



# **Policy Brief: Incorporation of Women's Economic Empowerment and Unpaid Care Work into regional policies: South Asia**

A case for centring Unpaid Care Work within regional frameworks

POWER PROJECT POLICY AND RESEARCH SERIES

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## **Unpaid Care Work**

For most women, time spent on Unpaid Care Work (UCW) is disproportionately high compared to men. The burden of Unpaid Care Work affects all women but has the worst effects on women in poverty. Girls and women spend long hours fetching water, collecting firewood, doing laundry, preparing food, caring for children and the elderly, and other household chores, as well as often carrying out agricultural duties. This time poverty limits women's opportunity to increase sustainable productivity and better access markets; to know how to claim their rights; and to participate in decision making. Unpaid Care Work is recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals but often not at community, national or regional government levels.

## **Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture**

Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA) is an initiative that ActionAid and its partners have been developing, based on the design and implementation of site-specific adaptation strategies aimed at increasing productivity, reducing vulnerabilities and increasing the resilience of smallholder production systems. However, the burden of Unpaid Care Work for rural women farmers often means they have little time to learn about and to practice sustainable productivity, and so limits these women's economic empowerment.

## **Violence Against Women**

Violence Against Women (VAW) is central in perpetuating women's position of economic, social and political subordination, marginalisation and inequality. It can restrict women's movements and access to markets, and limits income generating opportunities. Women's Unpaid Care Work burden can also compound discriminatory social norms and greatly increase vulnerability to violence.

# Introduction

The promotion of women's economic empowerment is an issue that is being increasingly focused on by different actors and policies across South Asia. However, the gendered nature and unequal burden of Unpaid Care Work is a key challenge to this, particularly for women in rural areas.

In response to this challenge, a policy briefing has been developed as part of ActionAid's five-year multi-country POWER project.<sup>1</sup> This is the second<sup>2</sup> in a planned series of policy and research papers. It provides an analysis of the current policies and practices across South Asia that relate to rural women's economic empowerment, especially the inclusion of the issue of Unpaid Care Work. There is a particular focus on the countries of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. It considers the successes and the gaps, and identifies opportunities for improvement. It also seeks to link Unpaid Care Work and women's economic empowerment with the issue of Violence Against Women.

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1. A short description of the POWER project, and link to the project website, can be found on the back page of this report.  
 2. A similar policy brief looking at policies in Africa has also been developed.

## Summary and key recommendations

The gendered nature and unequal burden of Unpaid Care Work is a key challenge to attaining women's economic empowerment in South Asia. Given the disproportionate amount of time poor rural women in South Asia spend on Unpaid Care Work<sup>3</sup>, they are unable to secure safe, fair employment, and are often forced to compromise their health and leisure time to secure paid work. Any strategies to achieve women's economic empowerment in rural South Asia must therefore take into consideration Unpaid Care Work and its impacts on women in the region.

There are several regional and national level actors and policies in place for the promotion of women's economic empowerment in South Asia, for example the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). While these organisations, and the frameworks put forth by them, provide a strong basis for the achievement of women's economic empowerment, there are certain gaps in their ability to attain their goals. These gaps include:

- overlooking Unpaid Care Work considerations and their impacts
- failing to identify the links between women's economic empowerment and Violence Against Women
- neglecting the importance of Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture for poor rural women
- making certain false assumptions around empowerment strategies
- failing to challenge exploitative labour market structures
- failing to adopt an intersectional approach to economic empowerment.

### Key recommendations

- **Recognise, reduce and redistribute women's Unpaid Care Work.**
- **Include Climate Resilient Strategies.** Given the disproportionate dependence on agriculture of poor rural women in South Asia, any policy to empower them must invest in sustainable methods to ensure protection from climate related vulnerabilities, and encourage climate resilient practices.
- **Ensure a consideration of intersectionality of issues affecting women's empowerment and the intersectionality of women's identities.** An intersectional approach is attentive to the linkages between Unpaid Care Work, Violence Against Women, Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture, and women's economic empowerment. Interventions must also consider the intersectionality of women's identities as mothers, farmers, workers, people living with a disability and others, so that a holistic approach is undertaken when working with rural women.
- **Reduce physical and safety related vulnerabilities for rural women.** It is important that women have a safe working environment, free from violence and harassment, and security in mobility and participation.
- **Represent women in planning.** Women should have a stake and a say in crucial processes of decision making, including the types of jobs created and made available to them, and the macro-economic climate within which labour is transacted.
- **Challenge existing labour market structures.** Regional and national civil society actors must constantly question the assumption that focusing on inclusion into the existing neo-liberal, often exploitative, market labour force will necessarily lead to positive empowerment outcomes.

3. For example, in Bangladesh, women engage in 6.3 hours of Unpaid Care Work per day, while men engage in 1.1 hours per day (From the report Changing Patterns of Time Use: Results from Women's Collectives in Bangladesh 2015, published by the European Commission and ActionAid in February 2016).



**Shanti Kullu**, team leader of a women's collective in Sundargarh, Odisha, India. Shanti is using a climate resilient approach to farming with dry mulching materials in the gap created after harvest.  
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

# Why care: Unpaid Care Work and links to women's economic empowerment

Women's economic empowerment has become an increasingly crucial goal within international development efforts, and has gained institutional support and operationalisation through various global commitments. Some of these include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and, most recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all of which have been ratified by the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. At the regional level, through various national and regional policies, including through bodies such as SAARC, UNESCAP and IFAD, South Asia has expressed its commitment to achieving women's economic empowerment with a focus on the challenges faced by women in this area.

