

Women's economic empowerment programmes: towards a 'double boon' instead of drudgery and depletion

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Recent research carried out in four countries (India, Nepal, Tanzania and Rwanda) under the framework of the Growth and Equal Opportunities for Women (GrOW) programme has highlighted the drudgery of both paid work and unpaid care work faced by women in poor families, leading to the depletion of their bodies and minds, and those of their families.

A key conclusion of this mixed-methods study is that women in poor families welcome the chance to earn any kind of income. However, their options for paid work are limited by both macroeconomic precariousness in their areas of residence and having to tailor their paid work around their unrecognised and undervalued work in the household: taking care of their family, doing housework, collecting water and fuel, caring for animals and tending the land. As a result, women are often forced into poorly paid, irregular and gruelling paid work. Simultaneously, women's engagement in this type of arduous paid work cuts into the time and quality of care they provide for their families.

To reduce the drudgery faced by women in their daily lives, it is essential to take these multidirectional and complex links between paid work and unpaid care work into consideration when designing and implementing women's economic empowerment programmes and policies. Focusing on getting women into the labour force as one of the primary objectives of these programmes obviates attention from the dire situation faced by women and their families: with no time to rest or recuperate, working long hours, travelling far for paid work, incurring injuries and wearing their bodies down. This is further exacerbated by a lack of public services. It is, therefore, not enough for such programmes and policies to provide just any type of income-generating opportunities and assume that women will be economically empowered as a result.

The study showed that while women across the four countries welcomed the opportunity to participate in the eight programmes that were studied, the income generated by their activities yielded only a small portion of their financial requirements. Women who participated in India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Nepal's Karnali Employment Programme (KEP) reported short employment periods, delayed payments and low returns from these programmes, which were insufficient to provide any sustainable improvements to their economic situation. Furthermore, there were hardly any child-care provisions in any of the programmes studied; where there were, their quality was abysmal and deterred women from accessing these services.

Our study showed that low returns from one source of work forced women to juggle multiple income-generating activities, resulting in

increased time pressures and high amounts of energy expended. This had two consequences: first, women spoke about being chronically exhausted and worried—both about the financial sustenance of their families and their ability to take care of them. Second, most women were involved in significant multi-tasking, adding to their physical and emotional depletion. The study found that children (especially girls) absorbed the negative effects of women's double burden, through receiving less care, providing substitute care as well as mimicking their mothers in helping to earn other sources of income.

The research points to the need for women's economic empowerment programmes and policies to make a concerted effort to consider the lived realities of women and their juggling of both paid work and unpaid care work. This can be done through the provision of decent jobs (flexible hours, timely and decent wages, good working conditions) and linkages with good-quality public services such as access to water, gas and electricity, and childcare. This will allow women to reap the rewards of a 'double boon'—a condition in which (i) women have access to decent, empowering work; and (ii) unpaid care and ancillary work is redistributed such that women undertake no more than their fair share of the labour of social reproduction.

The achievement of a double boon for women will lead to economic empowerment that is:

- a. **optimised**—i.e. women are able to work without deepening their time poverty or worrying about the amount and quality of care their families receive, making it possible for them to choose better-paid and more empowering types of work, rather than being forced into low-paid, flexible jobs;
- b. **shared** across all women in the family, without intergenerational transfer of care to girls or older women, and such that economic benefits are not eroded by the costs of substitute care; and
- c. **sustainable across generations**, reducing the drudgery of both paid work and unpaid care work such that women and their families are not emotionally and physically depleted. The quality of childcare should improve, rather than deteriorate, as a result of mothers' paid work.

Note:

This One Pager summarises the findings of a research project carried out by the IDS and its partners entitled 'Balancing Unpaid Care Work and Paid Work: Successes, Challenges and Lessons for Women's Economic Empowerment Programmes and Policies'. For more information, see: <<http://interactions.eldis.org/economic-empowerment>>.