The impact of unpaid care work and agroecology on women’s economic empowerment in Bangladesh, Ghana and Rwanda
Unpaid care work

Unpaid care work is work that involves the care of human beings and includes activities such as care of the sick, elderly, children, as well as activities that contribute to care of human beings such as fetching water, fetching firewood, cooking and other household chores. The work is predominantly done by women. In all parts of the world, women spend more time on unpaid care work than men, but women in poverty are the most affected. Girls and women spend long hours fetching water, collecting firewood, doing laundry, preparing food and caring for children and older people. This inequality keeps girls from receiving an education and limits women’s opportunities to increase their productivity, income and access to markets. It acts as a barrier to women claiming their rights and taking part in decision making and limits their time to pursue other opportunities.

Agroecology

Agroecology is an approach to agriculture that ActionAid has used in the POWER project with farmers in Bangladesh, Ghana and Rwanda. Tailored to the needs of each community, it helps farmers connect to sustainable ways of farming that consider the land, seed, water and ecological farming practices, to become more productive and resilient to climate change. However, the burden of unpaid care work for rural women farmers often means they have little time to learn about and to practice sustainable agriculture, which limits their economic empowerment.

Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index

The Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) is a tool for measuring women’s empowerment in the agricultural sector in five areas: production, resources, income, leadership and time use. It also measures women’s empowerment relative to that of men.
About the POWER project

Working through local partners, the long-term objective of POWER is to contribute to the increased economic empowerment of 21,000 rural women in Bangladesh, Rwanda and Ghana.

The project aims to mobilise these women to increase their income and ability to control that income, through an intersectional approach of:

- reducing, recognising and redistributing unpaid care work;
- promoting agroecology and enabling better access to markets; and
- addressing violence against women and girls.

POWER addresses violence against women, which keeps women in a position of economic, social and political inequality – and so cuts across all the project’s themes. Violence against women can restrict women’s movements and access to markets and limit their opportunity to earn a decent income. The unequal burden of unpaid care work can also make women more vulnerable to violence.

This report summarises research undertaken by International Solutions Group (ISG) in 2017, to inform the POWER project, as well as ongoing review of ActionAid work and experiences of smallholder farmers in the three project countries. It also uses the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index to analyse how empowered women in our target communities were when the project began.

POWER project outcomes

**Outcome 1:** 21,000 rural women are organised and can demand their rights as farmers and carers.

**Outcome 2:** Women’s unpaid care work is more highly valued within households, communities and government.

**Outcome 3:** 21,000 rural women have more secure and sustainable access to markets and productive resources.

**Outcome 4:** Create an environment that supports women’s economic empowerment by advocating for policy and institutional change.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands supports POWER through its Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) granting mechanism. The project runs from 2016 to 2020.
**Context:** overall levels of empowerment in Bangladesh, Ghana and Rwanda

**Methodology**

Our research methodology was tailored to the local context of each of the three countries and comprised:

- a household survey of around 1,000 people in each country (one man and one woman from 500 randomly-selected households)
- interviews with duty bearers\(^1\) at a community, regional and national level
- focus group discussions with people who might benefit from the project
- a desk review, including interviews with ActionAid staff and a review of existing evidence.

**Measuring empowerment**

We based our household survey on the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), a tool for measuring and analysing women’s empowerment in the agricultural sector. It measures women’s engagement in five areas:

1. **Production:** exclusive or joint decision making about farming, livestock, and fisheries.
2. **Resources:** ownership, access to, and decision making about land, livestock, agricultural equipment, consumer durables and credit.
3. **Income:** exclusive or joint control over income.
4. **Leadership:** membership of groups and ability to speak in public.
5. **Time use:** time spent in productive and domestic tasks.

Each area includes specific indicators to give a score on a scale of 0 to 1. These are combined to create an overall empowerment score. The nearer the score is to 1, the higher the level of individual empowerment within a population.

**Overall empowerment scores**

The scores for women in Rwanda (0.73) and Ghana (0.74) were similar, showing that they experience a significant lack of empowerment. In Bangladesh, the score for women was even lower at 0.64.

