

Reducing rural women's domestic workload through labour-saving technologies and practices

Gender, targeting and social inclusion



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Introduction

Rural women of all ages spend much of their day engaged in domestic chores, including collecting water and firewood, processing and preparing food, travelling and transporting, and caregiving. These tasks are unpaid and restrict a woman's time and mobility. Moreover, the drudgery can cause poor health and nutrition for a woman's entire family, in particular infants and young children. These domestic chores are a major constraint to the ability of smallholder farmers to increase agricultural productivity and achieve food and nutrition security.

Labour-saving technologies and practices promote inclusive development by reducing the domestic workload and freeing up time to perform productive tasks, to participate in decision-making processes and development opportunities, and to enjoy more leisure time. When the domestic workload is reduced, women are the principal beneficiaries but men also benefit, depending on the extent to which they perform these tasks.

One of the three strategic objectives of the IFAD Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment is "to achieve a more equitable balance in workloads and in the sharing of economic and social benefits".

The primary focus of the toolkit on labour-saving methods to reduce the domestic, rather than the productive, workload is to refocus attention on this relatively hidden but persistent hindrance to IFAD's drive for rural transformation. Moreover, without redressing the disproportionate burden of domestic work on women, progress towards the global goals to end poverty, hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity and gender inequality will be seriously hampered. This is acknowledged in target 5.4 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which calls on governments and development actors to recognize and reduce unpaid domestic work, and redistribute responsibility for carrying it out.

This toolkit comprises a teaser, a How To Do note, and a Lessons Learned note on labour-saving technologies to reduce the domestic workload: why they are needed, what they are, the benefits involved, and how they can be integrated into IFAD-supported operations. The Lessons Learned note draws from a study about the labour-saving outcomes of IFAD water investments. In addition, the toolkit includes a compendium on labour-saving technologies and innovations in East and Southern Africa, of relevance to women's work at home and on the farm. The toolkit is intended for country programme managers, design teams, project staff, development partners and the general public.

The importance of reducing the domestic workload

Globally, women work longer hours than men when both paid and unpaid work are accounted for. This is particularly pronounced in rural areas of most developing countries, where women have the triple responsibility for domestic, on-farm and off-farm work. Across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, rural women typically work 12 hours more per week than men.¹ Box 1 clarifies the term "domestic work".

A typical day sees poor rural women working up to 16 hours, or even longer in some cases, performing many tasks, often at the same time. And the bulk of their work, unlike for men, is unpaid. Women still shoulder most of the responsibility for domestic work, and their role in subsistence farming is often unremunerated. In Algeria and Pakistan, rural women do roughly five hours of unpaid domestic work per day, compared to less than one hour by men.² In many rural communities, the absence of, or poor access to, public infrastructure and services – such as water and sanitation, energy, health and childcare – means that domestic chores are still performed by traditional means. This makes the work heavy and time-consuming, with negative health and nutrition implications.

Within rural communities, variations exist in the burden of domestic work, depending on the woman's age, income, location, whether or not she is head of the household, and household size. In Algeria, the time spent on domestic work per day rises from 5.5 hours to 7.3 hours for women with children under four years old.³ Vulnerable households – such as female- or child-headed, or those with members who are elderly, disabled or suffering from a long-term illness – are particularly afflicted with domestic drudgery owing to relatively weakened labour capacity, lower income and a limited asset base.

Box 1. Domestic work

The term "domestic" used in this note refers to the reproductive roles that women usually perform, including providing labour to carry out household chores, and childbearing and childcare. Although this role constitutes work, it is differentiated from what is understood as "productive" because it does not generate an income (in cash and/or in kind), does not have an exchange value, and is not reflected in a country's gross domestic product.

There is clearly a fine line between what is "domestic" and what is "productive". For example, when domestic work is increased or adjusted to provide goods or services to others and consequently generates an income, it can be considered "productive". Therefore, the understanding of the term "domestic" is context-specific and adaptable when referring to "work" and "labour-saving technologies".

