



## **Cultivating rural women's economic empowerment:**

Exploring interlinkages between Unpaid Care Work,  
agroecology and violence against women and girls

ActionAid research

### **POWER PROJECT**

**As world leaders and civil society come together to consider the fundamental challenges and opportunities rural women and girls face at the 62nd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW62) one stark reality remains constant; that rural women remain at the margins of development, particularly regarding access to productive resources, decent work and their disproportionate burden of Unpaid Care Work.**

ActionAid's new research report: *Cultivating rural women's economic empowerment: Exploring interlinkages between Unpaid Care Work, agroecology, and violence against women and girls in South Asia* looks at the challenges and opportunities related to these issues and makes recommendations on how to address them. The study covers specific findings from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan and references ActionAid's extensive experience working on women's economic empowerment, Unpaid Care Work, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and agroecology; with a focus on implementation of ActionAid's Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA) approach.

The full report can be accessed here: <http://powerproject.actionaid.org/sustainable-agriculture/>



**Lucky Begum** from Gaibandha district, Bangladesh selling vegetables from her homestead garden. Reduction of her Unpaid Care Work burden has meant Lucky can produce more vegetables and make more money for her family.  
PHOTO: NOORE JANNAT PROMA/ACTIONAID

## Unpaid Care Work and rural women

Addressing Unpaid Care Work is fundamental to women's enjoyment of their human rights and to their pursuit of transformative economic, social and political activities. This has been recognised under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and goal 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>1</sup> However, despite this growing recognition at international and national level, the impact of women's Unpaid Care Work in farming communities is not well understood, monitored or recognised.

A recent time diary study conducted by ActionAid in Pakistan and Bangladesh with over 1,843 rural women and 500 men clearly shows the burden of Unpaid Care Work that falls to women and its impact on their ability to pursue economic and social activities. Unpaid Care Work included various household and community activities such as child care, cooking, housework, collecting fuel, water or food and other care giving tasks.

- **In Bangladesh, women complete nearly eight hours of Unpaid Care Work each day (nearly three times what men do), while in Pakistan women spend over 10 hours daily on Unpaid Care Work.**
- **In Pakistan women spent an average of 14 minutes per day on all paid labour activities while men spend 5.5 hours per day.**
- **Women have 1.5 hours less free time than men in Bangladesh, while women in Pakistan have 3 hours less free time than men.**

The study found that women also spend a disproportionate amount of time on time-intensive agricultural tasks such as collecting fodder and water, agricultural irrigation, animal care, foraging and agroforestry management, yet in focus groups women explained that their labour is so undervalued that they are often not recognised as “productive” farmers.

To try to address this imbalance ActionAid is working in four countries (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Ghana and Rwanda) on a project called POWER aimed at rural women's economic empowerment through addressing the intersections of Unpaid Care Work, agroecology and violence against women.<sup>2</sup> By analysing women's time use the project has established approaches aimed at mitigating specific Unpaid Care Work burdens, such as child care and farming. In Bangladesh, at the community level **100%** of mothers surveyed in Bangladesh reported that they gained **90 - 120 minutes** extra time each day from sending their children to day care centres supported by the project. In Pakistan women indicated that they have saved between **30 minutes to 1.5 hours** of time per day within just a few months of using improved fodder cutter equipment provided by POWER. The use of time diaries as a reflection and social change tool has resulted in early signs of redistribution of Unpaid Care Work at household levels. At the regional and national level, advocacy initiatives focused on pushing for gender responsive public services, that recognise and reduce the burden of Unpaid Care Work on women have been successful. For example in Bangladesh local government has started to take on some costs related to provision of day care services. Women reported that the time this saved them helped increase their engagement with productive work, paid employment and social activities.



Woman carrying out Unpaid Care Work in Nepal.  
PHOTO: RUPESH SHRESTHA/ACTIONAID

1. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>  
2. For more information see: <http://powerproject.actionaid.org/>



## Climate change and the impact on rural women's Unpaid Care Work

Adverse impacts of climate change and shocks such as flooding and landslides affect rural women disproportionately to men as they are often the most vulnerable and poor in society. This is largely due to social inequalities such as the unequal burden of Unpaid Care Work, unequal legal rights, unequal political participation, and lesser access to income, services and education. CSW62 draft conclusions already note concerns about climate crises and unsustainable agricultural practices on the 'lives, livelihoods and wellbeing of rural women and girls'. ActionAid's own research illustrates the stark reality women face due to climate change and the study highlights how it increases women's Unpaid Care Work because resources such as water, fuel and firewood become scarce and require more time to collect. Women also reported needing to repair or build shelter and find food.