Women's empowerment can broadly be understood as expanding the choices available to women and enhancing their capacity to realise these choices through an active identification and removal of constraints. Based on existing literature, women's economic empowerment can best be understood as: *improving women's access to economic resources and income through enhancement of economic opportunities and participation, and increasing women's agency and control over household resources and decision making.*<sup>4</sup>

Women's economic empowerment is therefore dependent on women's ability to access resources and income, participate in economic activities, and exercise control over resources and decisions. All of these goals are severely compromised due to the disproportionate burden of Unpaid Care Work on women.

## The gendered nature of Unpaid Care Work

Unpaid Care Work can be understood as the various crucial tasks and services performed and provided within homes and communities without any financial remuneration. These include, for example: cooking, cleaning, securing access to vital nutrition, childcare and eldercare. Unpaid Care Work is an inherently gendered phenomenon: a clear majority of uncompensated, unrecognised and undervalued care work is carried out by women.<sup>5</sup> For example, in Bangladesh, women engage in 6.3 hours of Unpaid Care Work per day, out of a total work time of 15.3 hours, which is 41.4% of their total work time. On the other hand, men spend 1.1 hours per day on Unpaid Care Work, a mere 7% of their total work time of 15.3 hours.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in India, women spend an average of 5.1 hours a day on household and other Unpaid Care Work, while men only spend 24 minutes on the same.<sup>7</sup>

4. Institute of Development Studies <http://www.ids.ac.uk/news/women-s-economic-empowerment-in-the-changing-world-of-work>

5. England, P., 2005. Emerging theories of care work. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 31, pp.381-399.

6. From the report *Changing Patterns of Time Use: Results from Women's Collectives in Bangladesh 2015* published by the European Commission and ActionAid in February 2016.

7. Budlender, Debbie. 2007. 'A Critical Review of Selected Time Use Surveys.' UNSRID: Gender Programme Paper No. 2.



*“Women have to be responsible for doing all the Unpaid Care Work at home because of tradition. Men have been given freedom enough not to carry out household chores and that work is considered the responsibility especially of the daughters-in-law.” [sic] Sandhya Limbu, 31, Terahthum, Nepal*

PHOTO: PRAKASH PAKSAWA/LIMBU VILLAGE COMMUNITY MEMBER

## **Unpaid Care Work compromises women’s economic empowerment**

The burden of Unpaid Care Work exacerbates women’s time poverty, severely limiting their ability to participate in various political, social and economic activities. Women’s economic empowerment goals are entirely incompatible with the continued gendered nature of Unpaid Care Work: poor rural women in particular are severely constrained in their ability to access economic opportunities, a key requirement for women’s economic empowerment. In Bangladesh, where three quarters of the population live in rural areas, rural women have a low level of labour force participation, particularly in the case of women who are married and have children.<sup>8</sup> In Pakistan, where most of the population live in rural areas, 87% of rural women work in the informal agricultural sector and the unpaid care economy, and experience seclusion and limited mobility, with little or no access to information, skills training and credit opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

8. From the ILO report that can be located at: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new\\_delhi/documents/publication/wcms\\_250112.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_250112.pdf)

9. From: [http://www.academia.edu/1914799/Rural\\_Women\\_in\\_Pakistan](http://www.academia.edu/1914799/Rural_Women_in_Pakistan)

In particular, women engaged in care work carry out a number of care-related tasks in the morning (5am - 11am), which has also been identified as prime time to secure paid work.<sup>10</sup> Women then often have to settle for precarious, flexible and poorly paid work in order to balance their care burden. Thus, poor rural women face several obstacles to accessing fair and reasonably paid employment. When women are able to access paid work, they continue to face various challenges due to the sub-optimal type of work and work conditions made available to them. Women are overrepresented in the informal sector, and among the working poor, in all four South Asian countries under consideration. They also face significant wage differentials and experience various forms of discrimination in the labour market.

When women do enter the paid workforce in order to access economic empowerment, they are confronted by a double burden: the challenge of balancing household, childcare and eldercare with paid work responsibilities. This often results in women and girls forgoing their basic rights to access education, healthcare, decent work and leisure time. This perpetuates cycles of dependency (mostly on male members of the family), can reinforce gender inequality and Violence Against Women, and keeps women and girls disproportionately tied to conditions of poverty.

The challenges related to women's Unpaid Care Work can be, and have been, mitigated through policies and programmes that are attentive to the needs of women, and the nature of Unpaid Care Work. In Patharkot, Nepal, for example, women used time diaries to indicate the need for a local well to reduce the time they spend collecting water. The well also served to reduce instances of diarrhoea amongst children and other family members. Thus, it is possible to constructively intervene to reduce women's Unpaid Care Work for better empowerment outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

## **Unpaid Care Work affects women's health**

The weekly average time spent by men and women on total work (both paid and unpaid) in India is shown to be 48 hours and 62 hours respectively, according to India's 1998-1999 National Time-Use surveys.<sup>12</sup> Women therefore spend 28% more time on work than men do in total. Women spend almost nine hours per day on work as opposed to 6.8 a day by men. If we apply the International Labor Organisation (ILO) norms of 48 hours a week, as per the surveys used, women are highly time stretched, and in excess of ILO's stipulated maximum, while men are within the limits of the norm. Women get much less personal or leisure time a day, and less time to sleep and rest as a result. This leads to detrimental effects on women's health. ActionAid's Young Urban Women project in India, Ghana and South Africa demonstrated the negative impact of the disproportionate burden of Unpaid Care Work on marginalised women's access to sexual and reproductive health rights and facilities.<sup>13</sup>

Unpaid Care Work poses a direct and fundamental threat to various factors of the meaningful empowerment of women, and women's economic empowerment in particular. Women's economic empowerment is fundamentally incompatible with the current configuration of Unpaid Care Work, and cannot be successfully achieved without explicitly acknowledging and addressing Unpaid Care Work.

