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JOINT PROGRAMME:

Accelerating Progress Towards
Rural Women's Economic Empowerment



POLICY BRIEF

**Addressing unpaid care
responsibilities of rural women
farmers in Madhesh Province of
Nepal**



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Objective

This policy brief examines the linkages between agrifood systems, climate change and the care economy. It is intended for stakeholders at all three levels of government, with particular emphasis on local governments. It describes how unpaid care responsibilities affect rural women and girls, their families and communities, and provincial and national economies. It highlights context-specific care workloads, particularly those socially recognized as women's and girls' responsibility, as well as the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and older people. The brief advocates for integrating care-responsive policies into local government priorities to reduce unpaid care responsibilities, improve livelihoods, and promote more inclusive, resilient, and equitable rural development.

62%

households
engaged in
agriculture

24%

of national GDP

70%

of agriculture
labour force are
women

Among Nepal's seven provinces, Madhesh Province occupies a strategic position as the country's agricultural heartland, contributing around 14% of the national GDP and an estimated 20-25% of the Agricultural Gross Domestic Product (AGDP).

Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries account for nearly 40% of the provincial GDP, making the sector critical for employment, food security, and inclusive economic growth. However, the sector is dominated by smallholder farmers cultivating less than one hectare of land, while a large proportion of producers are landless or land-dependent agricultural labourers. Despite women's substantial contribution to agriculture, their ownership and control over productive assets specially of land remain limited. Nationally, women own only 38% of registered land², while in Madhesh only 10% of women have land registered in their names³, significantly restricting their access to credit, agricultural services, technologies and decision-making opportunities.

Agriculture in Madhesh is undergoing rapid transformation due to large-scale male out-migration, climate change, and changing rural demographics. With nearly one-fifth of Nepal's labour migrants originating from Madhesh, women have increasingly become the principal managers of farms and household livelihoods, accelerating women's growing role in the agrifood system.

At the same time, the province is highly vulnerable to climate-induced risks, including droughts, floods, water scarcity and declining soil fertility, all of which increase production uncertainty. These challenges disproportionately affect smallholder farmers, particularly women, Dalits⁴, landless agricultural workers, older persons, and persons with disabilities who have limited access to productive resources, adaptive technologies, and financial services as well as care infrastructure and associated services.

Issues

Care responsibilities

Economic consequences

Policy responses

Impacts in empowerment
and livelihoods

Introduction

Agriculture remains the foundation of Nepal's rural economy, engaging nearly 62% of households and contributing about 24% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹ Women constitute approximately 70% of the agricultural labour force and play central roles in crop production, livestock management, seed preservation, food processing, household nutrition, and sustaining rural livelihoods.

¹ Nepal Rastra Bank Economic Research Department, Baluwatar, Kathmandu Current Macroeconomic and Financial Situation of Nepal (Based on Annual Data of 2021/22)

² Department of Land Management and A, 2024

³ National Statistics Office, 2023

⁴ A historically marginalized group in South Asia, particularly India and Nepal, who face overlapping forms of discrimination based on their caste and gender.



As agricultural responsibilities expand, women are also expected to manage household care responsibilities, further increasing their workload and limiting their socio-political space and economic opportunities.

A defining yet often overlooked feature of rural economies and agrifood systems is the enormous volume of unpaid care and domestic work performed by women and girls. Alongside agricultural production, women are primarily responsible for childcare, elder care, care for persons with disabilities, household management, food preparation, water and fuel collection, livestock care, communal and community level care, and the stewardship and care of natural resources and the environment, as well as other daily activities essential for household and community well-being.

The demographic shifts, migration and climate shocks also require diversified support systems and greater investment and gender-responsive norms and practices which are environmentally resilient and locally adaptable. This unpaid work remains largely invisible in economic accounting and public policy despite its critical contribution to agricultural productivity, socio-political transformation and rural resilience. These multiple and overlapping responsibilities can result in severe time poverty, limiting women's opportunities for education, skills development, mobility, entrepreneurship, leadership, participation in producer organizations, decent employment and local level agency building. Consequently, unpaid care work not only reinforces gender inequality but also constrains agricultural productivity, household livelihood security, and broader rural economic and socio-cultural transformation.

