



# Addressing women's work burden

## Key issues, promising solutions and way forward



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### Key facts

- In most developing countries rural women's tasks often add up to a 16 hour day.<sup>1</sup>
- Women bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work.<sup>2</sup>
- Rural women's labour is characterized by multiple and simultaneous activities (home and childcare, farming & minding stock, community work).<sup>3</sup>
- Rural women spend up to four hours a day walking to collect fuel and water for the household.<sup>4</sup>
- Access to energy (energy services) in West Africa has reduced women's daily work by 2 to 4 hours.<sup>5</sup>

### Good Practices

- Simple labour saving technologies such as water wheels are available: they reduce the drudgery of water collection, provide irrigation for household vegetable gardens, and enable people to use their time more productively.<sup>6</sup>
- Community managed multiple use water systems (MUS) and energy multi platforms provide support for women's domestic and productive work burden.<sup>7</sup>
- Rapid prototyping technology is being successfully tested to engage rural women in designing labour saving tools for their needs.<sup>8</sup>

### Issue

In developing countries the number of smallholder women farmers, fishers and/or livestock keepers who feed their households is increasing yet they typically achieve yields that are considerably lower than men's.

At the same time, the natural resources on which agriculture is based, particularly land, water, and forests are becoming degraded and there is growing competition for their use. Women in particular, are facing increasing threats in accessing these resources.

Rural women simultaneously manage triple responsibilities, at work within the household and at community level.

Women work within family businesses, as wage-workers or self-employed. As farmers, this implies ploughing, weeding, seed preparation, planting, harvesting, processing of household crops and selling production surplus at local markets, as well as tending to small livestock. In artisanal capture fishing communities, women mostly support offshore fishing with time-consuming onshore tasks, such as net making and mending. In fish farming they are very active through feed preparation, feeding of stock, processing and marketing of fish from cages, pens and ponds.

Household tasks involve looking after the family, caring for the children and the elderly, collecting firewood, fetching water and preparing meals while community tasks are linked to preserving culture and tradition, through the organization of funerals and religious ceremonies and to ensuring the provision and maintenance of common resources such as water, healthcare and education.

The competing demands linked to this triple role make women time poor. Despite the benefit that this work brings to the household and the community at large, much of women's work is unpaid and unrecognized.

This affects their quality of life and decision making, puts their health at risk and prevents them from taking full advantage of economic opportunities through engagement in income generating activities. When women are overworked, this has an impact on the whole household, including children and youth.

<sup>1</sup> World Bank, FAO & IFAD, 2009. *Gender in agriculture sourcebook*. Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> UN Women, 2015. *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016*  
[http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW\\_progressreport.pdf](http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> M. Blackden & Q. Wodon, eds. *Gender, time use, and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa*. World Bank Working Paper No. 73. Washington, DC, World Bank.

<sup>4</sup> FAO, 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture*.

<sup>5</sup> FAO <http://www.fao.org/climatechange/38080-0e86363b233f2bd2c8dd3754ff90cc86.pdf> and UNDP <http://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/ourwork/environmentandenergy/successstories/west-africa-light.html>

<sup>6</sup> "Wello" Water Wheels <http://wellowater.org>

<sup>7</sup> UNDP and International Water Management Institute (IWMI) free adaptation  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/undp-good-practice.html> & <http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/publications/corporate-publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2014/water-for-all/>

<sup>8</sup> NUI Galway Plant & AgriBiosciences Research Centre (PABC) and Concern Worldwide  
<http://3d4agdev.org/about>

## Access to and adoption of work burden solutions/options

Labour-saving agricultural technologies and practices (e.g: improved farming and processing tools – adequate storage facilities, practices such as roof water harvesting or minimum tillage), and related services (eg: extension, farmer field schools), can offer valuable solutions to reduce women’s work burden. Some of these options, provided they are introduced and adapted to local contexts and for women’s needs, have been tested as successful.