10. From the report Changing Patterns of Time Use: Results from Women's Collectives in Bangladesh 2015 published by the European Commission and ActionAid in February 2016.

11. From ActionAid's Unpaid Care Work Resource Guide available at: <http://www.actionaid.org/what-we-do/womens-rights/economic-rights>

12. Based on India's 1998-99 National Time-Use Surveys, funded by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. This was a one-off survey, and the same information has not been captured on a similar scale through a government sponsored effort either before or since.

13. More details available at: <http://www.actionaid.org/young-urban-women>

# Frameworks for women's economic empowerment in South Asia

In order to develop a critique of regional policy aimed at empowering rural South Asian women from a care perspective, this brief considers the frameworks set by three relevant actors within the South Asian context:

- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific (UNESCAP)
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Following this, the brief also conducts a short examination of national level policies and programmes to address women's economic empowerment in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Each policy or framework is followed by a brief identification of gaps or challenges. The section following this goes on to discuss these gaps and critiques in greater detail, describing their impact on poor rural women in South Asia.

## Regional frameworks

### South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)<sup>14</sup>

SAARC has multiple regional mandates under the broad umbrellas of regional trade and development cooperation. It is also a key actor in developing regional-level frameworks for gender equality and women's empowerment. Below are some of the key frameworks and instruments through which SAARC engages with women's economic empowerment:

#### 1. Memorandum of Understanding with UN Women

In April 2014, SAARC and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to promote gender equality, gender justice and the empowerment of women among the countries in the South Asian region. The key areas of cooperation between the two organisations have been identified as: promotion of regional cooperation on issues related to trafficking; economic empowerment; political leadership and decision making; and Violence Against Women (including safe mobility). While the MoU is a significant gesture of SAARC's commitment to women's empowerment, the MoU itself does not recognise the ways in which the various issues identified (eg Violence Against Women, safe mobility, economic empowerment, political leadership and decision making) interact to affect empowerment outcomes. It also contains no reference to the challenges posed by Unpaid Care Work.

#### 2. SAARC Social Charter

The SAARC Social Charter articulates the SAARC social development agenda within the South Asian region. The Charter explicitly deals with questions of women's empowerment within Article VI: Promotion of the Status of Women. Here, the Charter commits SAARC to working to combat discrimination and Violence Against Women, and work towards equality of role and status as well as participation in the social,

14. Comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

economic and political realms. Significantly, the Charter also explicitly discusses education as a strategy for empowerment, stating *“Parties also affirm the need to empower women through literacy and education, recognising the fact that such empowerment paves the way for faster economic and social development.”* While the Social Charter does the important work of cementing SAARC’s commitment to gender goals explicitly, the strategies for women’s empowerment do not interrogate whether literacy and education necessarily lead to attainment of all empowerment goals, particularly economic empowerment. The Charter also neglects the effects of Unpaid Care Work on women’s empowerment.

**3. SAARC Development Goals:** SAARC also articulated and operationalised key goals along with regional indicators to track progress in achieving the objectives laid out in their Social Charter.<sup>15</sup> The key goals pertaining to women’s economic empowerment include Goal 6, reducing the social and institutional vulnerabilities of women; and Goal 8, ensuring the effective participation of poor women through anti-poverty policies and programmes. These goals are measured through the share of participation of women in the workforce, and in key decision making, respectively. Similar to the SAARC Charter, the SAARC Development Goals are significant in their role of codifying commitments to empowerment through Goal 6 and Goal 8. However, they also fail to critically examine whether women’s inclusion in the labour force, or women’s employment, necessarily leads to meaningful empowerment, and further fail to address the manner in which Unpaid Care Work hinders women’s participation in economic and political activities.

#### 4. SAARC Gender Policy Advisory Group

In 2013 SAARC decided to constitute a Gender Policy Advisory Group (SAARC GPAG) with the following objectives: Advocate keeping gender high on the policy agenda of the SAARC countries:

- a. for enhancing political and administrative will on gender equality
- b. for ensuring implementation of commitments by member states to empowerment of women and gender equality
- c. for monitoring progress.

SAARC GPAG identified Violence Against Women, health-related issues, women in leadership and decision making, and the economic empowerment of women as key priority areas. However, SAARC GPAG failed to identify the linkages between the various priority areas identified, and further did not account for the unique challenges posed to poor rural women, the most marginalised community within South Asia. The GPAG has also not identified Unpaid Care Work as a central challenge to these women’s empowerment.

#### 5. Speech by SAARC Secretary General on International Women’s Day

On 8 March 2017, the Secretary General of SAARC spoke on the theme *“Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50:50 by 2030.”*<sup>16</sup> The speech opened with an implicit acknowledgement of Unpaid Care Work, stating, *“Globally, women and girls carry a high burden of household work, compared to that of men and boys. While these efforts are generally unrecognised, unrewarded and taken for granted, what is most worrisome is that they diminish opportunities for women and girls. These hours of household work tend to reduce their opportunities for learning, paid work, sports, engagement in civic or community leadership and contribution to the formal economy.”* The speech then went on to urge governments, international organisations, civil society and citizens to ensure women too *“reap the full benefit of the unprecedented opportunities brought about by the changing world of work.”* The speech marked a significant milestone where Unpaid Care Work was brought to the forefront of discussions around women’s empowerment. A strong next step would for SAARC to take this further in recognising the diversity of experiences women in South Asia have with empowerment, through an intersectional lens.

