



Food and Agriculture  
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 **IFAD**  
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Gender transformative approaches for food security and nutrition



**GOOD PRACTICE**

# Joint Programme to Accelerate Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women

PREPARED BY

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## SECTION 1

## OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

**Name of the methodology**

**A holistic, integrated approach to accelerate women's empowerment: Joint Programme to Accelerate Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE)**

**Countries with implementation experience**

- **East Africa:** Ethiopia, Rwanda
- **West Africa:** Liberia, Niger
- **Asia:** Kyrgyzstan, Nepal
- **Central America:** Guatemala

**Start/end date**

October 2012 – December 2020

**Lead organization sponsoring the development and implementation of the methodology**

The United Nations JP RWEE is implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

**Purpose of the methodology and the domains of gender inequality that are addressed**

The JP RWEE is based on the premise that an integrated approach to women's empowerment in development projects has multiplying effects that enhance the reach and sustainability of project outcomes. The JP RWEE aims to respond to the diversity of issues rural women face in their daily lives. These issues collectively go beyond the mandate of any one of the four individual United Nations entities. The JP RWEE aims to:

- improve food security and nutrition at the local level;
- create job opportunities to sustain women's livelihoods;
- respond to rural women's identified social and economic needs and add value to existing initiatives;
- partner with rural women's organizations to strengthen their capacities;
- affirm rural women as leaders, decision makers and agents of change for their individual and collective advancement;
- help governments to build more comprehensive national strategies for rural women's empowerment; and
- generate lessons that can strengthen the focus on rural women and girls in agricultural activities.

In addressing the barriers to gender equality in rural settings, the JP RWEE works to address the two components of systemic institutional gender inequalities: social norms and organizations (i.e. formal institutions, formal membership organizations and informal institutions).

**Contribution of the methodology to wider development/organizational/project goals**

A current initiative of the JP RWEE is to establish an evidence base that will facilitate systematic integration of empowerment dimensions into the work of relevant ministries of participating countries, as well as the participating United Nations organizations and other practitioners.

**Target group**

Based on criteria agreed on with the respective national governments and after conducting baseline assessments, the seven countries participating in the JP RWEE focus on two main groups of women:

- the most vulnerable, poorest and illiterate women, who are often bypassed by conventional economic empowerment programmes; and
- women entrepreneurs already organized in producer organizations/cooperatives who have the potential to grow their businesses and contribute to economic revitalization and growth in their communities.

The JP RWEE supports pre-existing or newly established women's groups that, in addition to offering mutual support, have the potential to maximize the impact of programme interventions and ensure the sustainability and replicability of the activities even after the end of the programme.

Indirect beneficiaries are the members of targeted communities in the seven countries who benefit not only from the overall contribution to poverty reduction but also from the numerous sensitization and awareness-raising activities carried out to promote behavioural change and gender equality.

## SECTION 2

## IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

### Key entry points for applying the methodology

The JP RWEE capacity development strategy operates at three different levels:

- strengthening the individual capacities of rural women producers to address their supply-side constraints, boosting their agricultural productive capacities (e.g. harvesting, storage, processing and marketing), and facilitating their access to remunerative jobs and lucrative markets;
- developing the collective capacities of producer organizations, cooperatives and unions to make their corporate governance more transparent, effective, accountable, gender equitable and age inclusive, as well as supporting the affiliation of informal rural women's groups with formal organizations; and
- enhancing the capacity of duty bearer systems and institutions to respond effectively to rural women's needs and priorities through policy interventions that advance rural women's access to productive resources, services and decent wage employment, and ensure women's equal participation in decision making.

### Implementing partners

The JP RWEE has a governance mechanism that has ensured smooth and transparent implementation and ownership by the main stakeholders, including donors and national counterparts. The mechanism is composed of;

- at the global level – an International Steering Committee and Technical Advisory Committee;
- at the country level – a National Steering Committee (NSC), which is chaired by the Minister of Agriculture or his/her representative and consists of donors, and includes the four participating agencies, civil society and private sector partners of the JP RWEE and representatives of rural women; and a Technical Working Group (TWG) consisting of representatives of the four United Nations agencies and technical staff of relevant ministries; and
- implementing partners hired at the national level, including international and national non-governmental organizations, to support delivery.

