance, we risk deepening isolation and injustice.

This paper has argued for a profound shift: resilience must be rethought as a relational, ethical, and transformative capacity rooted in care. Feminist ethics reveals how resilience grows out of attentive relationships and shared responsibility. Black feminist and queer philosophies show resilience as community-based care and survival beyond exclusion. Vedantic teachings remind

us that the self is not separate but interconnected with all beings, calling us toward compassionate action.

Together, these perspectives guide us toward a vision of resilience that transcends lonely strength. Resilience, properly understood, is the capacity of humans to live well together amid vulnerability — to care, to heal, and to renew. It is through such care that we can meet the challenges of the 21st century, not merely surviving but flourishing in collective transformation.

True resilience understands that we do not endure alone, nor should we be expected to. It is in the connections we nurture, the care we give and receive, that resilience finds its deepest power.

References

1. Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.
2. Hooks, B. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. William Morrow.
3. Lorde, A. (1988). *A burst of light: Essays*. Firebrand Books.
4. Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
5. Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Patricia Hill Collins. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
7. Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). *Indian philosophy* (Vols. 1–2). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1926)
8. Spade, D. (2020). *Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next)*. Verso Books.
9. Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
10. UN Women. (2020). *Whose time to care? Unpaid care and domestic work during COVID-19*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/whos-time-to-care
11. Vivekananda, S. (1989). *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda* (Vol. II). Advaita Ashrama.
12. Byung-Chul Han. (2015). *The burnout society* (E. Butler, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 2010).