In the majority of cases, however, women face difficulty in accessing solutions which are not tailored to their needs and therefore the adoption rate of innovative agricultural technologies and services remains low. Different constraints contribute to this:

**HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS:** At rural household level, the gender division of labour commonly assigns women a multitude of socially accepted tasks which determine their time-use. Limited awareness and recognition of women’s time burden and power imbalances within the household affect women’s capacity to express their needs and seek support. When it comes to the allocation of household resources, men, therefore, tend not to prioritize women’s needs. These constraints are exacerbated when we deal with technologies which, throughout the world, are often considered to be in the purview of men, both in terms of its development and usage. Moreover, in cases where women have mechanized and monetized their work, research has demonstrated that it is often taken over by men.

**SOCIAL NORMS:** Technologies can be perceived as inappropriate for women’s use: this was reported as being the case for long handled hoes or bicycles in parts of East and West Africa. Mobility norms also affect women’s access to public transport, training and thus gaining information. Travelling on foot can also pose serious safety risks.



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▲ Kitchen / keyhole gardens, enhance women’s capacity to provide their families with food and nutrition security and cash income from grown vegetables. Within easy access to the home, they rely on limited water and are beneficial for posture while working.



©FAO/Christopher Somerville

▲ A Gaza farmer with the harvest collected from an aquaponics system, a technology that combines farming fish with growing plants. The labour-saving technology allows to produce food at home on rooftops or backyards.

## Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holiday with pay.

Article 24 - UN declaration of Human Rights

**PHYSICAL CHALLENGES:** Agricultural labour-saving tools, equipment and machinery tend to be designed for men. The physical challenges women face in using these tools, having to lift and carry weights, is often huge and can lead to injuries and health-related problems.

**COMPLEMENTARY RESOURCES:** Limited access to education and resources such as land and credit are amongst the most important barriers to women’s access to and adoption of labour-saving solutions. The level of women’s education affects their capacity to make informed choices and weak access to land rights diminishes women’s credit capacity and autonomy to rent or invest in new technologies. Women also commonly find it difficult to hire labour for their crops.

**EXTENSION SERVICES AND TRAINING:** Extension and technical support is more likely to reach men than women. Information on the use and upkeep of agricultural technologies is provided by agricultural extension agents. A high percentage of these are men, who may not recognize the work women engage in, or be able to effectively communicate with women. Sometimes extension advice is offered to men with the assumption that the information is passed on.

**RISK AVERSION:** Women’s perception of risk associated with new agricultural technologies might be higher than men’s. This can be also attributed to adverse impacts of some technologies which may save time but reduce valued social contact, or which may improve efficiency, but create job loss. Some technologies have proved to increase work burden: when the gains of output linked to technology are nullified by debt payments, women may have to work as labourers to supplement income or not accept the technology.

## Promising technologies and services

There are water, energy and farming related **labour-saving technologies and practices** that, depending on the context, have been effective in decreasing women's work burden and improving the efficiency of performing farming and household activities, especially during seasonal peaks. Labour efficiency gains can be achieved in a number of different ways:

- by adopting technologies that save collection time and can be used closer to home, such as keyhole gardens that use less water or fuel efficient stoves which rely on briquettes as biomass fuel alternatives for cooking. Solar and wind technologies offer various options and opportunities to bring sustainable energy to rural households;
- by using tools which are easier to operate and less physically taxing such as manual shellers and mechanically operated grinders or mills. Drip irrigation technology is used by women and is less labour consuming;
- by adopting practices that concentrate several activities in one place (e.g. fishing and farming practices). Communally used fish processing technology for smoking, drying and storing;
- by adopting practices that change the labour requirements for crop production. Conservation agriculture, for instance, requires a switch from conventional methods of land tilling to practices such as retention of cover crops that decrease labour for weeding.

**Services** that support technology and the introduction of new practices are also very important. These refer to the range of information, training, child and elderly care services and agriculture-related knowledge provided by various service delivery systems (government, private sector and non-governmental organizations) to increase farmers' ability to improve productivity and efficiency.



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- ▲ Simple hand tools, such as this push weeder, are labour and time saving because they allow to cover more extended surfaces without bending down.



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- ▲ Water wheels or mobile water tanks are labour-saving technologies that enable women to collect considerable quantities of water in less time and without damaging their health.