## Addressing Unpaid Care Work and cultivating climate resilience through agroecology

Agroecological approaches, such as ActionAid's Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA) approach, enhance farm system's resilience to climate change and reduce adverse effects of climate disasters.<sup>3</sup> The study found that women using agro-ecological approaches reported 50% overall increase in crop yields, and that ecological, small scale and traditional systems can effectively match and even outperform industrialised/conventional agriculture models. This means women are better able to cope, and are more resilient, in the face of climate change and crises.

Agroecology practices and agricultural technologies can also reduce the time women spend on farming. Not only is agroecology proven to reduce women's Unpaid Care Work, it also can reduce women's exposure to harmful toxic agro-chemicals, which the study indicated is increasing for women in South Asia, due to the division of labour and women's limited access to education and literacy.

## Violence against women and girls

Women's economic inequality can also lead to diverse forms of gender-based violence through perpetuating women's socioeconomic marginalisation. In addition to the burden of Unpaid Care Work, female farmers also face a higher risk of violence in terms of economic violence, lack of rights and unequal power relations with men. Throughout South Asia, family and customary laws play a major role in the governance of women's economic life. Customary laws govern rights such as the capacity to inherit property; these rights define women's status and thereby determine their work and their ability to prevent violence or to exit a violent situation. **For example, in Bangladesh, men are six times more likely than women to be documented landowners.**<sup>4</sup> In this way, familial and customary laws and norms govern the economic and material realities of women and girls.

**However, there is evidence from this study that women's capacity to generate income leads to greater valuation within society and their self-confidence grows; in turn, violence against women is likely to diminish.**<sup>5</sup>

3. Altieri, M.A., Nicholls, C.I., Henao, A. (2015). Agroecology and the design of climate change-resilient farming systems. *Agronomy and Sustainable Development*, 35, pp. 869-890

4. Kieren, C., Sproule, K., Doss, C., Quisumbing, A., Kim, S.M., (2015). Examining Gender Inequalities in Land Rights Indicators in Asia. IFPRI Discussion Paper, 01429.

5. ActionAid Focus Groups Bangladesh and Pakistan, December 2017

Women in economically disadvantaged positions within society may face increased vulnerability to trafficking when they are forced to migrate for work. The study found that rural families often hire “agents” to help them move and identify opportunities, who may later sell young girls and women to brothels or forced domestic work. There is therefore a need for policy makers to put in place measures to safeguard women’s rights and prevent human trafficking.

## Recommendations for policy makers and practitioners:

- **Address women’s Unpaid Care Work through recognition, reduction and redistribution at local, national and international levels**
  - Measurement of Unpaid Care Work in national GDP
  - Collection of gender disaggregated data
  - Macroeconomic reforms that recognise Unpaid Care Work
  - Investment in Gender Responsive Public Services such as child care and access to water that reduce women’s Unpaid Care Work burden
  - Programmes that promote redistribution of Unpaid Care Work between men and women
- **Promote the use of agroecology for climate resilience and women’s economic empowerment**
  - Use of agroecology policy frameworks
  - Programmes funding community-based seed banks
  - Investment in time savings agricultural technologies
  - Ensure women’s access and control of critical resources, training, services and information
- **Ensure women farmers are recognised and represented at all levels of policy and decision making**
- **Protect women farmers and all rural women from violence against women: enforce CEDAW**
- **Develop integrated policies and programs that address Unpaid Care Work and agroecology**
  - Strengthen policies and frameworks tailored for the needs of rural women to specifically include Unpaid Care Work, agroecology, women’s economic empowerment, violence against women and the intersections between these issues
  - Ensure policies on Unpaid Care Work, women’s empowerment and gender equality are sufficiently funded and monitored for successful implementation
  - Promote alternative economic models which recognise and address the intersections between Unpaid Care Work, violence against women, market access and climate change

### The POWER project

ActionAid’s Promoting Opportunities for Women’s Empowerment and Rights (POWER) project is a five-year initiative (2016-2020) supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands under the Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) grant. The POWER project is working through local partners in Bangladesh, Ghana, Pakistan and Rwanda to mobilise and organise rural women to raise awareness of and claim their rights as farmers and carers. The project’s objective is to increase the income, and the ability to control this income, of 21,000 rural women in Bangladesh, Ghana, Pakistan and Rwanda. It is doing this by addressing Unpaid Care Work and, at the same time, by increasing productivity and access to markets through the practice of Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture. It also addresses violence against women as a cross-cutting issue. The POWER project is also working with policy and decision makers at local, national, regional and international level to ensure an environment that better supports women’s economic empowerment. For more information see the POWER project website <http://powerproject.actionaid.org/>

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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