Although Nepal has established constitutional commitments to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion policies, social justice and social security as fundamental rights, and adopted gender-responsive budgeting, the different dimensions of unpaid care work has yet to be systematically integrated into agricultural and rural development policies. Investments in care-supportive infrastructure and services-including safe water, sanitation, clean energy, rural transport, childcare, healthcare, disability and elderly care services, and labour-saving agricultural technologies, remain inadequate despite of proven contribution to productivity and economic growth. Recognizing care as productive work rather than a private household responsibility is essential for building resilient agrifood systems, reducing poverty, and expanding women's access to markets, decent employment, equal pay for work of equal value and participation in local governance.

In Nepal, women perform 85% of unpaid care work, which is six times more than men. Of them, 40% of women express that care responsibilities limit opportunities to engage in productive sectors. Women also face unequal wages, poor working conditions and limited social protection, while their voices remain fragmented and underrepresented in policy decision-making. Addressing this requires a 5R policy approach:

R Recognize

R Reduce

R Redistribute unpaid care

R Reward paid care through decent work, fair wages and social protection

R Represent women and care workers in decision-making

Institutionalizing these priorities in policies, plans and budgets is critical to advance gender equality, decent work and women's economic empowerment.

By transforming unpaid care work from an invisible responsibilities into a shared family and societal responsibility, as well integrating it in the public services and the private sector support systems, Madhesh Province can unlock women's productive potential, enhance agricultural productivity with special focus on access to productive resources such as land, strengthen household resilience, and accelerate progress towards gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Target 5.4 on recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work.

Nexus between the agriculture sector, rural economies and unpaid care responsibilities

Care responsibilities and their unpaid nature have direct impact on agricultural productivity, women's participation in agricultural production, access to economic opportunities and leadership in rural settings. In Nepal, women's increasing role in agricultural production has not been accompanied by a corresponding redistribution of unpaid care responsibilities. Instead, women are often expected to compensate for the outmigration of male family members while continuing to perform most childcare, elder care and domestic work.

These multiple and overlapping responsibilities leave women with limited time and energy to invest in productive farming, value addition, market participation and leadership. Unless unpaid care work is recognized, reduced, redistributed with ample emphasis on rewards and recognition, the efforts to modernize agriculture and strengthen value chains for inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood system will continue to deliver suboptimal outcomes for women farmers.

The unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work limits women's right to mobility, participation and right to expression for demand of their entitlements and rights. In the context of continued outmigration of male family members, rural women are increasingly taking on additional agricultural and care responsibilities, while opportunities to share care work within families and communities remain limited. Additionally, public investment in care service-related infrastructure and services is still very limited. This has significant implications for women farmers' organizing, economic participation, agency, leadership and resilience.

The impacts of unpaid care and domestic work on rural women farmers are particularly evident in the following areas:

- **Limited awareness and ability to claim rights and entitlements.** Time constraints and limited mobility can reduce women's opportunities to access information, training and awareness-raising on their rights and entitlements as farmers. This, in turn, can limit their ability to collectively articulate and advance demands for access to productive resources, including land, machinery, technologies, quality seeds and public budgets.
- **Limited participation in agricultural value chains and income diversification.** Time and mobility constraints can limit women's participation beyond primary production and reduce their exposure to market information, consumer demand and higher-value opportunities across agricultural value chains with collective bargaining power. This can constrain opportunities for income diversification, such as *biruwa* (steamed and dried leafy vegetables) for distance market, and make it more difficult for women to compete on volume, quality and market responsiveness.
- **Constraints on leadership, agency and decision-making.** Limited access to agency building and leadership opportunities can constrain women's ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making within producer organizations, cooperatives and agricultural institutions as well as government mechanisms. For example, women might be represented in Custom Hiring Centre management committee but have limited opportunities to develop knowledge of machinery operations, cost-benefit analysis, equitable access mechanisms and the requirements for sustained operation and maintenance. This can limit their ability to influence decisions and advocate for women's priorities in institutional policies, plans and budgets.⁵

- **Unequal access to human capital and productive services.** Human capital is critical in enhancing productivity across agricultural value chains. Yet women, smallholder farmers, Dalits, youths and persons with disabilities may face unequal access to skills, finance, insurance, mechanization and other productive resources and services. These intersecting inequalities can further limit their ability to adopt new technologies, diversify livelihoods options and participate competitively in agricultural markets.

Taken together, these constraints can contribute to time poverty⁵, income poverty⁶, limited mobility, lowering women's bargaining power and reduced resilience to climate shocks, price fluctuations and food insecurity.