15. Available at <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7396/Social+Charter>

16. Available at [http://saarc-sec.org/press\\_release/details/message-on-international-womens-day](http://saarc-sec.org/press_release/details/message-on-international-womens-day)

## The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)

UNESCAP is the regional development arm of the United Nations for the Asia-Pacific region made up of 53 Member States and nine Associate Members. UNESCAP works to overcome some of the region's greatest challenges by providing results-oriented projects, technical assistance and capacity building to member states. UNESCAP is also a key actor in determining regional frameworks for women's economic empowerment in South Asia. UNESCAP's contributions to these frameworks come in the form of the following:

### 1. Asia-Pacific Dialogue on Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work

In February 2017 UNESCAP and UN Women jointly convened the Asia-Pacific Policy Dialogue on "Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work" in cooperation with the UN Thematic Working Group on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women. The policy dialogue aimed to identify current and future macroeconomic and technological trends and examined how they would impact on women's economic empowerment. Key issues addressed included:

- global gender gaps in work and employment
- enabling macroeconomic environments for employment creation and access to decent work for all
- care economy, paid and unpaid care and domestic work
- technological change and its impact on the world of work.

The policy dialogue identified many of the key areas significant to women's economic empowerment, including care and macroeconomic environments for employment creation. It could, however, go further in critiquing the nature of the neo-liberal market itself, and its inherently exploitative nature.

### 2. Women in Asia and the Pacific: challenges and priorities

The Social Development Division of UNESCAP articulated the following key challenges and priorities in the area of gender equality in 2010:

- tackling maternal mortality
- protecting women from sexual exploitation and forced labour
- preventing Violence Against Women
- enhancing women's political participation
- safeguarding older women who live alone.

The challenges and priorities, while each significant, did not necessarily identify linkages and intersects, and further only presented a macro-level framework without due attention to the particular needs of the rural poor across these areas. The key challenges did not include any reference to Unpaid Care Work.

### 3. Gender equality and women's empowerment: Asia-Pacific progress and challenges

In a speech delivered for the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in March 2015,<sup>17</sup> UNESCAP set the following as key priorities: (i) strengthening accountability (ii) increasing financing for gender equality (iii) enhancing women's economic empowerment (iv) establishment of a gender equality resource facility and (v) coordination and partnerships regionally and internationally.

A good deal of UNESCAP's work on women's empowerment deals with women's entrepreneurship, an area that (i) is particularly challenging due to Unpaid Care Work realities and (ii) needs to be thought through within the context of the rural agrarian economy, within which the poorest, most marginal, and largest population of women in South Asia operate.

17. Available at <http://www.unescap.org/speeches/gender-equality-womens-empowerment-asia-pacific-progress-and-challenges>

## International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

The IFAD is a specialised agency of the UN concerned with the eradication of poverty from developing, primarily agrarian nations. Empowering women is a key component of IFAD's programme and project work. Addressing gender issues is central to IFAD's strategic frameworks 2011–2015, and is reflected in its 'Gender equality and women's empowerment policy'. Under this policy framework, IFAD identified the following strategic objectives:

- a. Promote economic empowerment to enable rural women and men to participate in and benefit from profitable economic activities.
- b. Enable women and men to have equal voice and influence in rural institutions and organisations.
- c. Achieve more equitable balance in workloads and in the sharing of economic and social benefits between women and men.

IFAD is a key vehicle to address issues of women's empowerment within the rural agrarian context. Its framework presents the basis from which to incorporate considerations of Unpaid Care Work (through objective c.), but does not go far enough in identifying intersectional challenges for poor rural women, and their vulnerability to climate change.

These regional frameworks in turn work to influence various national level policies and programmes aimed at women's economic empowerment. The next subsection conducts a summary discussion of national frameworks for women's economic empowerment in the four South Asian countries under consideration: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.



Women in a collective farming group set up in Birbhum district of India's West Bengal state. They took up collective farming following ActionAid's intervention towards creating a sustainable livelihood opportunity for them. These women now grow a number of seasonal vegetable and paddy using inexpensive organic farming technique.

PHOTO: ACTIONAID

## National Frameworks

### India

At the national level, India has several programmes and policies aimed at women's economic empowerment. Most significant amongst them is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Introduced in 2005, NREGA aims to assure employment to rural households. NREGA is attentive to concerns of care, facilitating women's economic empowerment through a guarantee that at least one third of these rural jobs go to women, and that on-site childcare be provided if at least five children under the age of six years old appear at the worksite with a parent or caregiver. Aside from NREGA, the state only accommodates care through provision of maternity benefits and by mandating crèches under certain labour conditions. Aside from NREGA, various other national and state level schemes aim to provide employment and livelihoods to women, including Tejaswani Rural Women's Empowerment Program and Rashtirya Mahila Koch. A key strategy for women's economic empowerment remains the facilitation of education for girls, through efforts such as the National Policy for Education and National Program for Education of Girls at Elementary Level, and other forms of vocational training such as Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP).

