

JOINT PROGRAMME:
Accelerating Progress towards
Rural Women's Economic Empowerment



Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) Impact Evaluation

Summary Version



This summary presents an overview of the key findings of the report *“Does the UN Joint Program for Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE) deliver on its empowerment objectives?”*. Interpreting the relevant evaluation’s findings, this document interprets the evaluation findings to describe how the JP RWEE interventions contributed to GEWE in Ethiopia, Niger, Nepal, and Kyrgyzstan.

[A full version of the report can be found here](#)

Executive Summary

Women’s empowerment and gender equality are increasingly important goals for agricultural development programmes. Efforts to evaluate their impact have been stymied by the difficulty of measuring a complex, multidimensional concept. The “Reach, Benefit, Empower, Transform” framework (Johnson et al. 2018) provides a potential lens for evaluating such programmes. In this framework, projects that reach women include them in programme activities and those that benefit them improve women’s well-being outcomes. Gender-transformative approaches emphasize interventions that aim to transform constraining gender norms, attitudes and behaviours towards those that support gender equality.

In 2012, the United Nations launched a Joint Programme called “Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment” (JP RWEE) in seven countries: Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda. The programme built on the expertise and comparative advantage of the four agencies that each took charge of a portion of the interventions in each country’s programme. As a result, it reached almost 80,000 women and over 400,000 members of their households. Women’s empowerment metrics were central to the programme’s monitoring and evaluation framework. This paper compares the empowerment impacts of the JP RWEE in **Ethiopia, Niger, Nepal and Kyrgyzstan** using data collected from impact evaluations in each country to assess the extent of empowerment and gender parity.

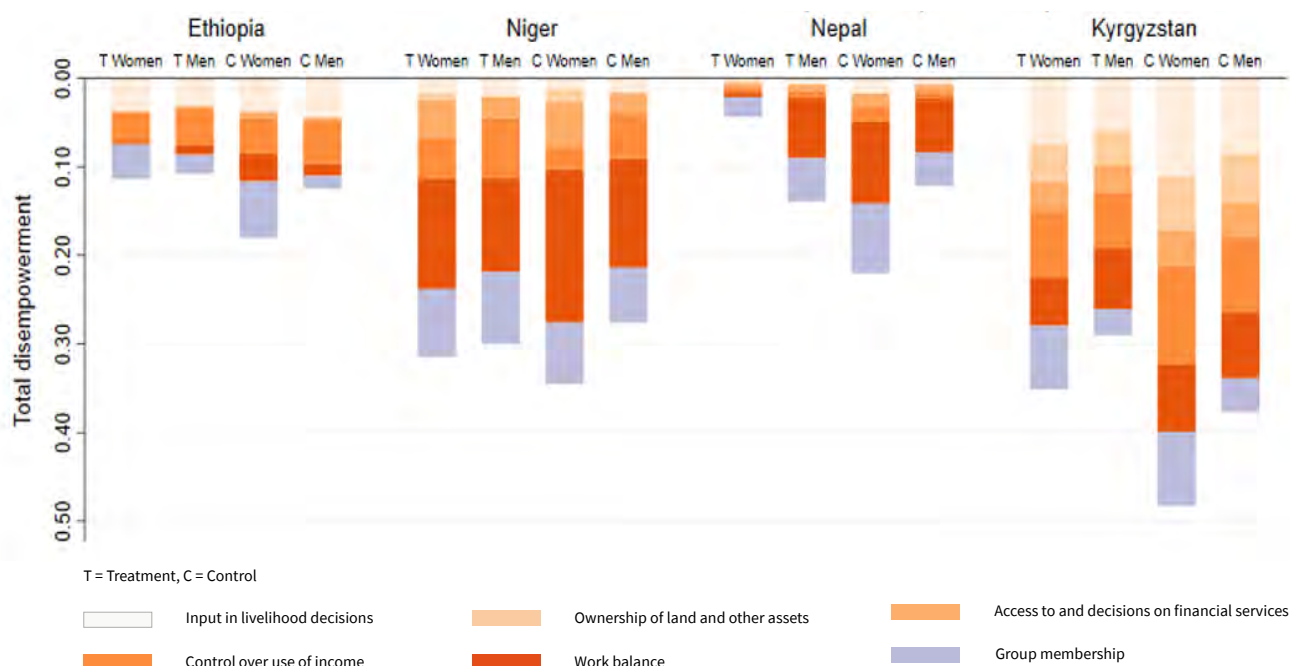
Highlights

- In general, the JP RWEE has had a positive impact on aggregate empowerment measures for programme participants.
- Women’s groups have played a crucial role in the programme’s success in every participating country. The group-based method was unquestionably helpful in empowering women, helping them build social capital, take part in public life, and take opportunities to voice their opinions.
- Women cannot change gender norms on their own. Effective and long-lasting programmes depend on including men in gender transformational approaches rather than concentrating solely on women.
- Workload is an important constraint and a barrier to empowerment throughout different countries. To reap the benefits of programme activities, women need to have the time to participate in development interventions.

Methodology

The four country studies used empowerment metrics based on the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Alkire et al. 2013). The WEAI is the weighted sum of two subindexes: the Five Domains of Empowerment (5DE) and the Gender Parity Index (GPI). 5DE assesses the degree to which women are empowered in five domains: (1) agricultural production decisions; (2) access to, and decision-making power over, productive resources; (3) control over use of income; (4) leadership roles within the community; and (5) time allocation. Surveys examined the proportional contributions of each indicator to disempowerment for those respondents identified as disempowered (Figure 1), for women and men, and separately by treatment and control group. The length of the bar indicates the extent of disempowerment, i.e. longer bars imply that the group is more disempowered.