¹ IFAD. 2011. *Women and rural development*. Fact sheet, IFAD March 2011. http://www.ifad.org/pub/factsheet/women/women_e.pdf.

² UN Women. 2015. *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016: transforming economies, realizing rights*. UN Women.

³ Ibid.

A heavy domestic workload often leads to “time poverty” (box 2), which is a major reason why women in rural economies are marginalized and why young women migrate to urban areas in search of a better life. It restricts their opportunities in education, training, farming, off-farm employment and development processes, and limits the income that they can bring in and have control over at home. These factors undermine women’s participation in decision-making at home and in the community and perpetuate the inequitable balance of workloads between men and women. With women’s limited voice in household expenditure, the need for technologies to reduce the burden of women’s unpaid domestic chores does not always surface as a priority.

Box 2. Definition of “time poverty”

Time poverty means “working long hours and having no choice to do otherwise”. It results from the combination of two conditions: “First, the individual does not have enough time for rest and leisure once all working hours are accounted for. Second, the individual cannot reduce his/her working time without either increasing the level of poverty of his/her household or leading his/her household to fall into monetary poverty due to the loss in income or consumption associated with the reduction in working time (if the household is not originally poor)”.

Source: Bardasi, E., and Q.T. Wodon. 2009. *Working Long Hours and Having No Choice: Time Poverty in Guinea*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Number 4961.

The challenges of a heavy domestic workload are compounded by increasing rural-urban migration in certain areas (box 3), which sees those left behind taking on more farm-related work without having their domestic responsibilities reduced. Climate change impacts can also put additional stress on already poor livelihoods (box 4).

Box 3. Rural-urban migration and changing responsibilities on- and off-farm

Many communities in developing countries are experiencing rural-urban migration of their younger, more educated, more skilled, and often male members, who choose to seek off-farm urban work. This is resulting in more “feminized” and older rural populations. As a consequence, labour productivity and gender relations shift, as women may have to take on more responsibilities on-farm and off-farm, without sufficient time, assets and skills to do so. The situation can be even more challenging when the husband’s absence does not necessarily increase a woman’s freedom to make decisions. Remittances help with economic pressures but they are not always enough. In such cases, lightening women’s domestic workload through labour-saving technologies, and empowering women at home, are highly pertinent for local rural development. Labour-saving technologies may also reduce the push to migrate by making rural living conditions more attractive.

Development interventions that target women but ignore underlying inequitable workloads may actually increase women’s workloads or cause them to make difficult trade-offs in terms of how they allocate their time. For example, interventions that increase women’s opportunities to participate in community activities or paid work but do not reduce (unpaid) domestic responsibilities risk either increasing the total time women “work” each day, or reducing the time for, and quality of, the domestic tasks they are expected to perform, including caring for other family members.

The unequal division of labour and inequitable workloads are central issues to be considered in development policies and programmes. By addressing them, through labour-saving technologies and other activities, the pro-poor impact of economic interventions such as value chain development, rural finance and agricultural extension is strengthened.⁴

Labour-saving technologies and practices free up women’s time by either making existing domestic tasks easier and more efficient, or by changing the way that they are carried out. There is a wealth of labour-saving methods applicable in rural development settings and suitable for IFAD-supported projects. The How To Do note provides details of these methods and key information sources.

⁴ Oxfam. 2015. *Examining pathways towards engendered change; involving men and women in care work in West Nile, Uganda*. Oxfam International, July 2015.

Box 4. Climate change – increasing traditional risks

Rural people living in poverty are on the front line of climate change impacts, including unpredictable climatic variability, degradation of land and forest resources, and increasing water scarcity. With already substandard infrastructure and services to meet their water and energy needs, poor rural people, and particularly women, will spend even more time collecting water and firewood. Global warming and more widespread water scarcity also increase the risks of malaria and water-related diseases. In turn, this means women spend more time caring for the sick and taking them for medical treatment.