## Pakistan

At the national level, Pakistan's key programme for the economic empowerment of women is the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP). Through its Women's Initiative, the BISP seeks to empower the poorest and most vulnerable women through financial schemes such as cash transfer programs. While BISP is the main government-led initiative, various development sector programmes aim at providing employment and livelihood opportunities to women in Pakistan, including Asia Foundation's Women's Economic Empowerment Program, Karvaan's Skills for Market Program and USAID's Pakistan Gender Equality Program.

## Bangladesh

The key national level programme related to women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh is the Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets (REOPA). REOPA aims to support the social and economic empowerment of destitute and vulnerable women living in extreme poverty so that they can have access to decent work, prioritising work which specifically raises the status of women. It improves financial conditions through regular income, savings and income generating activities. REOPA's objectives are to provide opportunities for decent and fair wages, improving working conditions and safe working opportunities. The project also seeks to improve the quality of and access to basic services for poor households and to strengthen local government institutions for better basic service delivery, in order to reduce the time spent by vulnerable women on Unpaid Care Work.

Beyond REOPA, Bangladesh has various other provisions related to the empowerment of women, including the following policies: a National Women Development Policy 2011, National Labor Policy 2012, and National Skills Development Policy 2011, all of which touch on gender equality in some form. While the National Women Development Policy does not explicitly discuss Unpaid Care Work, its related action plan does consider women's non-economic responsibilities in the form of household tasks, without using the Unpaid Care Work framework as such.

## Nepal

While Nepal's policy on women was initiated as far back as its First Five Year Plan (1956-1961), the initial approach was formulated around a welfare model focusing on the reproductive role of women as mothers and homemakers, entrenching the gendered nature of care work. Following this, there have been shifts in focus resulting in a more robust conceptualisation of women as independent entities and crucial empowerment targets.

The National Plan of Action for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment was revised and approved by the government in September 2004, and gender focal points have been appointed at the district level. With the aid of the Asian Development Bank, a project entitled Capacity Building and Empowerment of Women for Gender Equality (CBEWGE) is underway under the Department of Women's Development/Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare. This project seeks to empower District Women Development Officers (DWDOs) through their capacity development at the district level. The 2005 amendment of the Civil Service Act includes a provision for formulating affirmative action policies for women in government service and has exempted the age bar for temporary women staff wishing to apply for positions advertised by the Public Service Commission (PSC). Coaching classes and training continued to be held to prepare eligible women candidates for PSC and other examinations.

In addition, the Nepal Constitution 2015 spells out the need for recognition of Unpaid Care Work and inclusion in the GDP.<sup>18</sup> Gender Responsive Budgeting guidelines<sup>19</sup> also talk about women's care work, and one of the indicators of this is to reduce women's care work and improve time use.

## Gaps

National level policies across all four South Asian countries have thus brought considerable focus on women's economic empowerment, and have even incorporated care considerations to a degree. They have, however, failed to account for intersections of poor rural women's economic empowerment with Violence Against Women, climate resilience and Unpaid Care Work. They also often implicitly assume education as an automatic guarantor of paid employment, and therefore empowerment, without interrogating these links. Finally, none of the policies directly challenge macro-economic neo-liberal market structures.

## Detailed critiques of regional and national frameworks

The various regional and national level frameworks listed above do the crucial work of providing the impetus, political will and policy direction to realise women's economic empowerment in South Asia. They serve to promote gender equality at various levels, and ensure that the economic interests of women remain high on the regional policy and development agendas. While recognising the critical role played by these frameworks, it is important to evaluate how they can be improved in order to better serve women and, in particular, those at the margins such as poor rural women. The following section conducts a more detailed critique, expanding on the above-identified gaps in existing frameworks, and their ability to address the needs of poor rural women in South Asia.

### 1. Identifying overlooked linkages

#### Care Considerations

A key critique emerges from the lack of a central consideration of care within policies aimed at empowering women economically. As previously discussed, the current gendered division and unequal burden of Unpaid Care Work in South Asia is fundamentally incompatible with realising women's economic empowerment. Thus, empowerment cannot be achieved or addressed without consistent attention being paid to the realities of Unpaid Care Work and its implications on women's time and ability to seek non-exploitative, stable and fair employment.

While at the regional and national level, there are increasing allusions to Unpaid Care Work within frameworks (eg the SAARC Women's Day Speech, UNESCAP Dialogue on Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work, India's NREGA and Bangladesh's REOPA programmes), there remains a failure to accommodate Unpaid Care Work as a material reality consistently impeding particularly rural poor women's ability to access economic empowerment. Where care is acknowledged, it is often not accompanied with robust strategies to address this burden across various axes (eg redistribution of care work is seldom considered). There is, therefore, no detailed or nuanced consideration of the interactions or linkages between Unpaid Care Work and women's economic empowerment within the context of rural women in particular. This leads to various challenges such as:

18. Available at <http://www.constitutionnet.org/vl/item/constitution-nepal-2015-official-english-translation-ministry-law-justice-and-parliamentary>

19. Available at <http://www.mof.gov.np/grbc/grb%20new%20englis%20bros.pdf>

- (i) Inter-generational slippages when women joining the workforce compel younger girls to drop out of school and undertake the Unpaid Care Work responsibilities, compromising empowerment outcomes of the next generation. In India, for example, girls are often forced to exit formal education to take care of younger siblings, as discussed in ActionAid's Appendix of Case Studies on Unpaid Care Work, 2016.<sup>20</sup>
- (ii) Women's time poverty resulting in poorer quality of care, often resulting in nutritional or hygiene issues compromising the health of women, as discussed previously.
- (iii) The double burden hindering women's effective participation in various other political and social processes, and securing access to basic rights such as the right to leisure time.



