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POLICY BRIEF

Women in paid work from low income families are engaged in poorly paid, precarious employment, even as they are overburdened with unpaid care work responsibilities. This double burden has depleting consequences for both their mental and physical wellbeing, as well as those of their children. Women's economic empowerment programmes have to both improve the options and conditions of women's paid work and recognise, reduce and redistribute their unpaid care work burdens for these women to move from a double burden to a "double boon".

With the fundamental right to equality being enshrined in Nepal's Constitution and its commitment to SDG 5 Goal (which is focused on gender equality and women's empowerment), why does Nepal still lag behind when it comes to the social, economic and political empowerment of women?

### SNAPSHOT ON GENDER IN NEPAL

- Nepal ranked poorly in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2016 (110 /144 countries) and the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index 2016 (155/187 countries)
- At 80 %, women's labour participation rate is the highest in South Asia (ILO, 2016).
- Women are increasingly involved in non-agricultural waged work, with this proportion from a total waged work growing from 19.9% in 2009 to 44.8% in 2011 (Nepal Gender Profile, 2015).
- The average daily wage rate for women and men is Rs.189 and Rs. 286 respectively (Nepal Living Standard Survey (NLSS) 2010/11).

The Government of Nepal has made Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) a high priority with a majority of the line ministries making GESI a strong component in their strategies. Flagship employment guarantee programmes, such as the Karnali Employment Programme (KEP), for example, specifically target female-headed households, in addition to extremely poor families, providing them jobs on public works and paying them wages equal to men.

A large number of non-governmental agencies also have priority programmes focused on women's economic

empowerment. For instance, Oxfam Nepal's Enterprise Development Programme (EDP) targets agricultural sub-sectors that create opportunities for women at various levels, including production, leadership and management and accessing markets.

With these employment opportunities and a high-level male migration, a higher number of women are active in the productive sectors in Nepal and contribute to the national GDP.

However, amidst these positive outcomes, one key aspect that is still being overlooked by current policy and programming practices is unpaid care work, which is critical to the overall wellbeing of these women and their families.

### The "Double Burden": women's unpaid care work responsibilities and their employment opportunities

Unpaid care work includes both household chores and providing care to children, the elderly and the sick. It is time-consuming, often physically arduous and is traditionally perceived as the responsibility of women in the household.

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in four different sites in Nepal examined the familial nature of care work and the impact on women's ability to secure paid work.

It found the following to be important factors influencing women's choice (or lack of choice) of paid work:

- disproportionate unpaid care work responsibilities
- need to balance these responsibilities with need for income

- restrictions on their mobility
- location of paid work

This absence of decent employment opportunities for women from low-income households forces them to work in low-paying and precarious conditions.

**Care still predominantly viewed as women’s responsibility**

Household chores, such as collecting fuel and water, are predominantly considered to be the responsibility of women and girls in the household, with social norms dictating that some of these, such as carrying “woven baskets containing fodder, manure, water, planting and tilling the land can only be done by married women” (Ghosh and Singh 2017). If a woman is out doing paid work or is overburdened by both her paid work and her unpaid care work, it is the older women or the eldest girl who step in to do household work and childcare. While this meant that older women were working long after they should, it also meant that girls had less time for study and play or for acquiring skills that would get them better jobs in the future. Men only helped with care work when there were no other women in the family.

My daughters sometimes make food and I go to work during the day after cooking in the morning and sending the children to school. After returning in the evening I fetch water and my daughters make food. The older ones who can cook, they do but the younger ones cannot. They also feed the cattle in the afternoon on holidays.

Pramila Rokaya, Chandannath, May 2016

**Time taken by Women for Child care and Unpaid Care Work – Nepal (research)**

Care work responsibility	Average number of hours
Children <18	12.4
Household Chores*	13.9
Observations	200

\* Includes work involving direct care such as care of people, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and fetching water and firewood.

Source: Module 2: Time Use, GrOW Survey

**Women juggle unpaid care work and paid work, but this is precarious and poorly paid**

Paid work for women from low-income rural households largely consists of self-employment activities, either self-initiated or supported by I/NGOs, as well as some waged work. Those who had access to productive

assets such as land were involved in vegetable or seed farming while others engaged in micro-enterprise such as livestock-keeping, running shops, tailoring and alcohol brewing. Where they undertook waged work activities (both agricultural and non-agricultural), this was mostly small-scale, low-paying, manual and seasonal in nature.

Most women who participated in the study were involved in multiple self-employment activities since this gave them the flexibility to manage their care work responsibilities alongside their paid work.

Where care work could not be shared in the family (often because there was no one with whom to share it), or where there was no support in the workplace, particularly for child care, women with young children often withdrew from paid work altogether; or took up paid work closer to home with flexible timings.