In some countries, implementing partners have also organized a separate coordination group that has helped them to coordinate activities on the ground; present issues or suggestions to the NSC/TWG with one voice; and create a platform for exchanging information and learning from each other's work.

### Process of and criteria for selecting facilitators/champions/mentors

The implementation of the JP RWEE is embedded in the core operations of the four United Nations agencies, and is based on each agency's comparative advantage and innovative methodologies to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. One agency acts as the lead agency in a specific country, and hosts a national coordinator to ensure the sound planning, implementation and sequencing of field activities, and coordinates the work of implementing partners.

In some countries, to maximize learning opportunities, the leaders of women's groups have been selected to voluntarily pass their newly acquired knowledge and skills to other women in their communities who are not directly targeted by the programme. In Guatemala for instance, the women received specific training in this role by the local coordinators.



## Training of facilitators/champions/mentors

The JP RWEE uses a tailor-made, participatory approach for programme design and implementation in each country. This involves consultation with government officials, rural women's groups, youth groups, farmer organizations, implementing partners, other United Nations agencies and civil society organizations. The programme is an umbrella for a wide range of gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives. Consequently, many varied approaches are used depending on the context and implementing partners.

## SECTION 3

## IMPLEMENTATION CYCLE

### Key steps in the implementation cycle

#### — Step 1: Context

Reflecting the diversity of the field sites, the following elements were considered in both the design and implementation phases:

- factors affecting the position of rural women, including age, religion, ethnicity, social, economic, political and ecological status;
- formal and informal local gender norms (e.g. ideas about the appropriateness and safety of women in public spaces, and practices, such as early marriage) and the constraints they may impose on the successful implementation of the programme; and
- social dynamics, with particular attention to tensions or conflicts between men and women that may be triggered by any improvements in women's economic status (e.g. spikes in domestic violence that may accompany any gains made by women in terms of economic agency).

#### — Step 2: Strategy

The programme adopts a multitrack strategy aiming to achieve short-, medium- and long-term results. In the short term, the focus is on increasing rural women's production and ensuring their access to income. The medium- and long-term work focuses on promoting gender-responsive policy and legal environments for rural women's economic empowerment and gender transformative approaches at the household and community level to encourage behaviour change.

#### — Step 3: Activities for women's economic empowerment

The JP RWEE offers a comprehensive package of sequenced interventions to support women's economic and social empowerment, combining direct implementation and on-the-ground coordination with other community-level programming. This requires using different training methods on a wide array of topics, which are selected based on the specific needs identified in each country, and with varying frequencies. The main topics include:

- nutrition education and methods for preparing healthy food with locally-available products;
- agricultural techniques to increase the quantity and quality of production;
- value chain development;
- women's rights, including the right to land;
- the establishment and strengthening of producer organizations;
- the creation and management of saving groups;
- literacy and numeracy training;
- business and entrepreneurial development; and
- leadership development for women who already hold leadership positions and simplified modules for other women participants.

#### — Step 4: Gender transformative approaches

For the programme to have a transformative approach, it is important to focus not only on strengthening women's economic opportunities and reinforcing their decision-making capacities as farmers and group members, but also on helping communities understand and challenge the social norms that perpetuate inequalities between women and men. The JP RWEE is working to address these norms at the individual, community, and institutional levels in order to facilitate sustainable change.

At the household level, the JP RWEE is using household methodologies, and particularly the Gender Action Learning System (GALS), a participatory, community-led empowerment methodology that can be adapted to different cultural and organizational contexts. Through a set of pictorial tools, household members build their vision for the future and define strategies for achieving it. Throughout implementation, GALS tools have demonstrated their capacity to (i) transform gender-based power relations; (ii) promote men and women's self-confidence; and (iii) improve livelihoods.

At the community level, the JP RWEE has mainly applied three approaches.

- Community Conversations are conducted by community facilitators who engage the community in self-change processes and help eradicate gender discriminatory practices.
- Dimitra Clubs or Community Listeners Clubs are groups of women and men (mixed or single sex) who organize themselves to bring about changes in their communities, especially addressing discriminatory gender practices and the unequal sharing of household work. Through a solar-powered radio, club members access information, identify challenges and explore ways to overcome these challenges in an inclusive way.
- Awareness-raising and advocacy events are designed and led by rural women activists who organize forum theatres, song contests and other events to demonstrate the dangers of discriminatory social norms or harmful practices (e.g. child marriage), and the high social value of unpaid care work.