**Rekha Begum, 44**, Bangladesh. Rekha is President of a women's group in her village. One of the group's aims is to undertake activities to understand and reduce the burden of Unpaid Care Work for women in the community.

PHOTO: NOORE JANNAT PROMA/ACTIONAID

#### **Inability to account for intersectionality:**

There is a failure to account for the diversity of experiences of the rural poor in South Asia, or to identify intersections of identities that further marginalise women and interfere with their access to empowerment (eg a woman as a wife, mother, worker, muslim). In addition, none of the examined frameworks explicitly addressed the compound marginalities faced by poor rural women who belong to particular disadvantaged or persecuted groups, including women with disabilities, those belonging to a certain minority religion, lower caste and tribal women, widows and other socially ostracised groups. These compound identities, intersections or marginalities often restrict access to education, employment, crucial infrastructure and resources, and can even serve to compound or deepen Unpaid Care Work responsibilities and the resulting time poverty.

20. Available at: [http://interactions.eldis.org/sites/interactions.eldis.org/files/appendix\\_case\\_studies\\_0.pdf](http://interactions.eldis.org/sites/interactions.eldis.org/files/appendix_case_studies_0.pdf)

### Linkages to Violence Against Women

While several of the documents evaluated explicitly consider Violence against Women as a key priority area within broader approaches to women's empowerment, no link is made between this and entry into the labour force. This is particularly problematic as, both at the regional and national levels, a key strategy for women's economic empowerment is seen to be entry into the formal labour force. Advocating for women's employment in the labour force without considering the vulnerabilities and dangers this exposes women to highlights a failure to identify a crucial linkage affecting the lives of the rural poor.

ActionAid's Double Jeopardy Report<sup>21</sup> recently identified the violence women are exposed to in their quest for paid employment and empowerment within the patriarchal global economy. An example of the often dangerous link between vulnerability to violence and entry into the workforce is seen in the case of Bhanwari Devi, an Indian *dalit* (lower caste) social worker, employed under a government development welfare scheme, who was gang raped by a group of upper caste men in 1992 as she stopped a child marriage as part of her paid job. ActionAid's report revealed the institutionalised forms of vulnerability working women are exposed to within bangle factories in Hyderabad, South India, facing routine sexual harassment and abuse from managers and supervisors, as well as delivery men. Regional realities around Violence Against Women, and the particular, contextualised vulnerabilities women are exposed to due to their labour force participation must be accounted for and mitigated in order to facilitate holistic empowerment outcomes.

## 2. Recognising structural factors and influences

### Failure to challenge the neo-liberal macro-economic structures

Another key shortcoming within current regional frameworks is their inability to fruitfully challenge neo-liberal, often exploitative, market structures. The large degree of emphasis on accommodating women within the formal workforce in fact creates a degree of complicity with these exploitative structures. Failing public policy on privatisation and inequitable tax regimes that privilege the rich and persecute the poor continue to affect rural women's access to quality, affordable public services, increasing their time poverty, and therefore hindering progress towards women's economic empowerment. Without a robust critique of the (i) increased marketisation of labour, (ii) lowering of labour standards and protections and de-unionisation to attract foreign manufacturing investment, and (iii) unregulated profit motive, regional frameworks can never successfully ensure and safeguard women's economic empowerment as employment will remain structurally exploitative, precarious, and uncertain.

Beyond these structural challenges, women face compounded challenges within the labour market, including: limited access to relevant training, discrimination at the workplace and low wages. Gender inequality in wage differentials remains entrenched, with women typically earning 70%–90% of the male wage across Asia (50% in Bangladesh).<sup>22</sup>

21. The full report can be accessed at: [https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid\\_double\\_jeopardy\\_decent\\_work\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_6.pdf](https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid_double_jeopardy_decent_work_violence_against_women_6.pdf)

22. ADB. 2011. Women and Labour Markets in Asia: Rebalancing for Gender Equality.

## Applying the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)

Given the high level of dependency on agrarian livelihoods prevalent within the rural poor in South Asia (evidence in following section), the WEAI presents a crucial tool with which to evaluate the empowerment, agency and inclusion of women in the agriculture sector. The WEAI measures empowerment across five domains:

- decisions about agricultural production
- access to and decision making power over productive resources
- control over use of income
- leadership in the community
- time use.

Applying the WEAI as a tool of evaluation and critique makes visible additional contextual realities that can be better accommodated in regional and national frameworks seeking to empower rural poor women in South Asia.

## Neglecting Climate Resilient Sustainable Livelihoods

In assuming that participation in the paid labour force presents a solution to mitigate poverty and empower rural women, regional frameworks fail to account for the conflict between increasingly corporatised and unsustainable forms of paid labour vs smallholder, less formalised, often unpaid agricultural production work, in terms of their impact on the climate. Women are disproportionately dependent on agriculture and vulnerable to climate-related uncertainties and disasters. Only 30% of women in Asia and the Pacific are in non-agricultural wage employment, with only 20% in South Asia, the lowest among the world's regions.<sup>23</sup> Nearly 50% of women in South Asia are still concentrated in agriculture. In Pakistan, 74% of women are involved in agriculture. Data compiled from Census 2011 on cultivators and agricultural labourers in India reflects that 65.1% of female workers depend on agriculture, either as cultivators or agricultural labourers, while only 49.8% of male workers do the same.<sup>24</sup>

Climate resilience is therefore a key concern for rural women, and empowerment is unattainable without an emphasis on environmentally sound, sustainable agrarian policy. However, women are seldom given a stake in decision making, or have control over the productive resources (factors b and d of the WEAI), and are thus unable to influence decisions around sustainable agricultural practices. Beyond this, a policy focus on formal paid employment creates conditions that favour large-scale industrialised agriculture rather than smallholder sustainable farming. Unpaid work on family agricultural enterprises accounts for 34% of informal employment for women in India.<sup>25</sup> In prioritising paid employment for women, there is the danger that labour and other economic resources could be redirected from sustainable, climate resilient smallholdings to larger, more environmentally damaging agrarian practices.