Amongst these services, there are examples of gender-transformative approaches that have generated time-saving results, such as the DIMITRA Listener's Clubs and household methodologies - which have proved to be an essential platform for dialogue between women and men on a variety of topics including time constraints. This dialogue has led to changes in attitude and behavior: in support of their wives, fathers started taking their children to school.

Farmer Field Schools have contributed to improving women and girls' technical and entrepreneurial capacity by introducing labour-saving practices and offering business skill development.

Support to collectively-owned technologies enables women to work together, improve their outputs and share the benefits. It can help women's creation of savings groups and cooperatives that can qualify for credit. Such technologies exist in the water sector (multi-use water systems) and in the energy sector (multi-functional energy platforms, which supply mechanical and electrical energy for a number of different energy needs).



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- ▲ In the rice-fish farming practice, fish provide nutrition and fertilizer to rice, regulate micro-climatic conditions and eat larvae and weeds in the flooded fields, reducing the cost of labour needed for weeding, fertilizer and insect control.

# Way forward: development partners' complementary approaches

## FAO

### Institutional setting /Approach

- FAO Gender Equality Policy and Strategic Framework.
- Reduction of Women's Work Burden: specific objective of FAO Gender Equality Policy.
- Household approach.

### Priority areas of work

Advocacy & policy advice /tools and guidelines/ sex disaggregated data collection/ technology and service promotion, knowledge products.

### Labour - saving technologies and services

The **FAO FFT-Thiaroye oven** introduced to several African countries is a post-harvest artisanal technology which smokes, dries and stores finished product. Used by the local women's fish processors group, it saves them time, improves their production and makes them more competitive in regional and sub-regional markets while decreasing health risks linked to traditional fish-smoking (less heat, burn and smoke exposure).

The **FAO-Dimitra Clubs** contribute to women's empowerment and the transformation of gender roles in rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa. Rural women and men are supported to meet, discuss their daily challenges and solve problems using their own means. Equipped with wind-up solar-powered radio sets that enable them to communicate with other clubs and rural actors, the communities that adopt the approach have reported changes in behaviours and practices at the individual, household and community levels. Time use is frequently discussed and positive outcomes have been achieved, in particular for women.

### Activities/Initiatives Way Forward

- Advocacy /Communication on work burden (joint info brief FAO, UNIDO, IFAD).
- Gender and time-use studies in integrated production systems.
- Methodology for Labour and Time Use Assessment.
- Review of labour saving technologies supporting women's work & dissemination of good practices (TECA).
- Mainstreaming "time-use" as part of gender analysis in FAO projects.
- Evaluation of work burden in projects introducing technology use.

## RESOURCES

### FAO Policy on Gender Equality

[www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3205e/i3205e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3205e/i3205e.pdf)

### Paper: Running out of time (2015)

[www.fao.org/3/a-i4741e.pdf](http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4741e.pdf)

### TECA website (search: "labour saving")

<http://teca.fao.org/>

### Keyhole gardens

[www.fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/docs/FSNL%20Fact%20sheet\\_Keyhole%20gardens.pdf](http://www.fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/docs/FSNL%20Fact%20sheet_Keyhole%20gardens.pdf)

### FFT-Thiaroye ovens

[http://intranet.fao.org/fao\\_communications/from\\_the\\_field/detail/c/22636/](http://intranet.fao.org/fao_communications/from_the_field/detail/c/22636/)

### DIMITRA project website

[www.fao.org/dimitra/home/en/](http://www.fao.org/dimitra/home/en/)

### Farmer Field school manual

[www.fao.org/ag/ca/publications/farmer\\_field\\_school\\_approach.pdf](http://www.fao.org/ag/ca/publications/farmer_field_school_approach.pdf)

### FAO gender website

[www.fao.org/gender](http://www.fao.org/gender)

## IFAD

### Institutional setting /Approach

- IFAD Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.
- Reduced workload and an equitable workload balance between women and men: specific objective of IFAD Policy.
- Gender and nutrition-sensitive approaches.
- Gender and climate change.

### Priority areas of work

- Mainstreaming gender considerations into IFAD loans and grants portfolio.
- Knowledge management, capacity building and south-south knowledge exchanges.
- Evidence-based policy dialogue.