At the institutional level, the focus has been on creating evidence on current challenges and priority areas for interventions to enforce rural women's rights to land, resources, social protection and infrastructure. JP RWEE contributions include:

- the production of evidence-based studies to inform policy development and actions for gender equality;
- support to the design and implementation of revised national gender policies and gender policies in agriculture;
- the development of manuals and other operational guidance on designing agricultural interventions that take into account rural women's specific needs; and
- capacity development of government staff and other national stakeholders on gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting and women's rights.

### **Average length of the implementation cycle**

An ideal implementation cycle would be five years to provide integrated support and work in a sequenced way towards the four main outcomes: improved food security and nutrition; increased income to sustain livelihoods; strengthened leadership; and more gender-responsive policy environment for rural women in agriculture. However, due to the unpredictability of JP RWEE funding, most beneficiaries have been supported for a period of approximately three years.

### **Graduation from the methodology**

Not relevant.

## SECTION 4

## MONITORING

**Monitoring system**

The JP RWEE has developed a performance monitoring framework with a series of indicators (mostly quantitative) at both the outcome and output levels. These indicators were selected based on the following criteria:

- data that were already collected by the four agencies, in order to avoid creating parallel systems and build on the existing expertise in the country offices;
- applicability to activities implemented in all the countries; and
- ability to aggregate the results in each country at the global level.

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) has also become an important part of the JP RWEE monitoring system for three main reasons:

- The WEAI was a key component of programme design, as it gave an opportunity to identify needs in some of the participating countries through the baseline assessment.
- The WEAI survey represents the only rigorous tool through which women's empowerment in agriculture can be measured in ways that go beyond quantitative indicators that only look at specific aspects of the JP RWEE (e.g. food security). This has also helped compare and consolidate results among the seven pilot countries, which would otherwise have been difficult due to the different contexts the JP RWEE is operating in.
- The WEAI also supports JP RWEE work at the policy level with the Ministries of Agriculture of participating countries. One area of engagement is the provision of evidence-based studies to inform policy development and, when relevant, the development or revision of national gender policies for the agricultural sector.

**Indicators**

Core indicators included in the performance monitoring framework are listed below.

- **Quantitative**
  - Increased agricultural production of women farmers
  - Income generated by rural women's cooperatives from their sales to WFP and markets
  - The proportion of rural women who are members of land committees
  - The proportion of producer organizations led by women
- **Qualitative**
  - Evidence of improvement of rural women's dietary diversity and consumption patterns
  - Evidence of better quality of life and status of rural women, including individual stories and women beneficiaries' interviews
  - Evidence of rural women's empowerment in intra-household decision making
  - Extent to which national land, food, nutrition, agricultural and rural development policies and laws make provisions for gender equality and women's empowerment

## SECTION 5

## BUDGET

**Main items of expenditure**

- Training activities, including training of trainers, workshops, pyramid learning, group-based learning processes
- Asset distribution (e.g. agricultural tools and inputs, labour-saving technologies)
- Awareness-raising and sensitization activities
- Establishment of revolving funds, including the provision of start-up capital

**Total budget**

A total of almost USD 26 million has been received into the JP RWEE Trust Fund, of which almost USD 22 million has been transferred to participating agencies to support the global and national coordinators and direct implementation.

## SECTION 6

## RESULT

**Number of beneficiaries reached**

Since implementation started at the end of 2014, the JP RWEE has directly reached:

- 61 736 beneficiaries (80% women) and
- 315 688 household members.

**Main changes attributed to the methodology**

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to assess whether this pilot approach has been successful in empowering women, and define what empowerment means in a specific context.

Main changes reported as a result of the JP RWEE are:

- 103% average increase in the agricultural production of participating rural women since implementation started;
- USD 1.8 million income generated from sales;
- over 16 000 women organized into saving groups;
- over 80% of producer organizations supported by the JP RWEE are led by women or have women holding key leadership positions;
- approximately 2 000 government officials at all levels (national, regional, district) with enhanced skills on gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting, women's rights and women's leadership; and
- the national governments of Ethiopia, Guatemala and Nepal supported the development and implementation of gender policies in the agricultural sector.