23. Paths to 2015: MDG Priorities in Asia and the Pacific ADB. 2010. Full report available at: [http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/18740/mdg\\_paths\\_to\\_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/18740/mdg_paths_to_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

24. From the Census 2011 on cultivators and agricultural labourers in India.

25. FAO. 2010. Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty.

## Interrogating assumptions around empowerment

Applying the WEAI also makes visible some of the problematic assumptions implicit in regional and national frameworks on the empowerment of rural poor women. One such assumption is the notion that education through literacy and training leads to paid employment, which in turn ensures access to income, and finally empowerment. The SAARC Charter, for example states, “Parties also affirm the need to empower women through literacy and education recognising the fact that such empowerment paves the way for faster economic and social development”. UNESCAP’s Beijing +20 discussions similarly suggests that a key strategy to reduce poverty amongst women and girls, and to promote their economic independence, is the acquisition of labour market knowledge and skills by women, to promote the employment of women.

Operational realities, however, particularly within rural contexts, differ from these assumed progressions to empowerment. Education does not ensure, or even necessarily enhance access to, paid employment for girls and women where social norms and Unpaid Care Work restrict them to their households on completion of education. In Pakistan, for example, while the education sector has made progress in ensuring educational attainment for girls, the economic participation of women has continued to decline.<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite progress in education, Pakistan remains one of the lowest performing countries in the world for women’s economic participation and opportunity.

Further, as set out within the WEAI, empowerment outcomes are also crucially dependent on access to and control of resources and decision making. Despite participation in paid/waged labour and access to an income, women often remain systematically excluded from ownership of resources, as well as decision making at household, community, and broader levels. Data compiled from Census 2011 on cultivators and agricultural labourers reflects that while 65.1% of female workers depend on agriculture, either as cultivators or agricultural labourers, only 11% of women own land (smallholding).<sup>27</sup> Additionally, various regional studies illustrate that despite some gains in employment, it remains a substantial challenge for women at various levels, and in particular in politics, to influence decision making due both to a lack of experience and continuing resistance from men and patriarchal institutions.<sup>28</sup>



**Aitamaya Limbu, 36**, is a farmer and the president of Kafle Women’s Group in Okhre, Tehrathum, Nepal. As part of the women’s group discussions, the challenges related to Unpaid Care Work have been highlighted.  
PHOTO: NAYANTARA GURUNG KAKSHAPATI/ACTIONAID.

26. According to the WEF’s Global Gender Gap Report 2014, Pakistan ranked 141 in terms of economic participation and opportunity for women, 132 in terms of education attainment (down from 110).

27. Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA), women’s Unpaid Care Work and women’s economic participation An Indian Context – ActionAid India.

28. For example, see ADB 2010 Country Gender Assessment Bangladesh.

# Recommendations

Through the analysis and evidence presented, this brief has highlighted some gaps within current regional and national level frameworks informing efforts around women's economic empowerment for rural women in South Asia. In this final section we discuss recommendations to bridge these gaps. We begin with a broader set of recommendations aimed at policy makers and institutions across the regions, and then discuss some more specific, targeted strategies at the national and institutional level.

## General recommendations

The first set of general recommendations come from the established 3R<sup>29</sup> framework for the incorporation of care considerations for women's empowerment. The 3R framework consists of the following key strategies:

### 1. Recognise, reduce and redistribute women's Unpaid Care Work

- **Recognise care and care work:** In order to ensure that strategies to empower women are in touch with their realities, it is important to recognise both the gendered nature of care work, as well as the central importance of ensuring good care and its contribution to the development and economy of the family. It is therefore important to take stock of the nature and requirements of care in various contexts, and explicitly acknowledge women's contributions in this area.
- **Reduce the drudgery of and time spent on care work:** In order to enable access to empowerment outcomes, women must be relieved of difficult, inefficient tasks. It is important to intervene in order to provide infrastructure and services that reduce the time and effort of women in performing care related activities (eg through the provision of wells and hand pumps or crèches at workplaces). This frees up women's time for other social, political and economic engagements crucial to their empowerment.

**Zarina Bibi from Mansehra district of Pakistan used to spend three hours a day cutting fodder.**

*"Before having fodder cutter I was suffering; not have time to rest. I always do one house chore after the other; there is too much work to do at home and to care my livestock too," Zarina said.*

**Through an intervention as part of ActionAid's POWER project, Zarina Bibi's village got a fodder cutter. Now, she spends only 20 minutes a day cutting fodder, leaving her with an additional two and a half hours for other empowerment related activities.**

**Zarina Bibi**, Pakistan

PHOTO: SAIBAAN DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION, PAKISTAN



- **Redistribute care responsibilities:** As the performance of care work is indispensable, empowering women entails redistributing the burden of care within the household, within the community and even to the state. This is central to ensuring that care burdens are not simply shifted inter-generationally.

29. The 3R framework, conceptualised by Professor Diane Elson, Essex University, at the UNDP e-meeting on care in November 2008. The framework included elements of recognising care work, reducing the drudgery of care work for women, and redistributing care responsibilities both within the household and beyond.