In all three countries, the research showed that the greatest cause of women’s disempowerment is their workload – both economic and unpaid care work. In Bangladesh, women have less access to community groups, and less access to and decision-making power on credit. In Rwanda, women have less control over the use of income than in the other two countries. In Ghana, women have less input into making decisions about economic activities.

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\(^1\) Duty bearers are people who have an obligation or responsibility to respect, promote and realise human rights, such as state actors and policy makers at a local, regional and national level.
Gender Parity

The WEAI also measures women’s empowerment relative to that of men. The Gender Parity score indicates if all people are equally disempowered, or if women have significantly less power than men. The nearer the score is to 1, the closer women and men are to equal empowerment.

Our research shows that women and men are disempowered in all three countries.

Figure 1: Disempowerment disaggregated by indicator

Figure 2: Gender Parity Index by country
Levels of empowerment

Outcome 1:
21,000 rural women are organised and can demand their rights as farmers and carers

Through the POWER project, ActionAid aims to:

• increase women’s skills and confidence in speaking up for their rights;
• improve women’s ability to report cases of violence;
• increase women’s membership and active participation in community groups; and
• improve women’s control over household resources.

Speaking up

Confidence in speaking publicly about important issues is crucial to a person’s ability to claim their rights. We asked women how comfortable they felt about speaking in public and how often they spoke up about issues that are important to them. In Bangladesh, over 60% of women said they were not at all comfortable about speaking in public, while in Rwanda, nearly the same proportion of women said they were comfortable. However, women in all three countries said they did not often speak in public. Only 14% in Bangladesh, 32% in Rwanda and 37% in Ghana said they had spoken publicly in the three months before to the survey.

Reporting violence

Focus groups in Bangladesh and Ghana revealed that violence against women is common. This can be directly tied to men’s perceptions of whether a woman has properly performed unpaid care work according to expectations. In Rwanda, our secondary research shows that violence against women is common.

Taking part in groups

Taking part in community organisations – such as agricultural producers’, microfinance and women’s rights groups – can help women advance their social and economic empowerment. In Ghana and Rwanda such groups do exist, and women are aware of them. Rwandan women participated in groups the most consistently. For example, 54% of Rwandan women took part in credit or microfinance groups compared to 21% in Ghana.

Controlling and benefit from assets

One of the POWER project aims is to support women gain more control over household resources. We asked men and women what household and business assets they own and how they make decisions about the use, sale, rent or disposal of these assets.

In Rwanda, households were asset-poor, but men and women fairly equally decided how to use, purchase or dispose of assets. In Bangladesh, men were much more likely than women to say that they own most assets, but the type of asset was also an important factor. For example, women make decisions about poultry while men have more say over equipment. In Ghana, women are less likely to own or have rights to assets than men.
In all three countries, women’s economic activities focus on unrecognised, unpaid activities which sustain the households and are consumed at home. Some of these activities are invisible and not recognised in the Gross Domestic Product. For example, 80% of women in Rwanda participated in food crop farming while only 6% were involved in cash crop farming. In Bangladesh, just 3% of women farmed cash crops and 30% in Ghana farmed cash crops. The work which does not generate an income is also undervalued.

**Figure 3:** The degree to which women participate in specific economic activities

![Bar chart showing the percentage of women participating in different economic activities in Rwanda, Ghana, and Bangladesh.](image)

Women smallholder farmers demanding their rights at national women farmers’ convention in Bangladesh. PHOTO: NOORE JANNAT PREMA/ACTIONAID.
An unequal burden

Women in Bangladesh spend the longest amount of time doing unpaid care work (10 hours), which is 2.8 times the number of hours that men spend on it. The inequality is more striking in Ghana, where women spend six hours doing unpaid care work every day, around 10 times that of men.

In Rwanda, women spend five hours doing unpaid care work, compared to the 1.5 hours men spend on it. In Rwanda women spend only slightly longer – 5.5 hours – on agriculture and income generating activities than they do on unpaid care work.