In addition to these quantifiable results, women have challenged discriminatory practices in order to learn their rights and assume decision-making roles within their homes and communities:

- In Niger, some of the target communities agreed on reducing or eliminating the dowry as a precondition of marriage, and eliminating the harmful belief preventing widows to remarry.
- In Guatemala, the JP RWEE has supported the first indigenous woman running for mayor in the target area of the Polochic Valley.
- In Kyrgyzstan, women beneficiaries had the opportunity to participate in lobbying for a legislative initiative banning child marriage.
- In Ethiopia, women are openly discussing the importance of family planning with their husbands to improve their livelihoods.

Findings from country evaluations in Ethiopia and Kyrgyzstan show that women appreciate not only the increased access to income, diversification of their livelihoods, and the possibility of sending their children to school, but also the opportunity to challenge discriminatory practices, become more knowledgeable about their rights, and have their voices heard in the community and at home.

**Key success factors and strengths of the methodology**

Key success factors that consistently arise in evaluations, country reports, monitoring missions and other exchanges around the JP RWEE include:

- Women's empowerment is a multidimensional process with socio-cultural, familial, legal, political, psychological and environmental dimensions, all of which have to be addressed – in addition to women's economic empowerment – in order to achieve sustainable development. The multilayered approach of the JP RWEE demonstrates that integration and cross-sectoral harmonization is fundamental to realizing the economic rights of rural women.
- The alignment of the JP RWEE with national and global level policies and standards that promote and protect women's economic rights is a key aspect of the programme's success and ownership by participating countries.
- The availability of programmatic tools (e.g. common monitoring and evaluation frameworks, reporting templates, quality assurance checklists) and an operational guidance note ensure that the partnership is efficient.

- The role of dedicated JP RWEE staff (global and national coordinators) is essential to ensure sound performance, progress towards the expected results, and the effective collection and analysis of data and other information.
- Good planning and sequencing are key for providing the comprehensive ‘package’ of interventions used by the JP RWEE, and for avoiding beneficiary fatigue by ensuring there is sufficient time for beneficiaries to absorb, use and pass on their new knowledge to others.
- Working with women in key management positions, in either women-only groups or mixed groups, facilitates the establishment of support networks and the development of participants’ communication and leadership skills.
- Engaging men in programme implementation results in joint efforts to improve livelihoods and secures their buy-in to any transformation process that affects gender roles, workload allocation and economic empowerment.
- The provision of technologies has a proven impact on agricultural productivity and value addition. However, the distribution of these technologies must come after a thorough needs assessment. Also, because technologies are not gender neutral, the right conditions need to be created to make sure the technologies can, and will, be used by women.

### Challenges and measures to overcome them

From an operational perspective, there are four distinct challenges:

- The unpredictability of funding for the JP RWEE continues to be the biggest threat, with the potential to hamper implementation.
- Monitoring and evaluation remain problematic despite the regular progress in implementation. This reflects the lack of baselines in some countries; the different monitoring systems used by the United Nations agencies; and limited local capacities to devise indicators to measure ‘soft’ components of the JP RWEE, including qualitative changes in the lives of women as experienced individually and collectively. To mitigate this, the WEAI is being used as an integral part of JP RWEE activities to build the evidence base and monitor the system.
- In some cases, political instability, changes in government, staff turnover and travel restrictions delayed the provision of planned technical support by both institutional partners and United Nations organizations. The disruptions required additional time for national coordinators to brief new focal points.
- Joint programming might take a relatively long time to set up compared to programmes carried out by individual agencies because it requires the pooling of resources and expertise. Nonetheless, in the long term, the results seem to be more sustainable.

For all activities, the results from monitoring missions and the analysis of documentation showed some common challenges across the countries.