- 2. Include climate resilient strategies.** Given the disproportionate dependence on agriculture for poor rural women in South Asia, any policy to empower them must invest in sustainable methods to ensure protection from climate related vulnerabilities, and encourage climate resilient practices.
- 3. Ensure a consideration of intersectionality of issues affecting women's empowerment and the intersectionality of women's identities.** An intersectional approach is attentive to the linkages between Unpaid Care Work, Violence Against Women, Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture, and women's economic empowerment. Interventions must also include consider the intersectionality of women's identities as mothers, farmers, workers and people living with a disability and others, so that a holistic approach is undertaken when working with rural women.
- 4. Reduce physical and safety related vulnerabilities for rural women.** It is important that women have a safe working environment, free from violence and harassment, and security in mobility and participation.
- 5. Represent women in planning.** Women should have a stake and a say in crucial processes of decision making, including the types of jobs created and made available to them, and the macro-economic climate within which labour is transacted.
- 6. Challenge existing labour market structures.** Regional and national civil society actors must constantly question the assumption that focusing on inclusion into the existing neo-liberal, often exploitative, market labour force will necessarily lead to positive empowerment outcomes.



## Recommendations for specific groups

### SAARC is called up to:

- **Better consider the linkages.** As the SAARC GPAG drafts an action plan incorporating the themes of Unpaid Care Work, Violence Against Women and women's economic empowerment, there is a key opportunity to broaden the framework to consider the linkages between these. By bringing these areas in conversation with each other, as detailed within this policy brief, SAARC can ensure that the action plan for economic empowerment is aware of, and mitigates, women's Unpaid Care Work burden, and also remains attentive to the possibilities of Violence Against Women.
- **Focus more on Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture.** Additionally, SAARC's Technical Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development presents a key stakeholder in taking forward the agenda of Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture. Recognising the particular stake of rural poor women in this area, the Technical Committee and the GPAG could work together on an action plan to partner with women to undertake Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture, while incorporating Unpaid Care Work and safeguarding empowerment outcomes.

### UNESCAP is called upon to:

- **Better consider the linkages.** Following the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), as UNESCAP considers future directions based on reviews of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in Asia-Pacific, an approach informed with a consideration of Unpaid Care Work and its linkages to Violence Against Women and women's economic empowerment, particularly within the context of South Asia could help better achieve regional goals.
- **Ensure its work includes a focus on rural women.** As UNESCAP's focus on women's entrepreneurship deepens through the region, it would be important to consider the challenges faced by the large rural poor population of marginal women in South Asia. The focus on rural women could come through UNESCAP's sub-regional platform for South and South-West Asia (ESCAP-SSWA), as women's economic empowerment is a key mandate of this platform.

### IFAD is called upon to:

- **Apply the WEAI approach.** IFAD is a key platform to influence the promotion of women farmers and entrepreneurs, and ensure a focus on Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture. Within IFAD, a key resource is the results-based country strategic opportunities program (COSOP). The COSOP is a framework for making strategic choices about IFAD in particular countries. IFAD could consider the expansion of the COSOP framework within South Asia to incorporate the elements of the Women's Empowerment Agriculture Index (WEAI) discussed earlier. Given the large dependence on agriculture of poor rural women in South Asia, using the WEAI within the COSOP framework would present a key framework with which to approach women's empowerment through IFAD's existing infrastructure and approaches.

### National<sup>30</sup> policymakers are called upon to:

- **Invest better in public infrastructure and services.** Programmes such as India's NREGA, and Bangladesh's REOPA must ensure that women are able to balance their care responsibilities with work or livelihood opportunities provided, without increasing their time poverty. This can be done through the provision of child and other care facilities at, or near, worksites, or within communities, as well as the

30. Across the four South Asian countries studied in this brief

extension of public infrastructure to reduce the drudgery of care work. Thus, policies aiming at creating job opportunities must simultaneously mitigate Unpaid Care Work pressures to be accessible to poor rural women.

- **Shift social norms around Unpaid Care Work and women's employment.** Education and capacity building programmes such as Nepal's Capacity Building and Empowerment for Women's Equality and India's National Policy for Education need to go beyond providing training. They should be supplemented by efforts to shift social norms around the division of care work, as well as the participation of women in the formal workforce. Similarly, programmes like Pakistan's Benazir Income Support Program must go beyond provision of income to make sure it translates to greater control and decision making at various levels.
- **Include women in various levels of decision making.** Policy must be informed by the interests of poor rural women. Representation of women remains a key challenge in South Asia, and national level policy frameworks must ensure this shift occurs across levels. This can be ensured through their consistent inclusion in decision making at the community, state and national levels. The incorporation of women, and women's interests, in decision making will ensure safer, less exploitative employment opportunities. This will also lead to a greater focus on Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture, and conscious strategies to engage with Unpaid Care Work.

## **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. To do this at a regional level in South Asia it is also working with ActionAid India and ActionAid Nepal. For more information see the POWER project website <http://powerproject.actionaid.org/>

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Amraizan Bibi, 46 from a village in Mansehra district, Pakistan. Amraizan received a fodder cutter which has reduced her burden of Unpaid Care Work by one and a half hours a day. PHOTO: SAIBAAN DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION, PAKISTAN

**POWER project implementing partners:**



*Saibaan Development Organization, Pakistan*



*National Integrated Development Association (NIDA), Pakistan*



*SKS Foundation, Bangladesh*

**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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