Alongside broader climate adaptation measures, labour-saving technologies that reduce poverty and can buffer climate change shocks play an important role in helping to build resilient livelihoods.

Benefits of reducing the domestic workload

The direct practical benefits of reducing women's domestic workload through labour-saving technologies and practices include:

- Freeing up time;
- Improving health, nutrition (box 5), and well-being of women and their families.

With more time available during the day, women can perform more productive activities to generate income and improve household food and nutrition security. These activities include family farming (crop production and processing, small livestock production), fish processing/trading and aquaculture, vegetable gardening, selling and buying goods in the local market, and off-farm employment. Women also have more time to participate in training, self-help groups and community-based organizations, empowering them with greater voice and influence over their lives. In turn, rural youth, particularly young women, may view rural living as more attractive and with opportunities. A reduced domestic workload also means women need less assistance from their children, giving the children more time for school and play.

Box 5. Labour-saving technologies improve household nutrition

Labour-saving technologies and practices play an important role in improving household nutrition, an essential factor for economic growth. By reducing the physical exertion of domestic tasks, nutrient requirements are not increased through unnecessary labour. This is particularly beneficial for maternal nutrition in poor rural areas, where pregnant and breastfeeding women already struggle to meet the higher nutrient requirements of their condition. In turn, improved maternal nutrition translates into improved foetal and child nutrition and development. Together with nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions, time savings help to increase a woman's caring capacity in terms of the time and ability to put sufficient, diverse and nutritious food on the table for her family.

The environmental footprint of rural living, in terms of the amount and type of natural resources used and the amount of harmful gases produced, can decrease by using labour-saving technologies, such as improved cookstoves. Switching to modern biofuels (or sustainable harvesting of firewood) reduces the risk of deforestation, preserving habitats and biodiversity. Improved cookstoves also mitigate climate change by significantly reducing emissions of carbon dioxide and other harmful pollutants.

Reducing the domestic workload through labour-saving technologies and practices alone will not tackle the underlying gender inequalities that restrict women's voice in decision-making and their access to such technologies and practices, factors that perpetuate inequitable workloads. An enabling environment is needed to challenge discriminatory gender roles and relations and support positive behaviour change.

This calls for addressing women's empowerment at home and in the community, with men's active involvement, through proven gender transformative approaches, such as community conversations, community listeners' clubs and household methodologies (see the How To Do note for more details).

The significance of labour-saving technologies and practices also needs more visibility in policy engagement in order to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid domestic work so that women can actively participate in rural economies.

Examples from IFAD-supported projects

Water

In most countries of Eastern and Southern Africa, rural women typically farm individual plots for family subsistence, while also contributing their labour to common plots, but men control the harvest and the benefits of those plots. The Lower Usuthu Smallholder Irrigation Project (2004-2013) in Swaziland trained women to construct water-harvesting tanks to improve access to water and stimulate income-generating activities. Most of the families with tanks now grow vegetables, both for home use and sale. A group of women are forming a company in order to earn income by constructing tanks for others.⁵

The division of labour between rural men and women in West and Central Africa is highly inequitable. Women work long hours every day carrying out domestic and agricultural work. To lessen the burden of water collection for women, the Project for the Promotion of Local Initiative for Development in Aguié (2005-2013) in Niger built 20 village wells and 15 boreholes. Access to drinking water greatly improved in the project area, and women could use the time saved to participate in other project activities, including the establishment and management of food and cereal banks. The management of these banks exclusively by women has improved local people's perceptions of women in decision-making roles and in leadership positions.⁶

Firewood

In East Asia, progress has been made to reduce the domestic workload. The West Guangxi Poverty-Alleviation Project in China (2002-2008) supported the Government's biogas programme, including the provision of 22,500 biodigesters to about 30,000 households. The biodigesters are fed with waste from animal manure and domestic toilets, and convert these inputs into biogas and organic compost. The biogas is then used for cooking and in some cases lighting. Before the project, men and women would spend hours collecting firewood because trees had become scarce around their villages. The time spent gathering