- Certain conditions are required to access markets (e.g. collective bank accounts, quality control certificates, and other official documentation). These conditions, which can be difficult for individual women and women’s groups to meet, are needed to become providers of processed food to either government institutions (e.g. school canteens) or the private sector (e.g. restaurants, hotels). Efforts have been made to create virtuous circles that support women’s production, productivity and profit making.
- Leadership development is a long-term process that requires working with rural women who already hold leadership positions as well as with all beneficiaries so that they can be accompanied in the process of transformative leadership. The JP RWEE works at different levels (individual, community, institutional) to support women in making their voices heard, and provides specific support to women (e.g. indigenous women) who find it difficult to access fora where their voices can be heard.
- Limited access to and control over land, be it individual, group or communal land, presents a challenge to rural women beneficiaries to expand their productive base. The JP RWEE has worked extensively to raise awareness about land rights with local institutions in order to increase and improve the inclusion of women’s needs and rights in land policies.



- Even if sound evidence is provided to inform policy, the creation of decent rural employment largely depends on a strong commitment from national policy makers to promote inclusive social protection mechanisms and safe occupational practices across the agricultural sector.
- Changing social norms is a long-term process that is often not compatible with the short lifespan of a programme. However, integrated interventions with a strong focus on individual, community and institutional ownership can help accelerate the results.

### Potential for upscaling

At the country level, in order to continue and scale up the initiative, the JP RWEE country teams have already started engaging with non-traditional donors (e.g. China). Experiences of collaborations with the private sector (e.g. Orange in Liberia) could also be replicated in other contexts.

An assessment of the current level of capacity of women's organizations supported by the JP RWEE could help identify other United Nations partners that could add value to the initiative; for example, with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to strengthen value chain development, or with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to support the creation and promotion of decent job opportunities.

### Potential for replication

JP RWEE is in the process of developing a 'how-to' guide to joint programming for a holistic approach to women's economic empowerment. It will outline the practical aspects of programming and provide guidance and specific tools for planning, setup, implementation and evaluation.

### Sustainability of the methodology once project/external input is complete

Since the inception of the JP RWEE, close attention has been paid to the sustainability of the results achieved at all levels of implementation. This has been done in close collaboration with local governments in alignment with national policies and with the involvement of direct beneficiaries and communities in the design of programme activities. The focus has been on:

- investing in a more gender-responsive policy environment and national strategic frameworks by:
  - supporting the development of gender strategies in the agricultural sector;
  - strengthening national coordination and collaboration on agriculture and rural development issues, with a special focus on rural women's needs; and
  - providing capacity building to agricultural stakeholders in the use of gender analysis, gender budgeting and other gender mainstreaming tools throughout the planning, budgeting and monitoring stages;
- capacity development for individual women and for those in producer organizations in areas such as:
  - crop production, nutritional habits, food storage, entrepreneurial skills and sustainable agriculture techniques, as well as management and leadership and existing legal frameworks on family law and economic rights;
  - access to finance, including the provision of women-friendly financial services; and
  - market access;
- community awareness raising about women's rights through an array of context-specific methodologies aiming at behavioural change, and working within households, using GALS for example, and between households, for example with Dimitra Clubs in Niger or Community Conversations in Ethiopia.

## SECTION 7

## RESOURCES

**Publication**

- Chiarini A (2017) *Enhancing Opportunities for Rural Women's Employment and Poverty Reduction*, Presented at Expert Group Meeting on "Strategies for Eradicating Poverty to Achieve Sustainable Development for All" United Nations Headquarters, New York  
[https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2017/04/Azzurra-CHIARINI-EGM-Strategies-for-Eradicating-Poverty-Chiarini\\_ok.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2017/04/Azzurra-CHIARINI-EGM-Strategies-for-Eradicating-Poverty-Chiarini_ok.pdf)

**Websites**

- JP RWEE website  
<http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/RWF00>
- JP RWEE YouTube channel  
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMuXLipjcfvQW-M9v0HH36A>

**Cover photo:** Rural women walking in the field in Nepal

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This good practice is part of the publication '*Gender transformative approaches for food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture – A compendium of fifteen good practices*' prepared in the framework of the *Joint Programme on Gender Transformative Approaches for Food Security, Improved Nutrition and Sustainable Agriculture (JP GTA)*. The Joint Programme is implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Food Programme and funded by the European Union.



Joint Programme on

**Gender  
Transformative  
Approaches**

for Food Security and Nutrition

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Funded by  
the European Union



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