Among the initiatives undertaken by federal, provincial and local governments to advance inclusion, gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is one of the critical tools that carries the essence of women's empowerment and gender equality with proper allocation and utilization as an integral part of public finance management. In response to this context, the Government of Nepal has made Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) a priority in its policies and plans.

For example, in fiscal year 2026–27, 44% of the federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Environment's total allocated budget is classified as directly gender-responsive. Similarly, Madhesh Province allocated approximately NPR 41.14 billion for the same fiscal year, a portion of which is classified as directly gender-responsive, meaning that more than 50% of the benefits are expected to reach women. However, it remains unclear to what extent budget allocations specifically targeting care work translate into actual expenditure.

In a nutshell, care responsibilities have to be understood from the holistic perspectives of empowerment. It is therefore, important to reflect and analyse the context within the **5R Framework of the Care Economy: Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute unpaid care work and Reward and Represent paid care work**, which provides a practical approach for integrating care considerations into agricultural policies and rural development programmes. In the context of Madhesh Province, investing in child, older people, People with Disabilities related care services, labour-saving infrastructure and technologies (such as to enable access water and clean energy), mechanization, gender-responsive extension services, and women's leadership can simultaneously improve farm productivity, market participation, value-chain integration, and decision-making power.

⁵ According to ILO, time poverty denotes lack of sufficient hours for rest, leisure, or self-care due to excessive workloads combining formal market work and informal domestic care duties.

⁶ According to the World Bank group, income poverty is a condition where a person's daily income or consumption falls below a minimum financial threshold required to meet basic human needs.



In Nepal, women shoulder **85% of unpaid care work, six times more than men**, and 40% say care responsibilities limit their economic opportunities. Tackling the unequal care workload is therefore critical to improving women's access to decent work, social protection and a stronger voice in decision-making.

Findings and reflections from field interactions

The field-based interactions which were validated by the observations are classified under the 5R framework and listed below.

R Recognize care work

Findings from field observation and interactions

Women are central to sustaining households, agricultural production and community life, performing a wide range of unpaid care, household, agricultural and community responsibilities. Yet these contributions remain largely invisible and are rarely recognized or valued by families, communities or local governments. **Simple time-use surveys** could generate practical evidence on how women and men spend their time, but their potential is often underestimated, resulting in limited evidence to inform local planning, budgeting and service delivery. Consequently, **care-related indicators are largely absent from development programmes**, particularly in agricultural production and value-chain development, leaving the time, labour and care constraints faced by women insufficiently reflected in interventions designed by individuals, families, communities and local governments. Integrating care evidence and indicators into local development planning can help make women's contributions visible and strengthen gender-responsive agricultural and economic development.

Reflections based on field observation and interactions

Women make vital contributions to household and local economies through unpaid care, agriculture, household and community responsibilities, yet much of this work remains invisible and undervalued. **Recognizing and valuing women's unpaid and productive work should be an explicit priority for families, communities and local governments**, reflected in development planning, resource allocation and decision-making.

The lack of basic time-use evidence creates a gap between women's lived realities and local planning and budgeting. **Simple, locally generated time-use data can make workloads and care responsibilities visible, identify constraints and inform targeted, realistic and gender-responsive policies, services and investments.**

When care responsibilities are overlooked, agricultural and value-chain programmes can unintentionally increase women's workload and limit their participation and benefits. **Integrating care indicators into agricultural interventions can identify care-related barriers and guide measures that reduce time investments while strengthening women's productivity, well-being and economic empowerment.**



R Reduce the care work responsibilities

Findings from field observation and interactions

Examples from Madhesh Province demonstrate that **practical investments can significantly reduce women's time for care responsibilities**. Priorities include safe drinking water systems, clean energy and improved cookstoves, rural transportation, and labour-saving agricultural technologies that reduce the time and physical effort required for household and agricultural tasks. Women's demand for access to seed banks, gender-responsive agricultural technologies and services, tool banks and markets further highlights the importance of **care-responsive and labour-saving investments across agricultural production and value chains**. These investments are particularly important in households affected by male out-migration, where women often carry increased responsibilities for agricultural production, household management and caregiving. **Strengthening support for care-reducing infrastructure, services and technologies can therefore reduce women's time and workload while enabling greater productivity, participation and economic empowerment.**