Figure 1. Contributors to Disempowerment (all countries)



Key Findings

BUILDING ON THE SUCCESSES OF GROUP-BASED APPROACHES

In every participating country, women's groups have been core to the success of the programme, helping women build social capital, participate in public spaces, and provide opportunities to express their views. The group-based approach was a clear contributor to women's empowerment in Ethiopia, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan and Niger.

In **Niger**, the JP RWEE delivered a set of programme interventions through Dimitra Clubs, or community listener clubs. The clubs became a platform for community-level groups to promote dialogue and a

safe place for both men and women to talk about their challenges openly. Rural radio stations also disseminated information on themes that were identified and requested by members. In **Ethiopia**, the JP RWEE supported women-led savings and credit cooperatives (RUSACCOs) that offered financial products to women farmers. Membership required the women to save a fixed amount every month and participating in specific group activities. RUSACCOs provided low-interest loans through revolving funds along with training in financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills. For those beneficiaries who maintained access to credit, adequacy with respect to access to and decisions on credit significantly

improved. In **Kyrgyzstan**, the programme focused on mobilising and strengthening women's Self-Help Groups (SHG) by providing them with access to funds to be used as seed capital for small economic activities. It aimed to improve the production-related skills of rural women and their families in the agricultural sector. The programme also supported women's activism at the community level and public speaking skills for candidates to local councils. The Gender Action Learning System and Business Action Learning for Innovation (GALS/BALI) interventions, which were developed and implemented by IFAD, promoted behavioral change for gender justice, planning of livelihood strategies, the fair distribution of workload within households, the management of income-generating activities, and increased agricultural productivity. In **Nepal**, the programme supported the formation and strengthening of 122 women's groups. Additional training was introduced between 2019 and 2021, which targeted both men and women. GALS in Nepal encouraged family members to reflect on their aspirations, thinking, behavior and actions, so that family

members' shared goals led to changed behavior. Results showed that participation in GALS was associated with a higher probability of being empowered, as well as a higher empowerment score for both women and men.

INVOLVING MEN

Gender norms cannot be transformed by women alone. If men feel excluded from development programmes that target women, there is the potential for backlash, with implications for programme sustainability. In all countries except Nepal, men were empowered by the programme. However, discussions with programme staff in **Nepal** indicate that men willingly took on additional reproductive work and shared women's workload. The positive impact of GALS and GALS/BALI on men and women alike in **Kyrgyzstan** is consistent with emerging evidence from other countries (e.g., Bangladesh, see Quisumbing et al. 2021a, 2021b) that involving both men and women in gender transformative approaches, rather than focusing on women alone, may be key to effective and sustainable programmes.



Photo: UN Women Nepal /2016

In **Ethiopia**, men in households with access to credit made fewer income decisions and had input into fewer livelihood decisions. In **Niger**, men significantly increased the amount of work hours compared to the control group, with no significant impacts on the other continuous variables. In **Nepal**, men involved in the programme experienced significant impacts on the number of livelihood decisions made, asset ownership, the number of credit sources, and income decisions made, results that are very similar to those of women. In **Kyrgyzstan**, GALS/BALI significantly increased men's asset ownership, while GALS increased the number of groups to which men belong while decreasing their workload. Interestingly, the GALS approach marginally decreased men's control over use of income.

REMAINING MINDFUL OF WORKLOAD IMPLICATIONS

Many project designers assume that women have time to participate in development interventions. Yet, in all four

countries, more than any other factor, workload was an important constraint and a barrier to empowerment.

In **Ethiopia**, among women in the treatment and control groups, lack of work balance is the biggest contributor to disempowerment, with the extent of disempowerment greater among control women. In **Niger**, lack of ownership of land and other assets contributes most to the disempowerment of women, followed by work balance, and access to and decisions on credit/financial accounts. In **Nepal**, although lack of work balance is the largest contributor to treatment women's disempowerment, this is substantially smaller among beneficiary women compared to women in the control group. Finally, in **Kyrgyzstan**, lack of work balance, input in livelihood decisions, and ownership of land and other assets are the major contributors to disempowerment of women in the treatment group, whose disempowerment is less severe compared to those in the control group.

Conclusions

Despite the diversity in country and cultural contexts, common patterns of disempowerment exist across the study populations in Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Niger. In all countries, women are more disempowered than men, although large proportions of men are themselves disempowered. Excessive workload is the most common major contributor to disempowerment across all four countries, and so is lack of group membership. This suggests that the group-based approach of the JP RWEE is filling an important empowerment gap. However, the continued high contribution of inadequate work balance, indicative of excess workload, to disempowerment for both men and women alike suggests that this is a persistent constraint.

In general, the JP RWEE has had positive impacts on aggregate empowerment measures for programme participants (Niger, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan). In Ethiopia, the JP RWEE did not have a significant impact on any of the aggregate indicators for men and women who maintained access to credit. However, those who lost access to credit or left the credit groups suffered negative and significant impacts, which suggests that maintaining programme inputs, or ensuring the beneficiaries remain in it, is essential for the programme's success.

The JP RWEE and other development programmes should continue to monitor empowerment, ideally with more sensitive measures like pro-WEAI, which can capture additional dimensions of empowerment that are likely to be influenced by the JP RWEE such as self efficacy and intrinsic agency. Attention to empowerment measures should be part of regular M&E to flag potential problems as they arise, rather than after the programme has been operational for a longer period. Moving along the continuum from reach and benefit to empower and transform may increase the effectiveness of programmes that seek to empower not only rural women, but also their families and communities.



Photo: WFP Niger /2020
Cover photo: UN Women Nepal /2016
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**Joint Programme on
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