In all three countries, women spend much more time than men on housework, collecting firewood and childcare. In Bangladesh, men have a higher work burden than the men in Ghana or Rwanda, which may explain why women’s time is so consumed with unpaid care work. Men in Ghana spend 3.7 hours more than women on “other” activities, including leisure activities, while men in Rwanda spend 0.6 hours more than women on such activities.

Figure 4: Amount of time women spend on total work (including income generating) and unpaid care work

Outcome 2: Women’s unpaid care work is more highly valued within households, communities and government.

In all three countries, women’s economic work and unpaid care work burden was the biggest factor in their disempowerment. Women work longer days than men and unpaid care work forms a disproportionate part of their workday. POWER is seeking to address these issues through:

• recognition of the value and unequal burden of unpaid care work;
• redistribution of the burden of care work; and
• reduction of the amount of time women spend on care work.

Our research validates the need to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work in all POWER communities, and exposes the cultural barriers to achieving this. In all countries, male focus group participants said unpaid care work has a low status and is a woman’s “duty.” During the focus group discussions, the majority of men in Rwanda and a third of men in Ghana said they agreed with equal distribution of unpaid care work, but their time diaries showed that their words are not supported by actions.
POWER Project Policy and Research Series

POWER must work to influence men and boys in its target communities to recognise, redistribute and reduce unpaid care work for women.

**Figure 5:** The difference in the number of hours men spend than women on key activities

![Bar chart showing the difference in hours spent on various activities by men and women](image)

- Paid work, excluding agriculture
  - Men: -0.2
  - Women: 1.1
- Unpaid GDP work (agriculture)
  - Men: -2.4
  - Women: -2
- House work
  - Men: -1.4
  - Women: -1.4
- Collection of fuelwood and water
  - Men: -1.4
  - Women: 3.7
- Childcare
  - Men: -1.4
  - Women: 3.7
- Other
  - Men: 3.7
  - Women: 3.7

*Uwimbabazi Gloriouse, completes a time diary with support from ActionAid partner Faith Victory Association, Rwanda. PHOTO: JANE LENNON/ACTIONAID*
Access to land

We asked women and men about their land, soil quality and farming problems. In Rwanda, 95% of women and 96% of men said they had owned, rented or cultivated plots of land or other natural resources during the previous 12 months. In Ghana, a similar percentage of men (96%) but a lower percentage of women (72%) owned, rented, or cultivated plots of land or other natural resources.

Soil Quality

Men and women in Ghana believe that their soil is good quality. In Rwanda, men and women were more likely to say that their soil was of average quality. In Rwanda, nearly 70% of men and 55% of women reported that too little rain was their biggest farming problem.

Access to markets

We also asked men and women how often they sold their produce at markets. In Ghana, nearly half of men and women said they had not sold anything in the previous year. This percentage was 60% in Rwanda and 77% in Bangladesh.

Men and women in all three countries said the reason they do not sell in the market is that they focus on subsistence agriculture. They simply do not grow enough to sell.

In Rwanda, focus groups also said that the lack of cash in the community meant it was difficult to sell their produce at market. In Ghana, unequal pricing structures may create a disincentive to sell. In Bangladesh, more than 40% of women who did not sell at the market said that too much housework prevented them from doing so.

Looking at income from all sources, the biggest gap in earnings was also in Ghana. This may be because men tend to control cash crops. Women and men in Rwanda had fairly equal earnings. In Bangladesh, women reported higher earnings than men, but this may have been influenced by flooding in the region.
Figure 6: Men and women’s income from all sources over the previous 12 months.

2. Sources of income include income related to agricultural activities, regular work for pay, occasional work for pay, and income earned through other types of self-employment.
Outcome 4:
Create an environment that supports women’s economic empowerment by advocating for policy and institutional change.

We need to persuade local and national duty bearers to support and invest in recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. We will do this by working with women to advocate for policy changes at all levels.

Advocating for change

POWER project advocacy efforts could face some challenges in Ghana, where even though the duty bearers interviewed by ISG said they agreed with the project objectives, the former did not fully understand the impact of unpaid care work on women’s empowerment or view it as a women’s rights issue.