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firewood has since been saved thanks to the supply of biogas at home. Many other benefits are enjoyed from the biogas systems as well. The health of the whole family is improved from no more, or much reduced, harmful woodsmoke in houses. The replacement of firewood as the primary cooking fuel equates to an approximate saving of 56,000 tons of firewood annually, or the recovery of 7,470 hectares of forest. The direct capture and use of methane produced from livestock manure in the biodigesters also decreases greenhouse gas emissions. And households have a ready supply of organic fertilizer to use on their land.^{7,8}

⁵ IFAD. 2015. *IFAD Gender and rural development brief: East and Southern Africa*. May 2015.

⁶ IFAD. 2015. *IFAD Gender and rural development brief: West and Central Africa*. May 2015.

⁷ Rota, A., and K. Sehgal. 2012. *Livestock and renewable energy*. Livestock Thematic papers, Tools for project design. Rome: IFAD. <http://www.ifad.org/Irkm/factsheet/energy.pdf>.

⁸ Wang, W. 2012. Biogas: simple technology makes a difference. *Making a difference in Asia and the Pacific IFAD Newsletter*, Issue 41, February 2012. http://www.ifad.org/newsletter/pi/41_full.htm#5.

The International Network for Bamboo and Rattan, a recipient of an IFAD grant (2012-2014), developed a household charcoal production value chain that uses charcoal produced as a by-product of daily cooking with firewood. Workloads are not reduced but made profitable. Poor rural women are the primary beneficiaries of this year-round income-generating activity because they are typically responsible for cooking in households. The project has enabled almost 15,000 rural women in Ethiopia, India and the United Republic of Tanzania to benefit. For example, in India, women generated an additional income of US\$58 per household per year without any extra work. Charcoal collected from households is taken to a collection centre where it is transformed into briquettes and sold to local enterprises at competitive prices. In order to limit forest degradation from firewood collection, the planting and use of bamboo was promoted as the most sustainable and affordable option because it is fast-growing and grows year-round. Worldwide, roughly 500 million households produce charcoal as a by-product of cooking with firewood. This represents a significant scope for replicating and scaling up household charcoal production value chains.⁹

Transport

In South Asia, rural women typically work longer hours than men, including more time on domestic activities and unpaid agricultural tasks. As lesser earners, they have less decision-making power over how household income is used. The Agriculture, Marketing and Enterprise Promotion Programme (2005-2012) in Bhutan constructed and rehabilitated 460 kilometres of feeder roads, providing communities with access to markets, easing the transport of goods, and enabling more shops to open in rural areas. Women now spend a mere few minutes buying household items from the newly opened local shops rather than a full day travelling to the main market for the same goods. The time saved is used for vegetable production, an important source of income and nutrition.¹⁰

Childcare

Recognizing that rural women in the Plurinational State of Bolivia would not be able to participate in economic development opportunities unless their workloads were reduced, the Enhancement of the Peasant Camelid Economy Support Project (2006-2012) launched mobile childcare nurseries. The nurseries enabled women to participate in training and other activities to strengthen their skills, particularly related to the management of their camelid livestock. The nurseries were staffed by volunteers from local nursery schools in return for a certificate of work from the project.¹¹

Mixed

A lack of employment opportunities in Central America and Mexico has caused many men to migrate, leaving many women as de facto heads of household. Their new "status" has heightened their work burden, as they find themselves responsible for both productive and household activities. The Rural Development and Modernization Project for the Eastern Region (2005-2013) in El Salvador sought to reduce the domestic workload of women and facilitate their involvement in productive activities. For households headed by women, a fund was used to reduce the domestic workload by the provision of improved stoves, mills, community kitchens, household water cisterns, agroforestry parcels to decrease the need to collect firewood, and child day-care centres. Women used the time saved to participate in other project activities. For households with both women and men, the project organized workshops on equitable workloads.¹²