Reflections based on field observation and interactions

Women's care work responsibility is closely linked to **gaps in basic infrastructure, services and appropriate technologies**. Investments in safe water, clean energy, rural transportation and labour-saving technologies can reduce the time and physical effort women spend on **domestic, environmental, care and agricultural tasks**, creating greater opportunities for productive work, income generation, education and leadership. **Access to appropriate agricultural services and technologies is itself a care-responsive investment**. Bringing inputs, tools, extension services and markets closer to where women live and work can substantially reduce unnecessary travel and physical labour. Agricultural investments should therefore be assessed not only for their productivity gains, but also for their potential to **reduce women's workload and unpaid care responsibility**. This is particularly important as male out-migration has increased women's roles in agricultural production and household management, often without a corresponding transformation in access to services, technologies and labour-saving solutions. **Agricultural support systems must therefore respond to women not only as farmers and economic actors, but also as primary managers of farm, household and care responsibilities.**

R Redistribute care responsibilities

Findings from field observation and interactions

Promoting shared responsibility for unpaid care work at the household level is a critical entry point for enabling women's greater participation in economic activities. This needs to be complemented by **accessible community childcare services, employer-supported childcare and cooperative care arrangements**, particularly to support women's participation in local haats, markets and other economic spaces. At the same time, women's **limited access to markets remains a major barrier to self-employment, entrepreneurship and business development**. Addressing both care constraints and market access is therefore essential to create an enabling environment for women to participate fully and benefit from economic opportunities.

Reflections based on field observation and interactions

Transforming the unequal distribution of unpaid care work requires action at **both household and institutional levels**. Greater participation of men and family members, combined with gender-responsive public services, childcare and infrastructure, is essential to reduce women's care work responsibility. Policies should promote **shared responsibility for care**, challenge gender stereotypes through behaviour-change initiatives, and use public-service incentives to sustain positive practices.

A **care-responsive market system** also requires coordinated investment by government, communities and the private sector in childcare, safe transport, market infrastructure and skills development. Women's limited market participation often reflects **time, care and mobility constraints rather than limited entrepreneurial capacity**. Addressing these structural barriers can enable women to participate more fully in markets, develop sustainable enterprises and increase their incomes.

R

Reward care workers

Findings from field observation and interactions

Investing in the care economy requires both adequate services and economic incentives for care workers. Establishing safe and affordable childcare facilities, particularly for women cooperative members engaged in commercial production and marketing, can enable women to participate more effectively in economic activities. At the same time, expanding childcare, eldercare and community-based care services can create **new and decent employment opportunities**, especially for young people. Targeted training and certification for youth in safe, quality and gender-responsive care services can help build a skilled care workforce while responding to the care needs of women, families and communities. These measures can position the care economy as both a **social investment and a source of employment and women's economic empowerment**.

Reflections based on field observation and interactions

Care work should be recognized and supported as **productive and valuable employment** through skills development, certification and appropriate economic incentives, enabling caregivers to earn a livelihood while allowing economically active mothers to participate in paid work. **Investment in the care economy, including targeted training for youth, can create decent employment opportunities** and expand quality services in childcare, eldercare, disability support and community-based care. Local governments should integrate **care workers' social protection and insurance** into policies, plans and programmes, backed by adequate budgets and human resources, to strengthen recognition, professional development and sustainable career pathways in the care sector.

R

Represent care workers

Findings from field observation and interactions

Women's participation and influence in **local and provincial planning and implementation** remain limited, constraining their ability to raise care concerns and advocate for appropriate investments and services. Care-related evidence and learning should therefore be integrated into **formal and informal education, training and extension systems**, including agribusiness and fisheries training programmes, with dedicated budget allocations.

At the community level, women, smallholders, Dalits, youth, persons with disabilities and their organizations need stronger capacity and collective platforms to articulate care needs and influence decisions. **Training on unpaid care work, leadership development and engagement of social and community leaders** can help ensure these priorities are reflected throughout the **seven-step local planning process** and that caregivers and excluded groups participate meaningfully in decision-making. Local governments should also strengthen understanding of diverse and time-specific care needs and establish **care workers' networks** to mobilize trained caregivers during trainings, long events, peak farming seasons and market activities. These measures can strengthen **inclusive, care-responsive planning and investment** while ensuring that care needs are recognized in local development processes.