In Bangladesh, we interviewed four representatives from government ministries. Three of the four clearly recognised the need to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. The challenge is to leverage this into support for enforcing existing measures or creating new policies.

In Rwanda, gender equality is central to the government’s agenda. Nearly all the duty bearers we interviewed said gender equality programmes were a “high priority”.

As all three national governments publicly state their support for gender equality, we need to find ways to help translate this into policies that recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. In Ghana, we need to do more to educate government officials, community leaders and local influencers on what unpaid care work is and how it affects women’s rights.

Access to agricultural extension services and care facilities

Agricultural extension services and care facilities can reduce the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, if women have access to them.

Agricultural extension services are government-funded services and programmes which support and educate farmers. These are most effective in Rwanda, where 53% of men and 46% of women received them. In Ghana, only 18% of men and 8% of women said they had received these services.

Our research also shows that when women have access to care facilities, such as childcare centres and health centres, their burden of care work is reduced. We need to work with local and national governments and other partners to make these facilities available to more women.

Access to fuel, water and sanitation

Women’s access to fuel, clean water and sanitary facilities has a major impact on their work burden. Most households we surveyed used firewood as their main source of cooking fuel; 56.3% in Bangladesh, 89.1% in Rwanda and 83.3% in Ghana. Introducing alternative fuels and efficient stoves can reduce the time women spend collecting firewood.

The results were similar for access to water and sanitation. In Rwanda, families rely on public taps (30%), protected wells (24%) or rain water (24.4%). In Ghana, 83.3% of families rely on public taps. In these countries, improving the water infrastructure would reduce women’s unpaid care work. In Ghana, the lack of access to toilets is a problem that must be addressed.
Speakers at the launch of the POWER project in Adaklu Waya community, Volta region of Ghana.
PHOTO: DEBORAH LOMOTYE/ACTIONAID.
Conclusions and recommendations

**Awareness raising and advocacy**

Reducing, redistributing and recognising women’s unpaid care work is POWER’s top priority in promoting their economic empowerment. The first step is to change perceptions of care work as a low-value activity and create incentives for men to take more responsibility for it. We need to educate men that freeing women to earn an income can raise the whole family’s standard of living.

At the same time, we must collectively advocate for an expansion of facilities that reduce women’s unpaid care work, such as childcare, quality schools and health clinics at the village level. Women often live too far from these services to use them, or the services may not be available or not subsidised by governments, placing them out of reach of women.

We also need to encourage investment in public utilities, so they respond to women’s needs. ActionAid has been advocating with regional and national authorities to improve access to utilities such as water and electricity. This will go a long way to reduce the time women spend on tasks like collecting firewood and water, as well as improving the well-being of the whole community.

Women also need an effective means of reporting violence and institutional support so that when they do report it, legal protections are enforced, and the resources are there to support them.

**Measurable change**

Our research shows that many men say they agree with women’s rights but do not put words into practice in their own communities. POWER’s activities will result in measurable changes as well as self-reported changes in perception by both men and women. These could include a reduction in the time women spend on unpaid care work, increased use of facilities and evidence of increased income.

We found that low agricultural yields and the focus on subsistence farming are more of a barrier to women increasing their income than access to markets. We will focus on supporting women to produce enough surplus to sell.

In Bangladesh, it is important be clear how much communities depend on farming and non-farming activities for their income. If the communities rely on non-farming activities, more research is needed into what these are and how people can use them to increase their income.

**Freedom to choose**

Some of the activities POWER encourages women to take part in – such as joining community groups and learning new farming techniques – may take up more of their time in the short-term. We need to be clear about how these activities could reduce their burden in the longer term. We must also accept that women may make trade-offs to have more time instead of more income and monitor these decisions. An empowered person is someone who has the freedom to make such choices. If POWER achieves this, then we will have succeeded.

*Look out for our mid-term review, to be published in 2019, which will report on progress made towards the project outcomes.*
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 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 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 agroecology. 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/

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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.