Responsibility for domestic work often limits rural women's economic opportunities in Southeast Asia. The domestic workload burden is compounded by poor infrastructure and a lack of childcare options. In the Rural Income Diversification Project in Tuyen Quang Province (2002-2010) in Viet Nam, men and women attended gender awareness training, whose topics included the division of labour, the prevention of domestic violence, and women's participation in decision-making processes. Women were also offered a menu of options to ease their workloads, which led to the construction of safe water supply systems, latrines and childcare nurseries, and a supply of threshing machines and scholarships for schoolchildren

⁹ IFAD. 2015. *An innovative, scalable, pro-poor home cooking-based charcoal production value chain for women*. Grant factsheet. Rome: IFAD.

¹⁰ IFAD. 2013. *IFAD Gender and rural development brief: South Asia*. October 2013.

¹¹ IFAD. 2014. *IFAD Gender and rural development brief: Andean countries*. November 2014.

¹² IFAD. 2014. *IFAD Gender and rural development brief: Central America and Mexico*. November 2014.

from poor households. Gender roles and responsibilities were reportedly being favourably changed. Men were participating more in domestic activities previously performed only by women, while women were spending less time on domestic tasks and agricultural labour and more time in training courses, village meetings, and marketing.¹³

Women in the Near East and North Africa region are responsible for domestic tasks and they typically provide most of the manual agricultural labour for crop production on-farm, while men do the mechanized work and the marketing, and control the household income. Migration by men looking for work has shifted this division of labour, leaving women responsible for both the domestic and agricultural work. The Al-Dhala Community Resource Management Project (2004-2012) in Yemen first addressed women's basic needs by releasing them from time-consuming water and firewood collection through rainwater harvesting reservoirs and biogas units. Training was offered on literacy, health and nutrition, kitchen gardening, income-generating activities, midwifery, extension services and managing credit. Women used the time saved for kitchen gardening and chicken raising, which improved household nutrition and women's income. Despite the social complexity of the project context, women's development capacities were strengthened, and their inclusion and empowerment in decision-making gave them greater recognition at home and in the community.

Conclusion

Women's laborious and repetitive domestic workload is a longstanding characteristic of rural poverty – both as a cause and an effect – that unfortunately persists today.

The primary value of labour-saving technologies and practices in rural and agricultural development programmes lies in increasing human capital by improving the well-being and nutrition of rural women and their families, making life in rural areas more attractive for younger people, and freeing up time for women – young and old – to participate in and benefit from development processes, with the possibility of undertaking more productive work with greater income potential.

Labour-saving technologies and practices, supported by gender transformative approaches and policy engagement, help to challenge discriminatory gender roles and encourage more equitable workloads. Furthermore, women become empowered both socially and economically: their status and bargaining power are strengthened and they have more access to and control over technologies and finance.

About this toolkit

- Teaser** describes why labour-saving technologies and practices are needed to reduce women's domestic workload and the benefits to be gained, with examples from IFAD-supported projects.
- How To Do note** offers practical guidance to help practitioners address this issue in the design and implementation of projects. It also provides details on proven labour-saving technologies and practices and gives key information sources.
- Lessons Learned** provides lessons learned from a study on the impact that IFAD water investments had on the time saved by households in collecting water, with a gender lens. It also gives recommendations for IFAD project design and implementation to improve the outcomes of labour-saving water investments.
- Compendium** showcases labour-saving technologies that were exhibited at the Sharefair on technologies and innovations for rural women on "Improving Food Security, Nutrition and Productive Family Farming in Eastern and Southern Africa", held in Nairobi on 15-17 October 2014.

¹³ IFAD. 2013. *IFAD Gender and rural development brief: Southeast Asia*. October 2013.



Photographer: Pirozzi
Woman carrying firewood in Sao Tome and Principe

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