How can I do (any more) paid work? I have no one to look after my daughters. Therefore, I can’t buy salt, oil or rice. I just look after my daughters and do the household work as there is no one to help...I leave my children inside the house and go to work [breaking stones] nearby.

Kusum BK, Chandannath, May 2016

Additionally, restrictions on mobility arising from strict gender norms around how far women could travel, also influenced their choice to work closer to home. These norms seem to have become pronounced in the context of male out-migration in Nepal, because of women’s increased paid and unpaid work compounded by lack of trust by their husbands.

**The negative consequences of women’s Double Burden on their health and wellbeing**

The study found that women’s physical and mental wellbeing is being depleted to varying degrees depending on the nature of paid work, their family structure and what stage they are at in their lives (no children, married, pregnant, children, etc.).

For example, certain types of waged work, such as stone breaking and carrying sand, is arduous and back-breaking and adds to existing physical demands of unpaid care tasks such as fire wood collection, cutting grass, digging, irrigating and fetching water. Lack of public resources and services compounded the issue and further affected women’s health adversely, with back aches, headaches and uterine prolapses being common complaints among women. There is little



respite from this double-burden, with any rest or leisure being mostly seasonal in nature. For example, June and July or September and October were described as particularly hectic times because of women's heavy involvement in planting and harvesting on their farms, whilst the months of April-May and November-December are spent collecting firewood and cutting fodder to tide them over difficult months. Even during important festivals such as *Dashain* and *Tihar*, women have numerous societal obligations.

...economic empowerment can be sustainable only if its gains are shared across all the female members of the household.

Given this gruelling situation, it is important to understand how different stakeholders such as family, community, employers and state can contribute to women's economic empowerment in a way that is **optimized**, **shared** and **sustained**. The challenge is to enable women to perform decent work without over-burdening them, deepening their time poverty or having them worry about the care of their families. Moreover, economic empowerment can be sustainable only if its gains are shared across all the female members of the household.

### Priority Action Steps for Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) Programmes

The Government should recognize that creating a balance between unpaid care work and paid work is difficult yet imperative for women and their families, and

that critical steps are needed to create a “double boon”: that is paid work that empowers women and provides support for their unpaid care work responsibilities. This can be done through:

- Macro-economic reforms, especially increasing the availability of decent work and better income opportunities for women and men in a range of localities, particularly closer to home for women with young children.
- Design key national policies and strategies (a) to recognise women's and girls' heavy and unequal unpaid care and household work as a key issue that need to be addressed to achieve development goals, and (b) to include concrete commitments to address women's and girls' unpaid care and domestic work.
- Focus on skills training and access to finance and markets.
- Increase public investment in infrastructure and services that are accessible and affordable for poor women and girls and that reduce time and energy they spend on unpaid care and domestic work. Two things are critical: a) Provision of accessible public services such as roads, irrigation canals, water, fuel, electricity, flour mills, health centers, schools; b) child care provisions – through scaling up, promoting and improving the quality of some existing community run Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers; and provision of childcare at workplaces.
- Collect relevant data on unpaid care and household work and incorporate into relevant national statistics
- Prioritise the importance of girls' education, addressing the challenge of them taking on unpaid care work.
- Promote positive attitudes towards women's leadership and concerns, such that unpaid care and household work becomes a legitimate and vital issue for public debate at community, local and national levels.

NGOs, private sector organizations and communities working on WEE programmes are critical actors for recognizing women's and girls' heavy and unequal care and household work. They could include concrete commitments to take care into account in WEE programmes, through:

- Undertaking Rapid Care Work Appraisal while designing WEE programmes.
- Ensuring that flexibility of working hours; transportation to worksites, decent work conditions and safety and security measures, are integrated in WEE programmes.
- Building capacity of local women's rights organisations and community-based organisations to (a) advocate for improved recognition of unpaid care and domestic work,

and (b) support existing male and female community and opinion leaders to understand and advocate for progressive unpaid care and household work policies

- Provide accessible and affordable time and energy saving equipment for poor women and girls to help in key household tasks (e.g. fuel-efficient stoves, access to energy)
- Focus on changing gender norms such that men take on care responsibilities and there is more gender equal division of labour at household and community levels.
- Encouraging higher representation of women in decision making bodies so that the budget allocation for WEE programmes addresses unpaid care work concerns.

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- Encouraging higher representation of women in decision making bodies so that the budget allocation for WEE programmes addresses unpaid care work concerns.

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## Balancing unpaid care work and paid work

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### RESEARCH PARTNERS:



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For more project background information, publications and access to datasets and case studies, visit [interactions.ids.ac.uk/wee](http://interactions.ids.ac.uk/wee)



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