Reflections based on field observation and interactions

Women's meaningful participation in planning and budgeting is essential to institutionalize care priorities in government policies, programmes and budgets. Strengthening linkages with educational institutions and training centres can further embed learning on unpaid care work and support sustained investment in care services. At the community level, **awareness, collective voice and leadership** need to be strengthened so that caregivers and excluded groups can articulate their needs, challenge gender-biased norms and influence the seven-step planning process.

Local governments should also strengthen mechanisms to **identify and respond to diverse care needs at different times**, including during trainings, long-day events, farming seasons and market activities. Care workers' networks and community leaders can help organize and consolidate these needs and facilitate timely services. Together, these measures can strengthen **inclusive participation, care-responsive planning and accountable public investment**.

Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations apply the 5R framework to strengthen the rural care economy and advance rural women's economic empowerment. For unpaid care, this means recognizing, reducing and redistributing women's unpaid care responsibilities. For paid care, it means rewarding care work through decent work, fair wages and social protection, and ensuring the representation of women and care workers in decision-making. Embedding these five priorities in policies, plans and budgets is critical to advancing gender equality, decent work and women's economic empowerment. See the specific recommendations below:

1. Recognize unpaid care work as a vital contribution to the rural economy and integrate it into local, provincial and federal development policies and plans.
2. Expand access to affordable childcare, eldercare, and disability care services in rural areas to reduce women's unpaid care responsibilities and increase their participation in paid employment and productive sectors.
3. Invest in rural infrastructure such as safe water supply, clean energy, transportation, healthcare, and digital connectivity to reduce the time women spend and the drudgery they experience related to domestic and care responsibilities.
4. Promote shared household responsibilities by encouraging greater participation of men and boys in unpaid care work through awareness campaigns, education and training curricula.
5. Create decent jobs in the care sector by training and employing local women as childcare workers, community health workers, caregivers, and early childhood educators with specific needs on a regular basis and seasonal needs.
6. Improve women's access to productive resources including land, credit, technology, machines, agricultural extension services, and markets to enable them to convert time saved from care work into productive economic activities.
7. Strengthen social protection systems, including maternity benefits, paid family leave, pensions, health insurance, and caregiver support, particularly for women in the informal rural economy.
8. Leverage digital technologies to improve access to education, tele-medicine, financial services, e-commerce, and flexible work opportunities.
9. Collect and use sex-disaggregated and time-use data to measure unpaid care work, monitor policy impacts, and design evidence-based interventions.
10. Foster multi-stakeholder partnerships among governments, local communities, cooperatives, civil society, development partners to build sustainable and inclusive rural care systems.
11. Encourage and mobilize the private sectors to create care jobs, care services, and care infrastructure that are aligned with the local government policies.
12. Develop an investment plan for affordable, accessible and quality care system.
13. Ensure fair wages, decent work and social protection integrated in local government mechanisms.
14. Ensure inclusive policies, mechanisms, terms of responsibilities to represent voices of rights holders (the demand side representatives) in local, provincial and federal government mechanisms for their meaningful participation.
15. Advocate for integrating care economy considerations into Gender Responsive Budgeting through budget tagging, expenditure tracking, and care-sensitive indicators.

Conclusion

In conclusion, recognizing, reducing, redistributing unpaid care work and rewarding and representing paid care work is fundamental in advancing gender equality, strengthening rural economies, and transforming agrifood systems. Recognizing its economic value and creating enabling conditions are essential for rural women farmers, particularly smallholder, landless, indigenous, Dalits, and other marginalized women, to participate fully in productive agriculture, entrepreneurship, leadership, value chains and local economic development.

This requires integrating the care economy into local development planning, gender-responsive budgeting, and agricultural and rural development policies, with dedicated investments in care-supportive infrastructure and services such as childcare, elderly care, care for people with disability, water and sanitation, clean energy, rural transport and community-based care. Such investments enable women farmers to devote more time and resources to productive farming, adopt improved and climate-responsive practices, access markets with organized voice for collective bargaining, finance and extension services, and participate in household, community, and both public and private sector-led institutional decision-making.

In Madhesh, investing in the care economy through responsive local governments can enhance women's economic participation, productivity, agency and collective voice, and leadership while strengthening household well-being, community resilience, food and nutrition security, and equitable gender relations. Ultimately, recognizing, investing in and rewarding unpaid care as well as ensuring meaningful representation through inclusive planning, adequate public financing and accountable local governance is a strategic pathway to reducing gender inequalities and poverty while fostering resilient, inclusive, climate-responsive and sustainable rural development and agrifood systems.

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