### Labour-saving technologies and services

**Flexi-biogas** is a new technology intended to provide cooking gas, lighting and even electricity for smallholder farmers with livestock. The basic design consists of a plastic digester bag under a greenhouse covering together with simple input and output pipes, and pipes to transport biogas to home or storage. Compared to conventional biogas systems, flexi-biogas is lower cost, easier to install, use and maintain. This makes it more attractive to women, and it is portable so it is also more suitable for landless households.

**Household methodologies** for gender equality and social inclusion: Household methodologies are participatory methodologies that enable family members to work together to improve relations and decision-making, and to achieve more equitable workloads. Their purpose is to strengthen the overall well-being of the household and empower all its members to realize their development potential and create stronger, more resilient, productive and sustainable smallholder farming and rural livelihoods systems.

### Activities/Initiatives Way Forward

- Toolkit on labour-saving technologies and services to reduce domestic workload, including:
  - › teaser on labour-saving technologies and services to reduce domestic workload;
  - › how-to-do note on integrating labour-saving methods in project design and implementation;
  - › study on water investments for time-saving and domestic water collection;
  - › examples of good practices and field-based experiences of labour-saving technologies.
- Assessment of work burden in projects introducing technology use.
- Communication, awareness raising, training, networking
- Partnering with other UN agencies.

## RESOURCES

### IFAD Gender Policy

[www.ifad.org/gender/policy/gender\\_e.pdf](http://www.ifad.org/gender/policy/gender_e.pdf)

### HHM methodologies toolkit

[www.ifad.org/knotes/household/index.htm](http://www.ifad.org/knotes/household/index.htm)

### Reducing women's domestic workload through labour-saving technologies and practices, Teaser and How-to-do Note IFAD (2016)

[www.ifad.org/topic/gender/overview/tags/knowledge\\_notes](http://www.ifad.org/topic/gender/overview/tags/knowledge_notes)

### Gender and climate change

[www.ifad.org/climate/resources/advantage/gender.pdf](http://www.ifad.org/climate/resources/advantage/gender.pdf)

### Biogas

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iRk1UBUDQC&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iRk1UBUDQC&feature=youtu.be)

## UNIDO

### Institutional setting /Approach

- UNIDO Policy on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (GEEW).
- UNIDO Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2016-2019).
- Thematic UNIDO Guides on Gender Mainstreaming in:
  - › Trade Capacity Building Projects;
  - › Agribusiness Development Projects;
  - › Energy and Climate Change projects;
  - › Environmental Management Projects;
  - › Montreal Protocol Projects.

### Priority areas of work

- Mainstreaming gender considerations into UNIDO programmes and projects for Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development (ISID).
- Knowledge management, advocacy and project monitoring.

### Labour-saving technologies and services

#### Improved design of cook stoves for small-scale beer production.

The traditional stoves, fuelled by firewood, have a low combustion efficiency that results in longer cooking times and higher fuel consumption. By designing more efficient cook stoves manufactured by local manufacturers and establishing a credit line to purchase the energy-efficient cook stoves, women beer brewers improve their health as well as their profits. In addition, clusters of women beer brewers emerge with a high potential to integrate into the local value chain.

**Inclusion of women in productive activities** by improving technical skills and business literacy as well as integration into international, regional or local value chains.

### Activities/Initiatives Way Forward

- Develop new impact indicators to capture changes in women's work burden in projects following introducing of improved technologies and manufacturing practices.
- Communication, awareness raising, training, networking.
- Partnering with other UN agencies.

## RESOURCES

### UNIDO Gender Policy

[www.unido.org/gender.html](http://www.unido.org/gender.html)

### UNIDO Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2016-2019)

[www.unido.org/gender.html](http://www.unido.org/gender.html)

### Gender Newsletter and Project information

[www.unido.org/gender.html](http://www.unido.org/gender.html)

### Thematic Guides on Gender Mainstreaming

[www.unido.org/what-we-do/cross-cutting-services/gender/publications.html](http://www.unido.org/what-we-do/cross-cutting-services/gender/publications.html)

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