

# UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S TIME USE IN FARMING COMMUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM THE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE INDEX

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## Key messages

- Agricultural programs targeting women may increase women's work burdens and shift the distribution of work between productive and reproductive tasks.
- Complementary information on women's sense of control over their time highlights additional benefits of agricultural programs beyond changes in women's workloads.
- Despite program interventions, gender norms often persist, affecting how communities perceive work intensity and division of responsibilities between men and women.
- The relationship between women's time use and nutrition is complex and interacts with mediating factors, requiring a multifaceted approach to program design and evaluation.
- Evidence linking time use data to nonfarm work is lacking, highlighting the need to leverage WEAI time use data to fill this critical gap.

## Introduction

Globally, women often bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities, spending on average three times more time than men on these tasks (UN 2015). In rural communities of low- and middle-income countries, women's participation in agriculture can affect time spent on household management, on-farm and off-farm work, and caring for themselves and their children. As such, agricultural programs and interventions that engage women as beneficiaries may unintentionally add to women's time burdens. Assessing women's time use as an indicator of women's agency and well-being can help project implementers and researchers identify potential trade-offs between productive and reproductive tasks and

avoid reinforcing existing gender disparities.

This brief summarizes research findings related to women's time use in the context of women's empowerment in agriculture.

## Measuring women's time use in agriculture with the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index

Measurement of women's time use in agricultural households in low- and middle-income countries has improved since the development of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (Seymour et al. 2020). The WEAI is a comprehensive tool that assesses women's empowerment and gender disparities in the agriculture sector (Alkire et al. 2013) and has been applied in multiple regions through the Gender, Agriculture and Assets Project, Phase 2, and by other partners. The time use module is a key component of WEAI that can improve our understanding of women's time allocation by collecting information on women's and men's productive and reproductive activities over a 24-hour period using a storytelling approach. This time diary is suitable in agricultural settings as it enhances the recall accuracy of the tool as compared to other methods (for example, stylized questions) that may place a higher cognitive burden on respondents (Seymour et al. 2020). The WEAI's 24-hour time diary allows respondents to report on primary and secondary activities, capturing tasks that are performed simultaneously, which is common among women. To help contextualize time use data, newer versions of the WEAI tool include qualitative protocols. These protocols gather supporting information on seasonal variation in labor patterns and gender norms, for instance, which may interact with time allocation.

## Women's time use in agriculture from WEAI findings

### I. Program impacts on women's time in productive and reproductive activities

Impact evaluations of agriculture-nutrition programs show how the WEAI time use module can assess trade-offs between productive and reproductive activities. In a cluster-randomized controlled trial in rural Malawi, Margolies and colleagues (2023) sought to determine if a nutrition-sensitive agriculture program delivered through community-based preschools increased women's unpaid work burdens over a one-year period. The evaluation found that daily caregiving time increased by about 30 minutes, an increase of about 19 percent among the project's intervention group, although only during the lean season, highlighting the important role of seasonality in women's time. In another cluster-randomized controlled trial, Van den Bold and others (2020) examined the impact of Helen Keller International's two-year Enhanced Homestead Food Production program in Burkina Faso on women's and men's time use in agriculture. The program increased the amount of time women spent on household agricultural activities by four hours as well as the number of days spent on agricultural production. Shifts in the allocation of time between productive and reproductive tasks may still occur even if evaluations do not detect net changes in women's workload. An impact evaluation of a multi-country program, the UN Joint Program Accelerating Progress toward the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (UN JP RWEE) in Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Niger revealed that women who participated in program activities reduced their time allocated to childcare and reproductive tasks, even though their overall workload remained unchanged (Quisumbing et al. 2023).

The findings exemplify unforeseen outcomes of women's participation in projects, which might remain overlooked if not investigated through the lens of the WEAI's time use module.

### II. Women's perceptions of their time use

Qualitative research highlights some of the nuances associated with measuring women's time use. The number of hours women spend on activities may be viewed differently by women themselves. Women's perceptions of how much time they spend are influenced by the advantages they derive from tasks, along with their sense of having control over their time. For instance, qualitative interviews with participants of the Nutrition Embedding Evaluation Platform program in Malawi found that the time invested in activities was perceived positively by women due to the benefits gained in terms of agricultural yield and newly acquired skills (**Box 1**; Margolies et al. 2023). In Nepal, Doss and colleagues (2022) found, through qualitative work, that daughters-in-law felt overworked and had little to no control

over their time, despite quantitative findings showing that they and their mothers-in-law had similar workloads.

These results are motivating researchers to look beyond the mere number of hours spent on activities and to explore other innovations that can complement the WEAI, such as ongoing investigations by Eissler and colleagues (2021) focusing on women's agency in time use.

#### BOX 1

"Planting [took] three days. [Before], we could finish in one day. . . But we did not complain because they said we would harvest more in a small plot."

*Female Respondent from Malawi in Margolies et al. 2023*

### III. Social norms, gender roles, and household dynamics

Social norms continue to dictate gendered time allocation. Patterns of work assessed with the WEAI show that women spend more time on domestic tasks, as these are often defined as women's work in communities. For example, in qualitative interviews with women in four countries, men were often described as the providers and decision-makers of the household, while women were expected to take on the domestic and care responsibilities (**Box 2 & 3**). These norms may also shape how communities view the intensity of work. Although women engage in both household and agricultural tasks, men's labor is often perceived as more physically strenuous (Margolies et al. 2023). Prevailing norms might persist despite the presence of interventions. A synthesis of impact evaluations across four countries by Quisumbing and others (2023) found that intervention modalities targeting women and men resulted in shifts in household work dynamics. In three of the four countries, men increased their participation in domestic tasks but did not increase their involvement in childcare. While other household members such as adolescent girls may assist women in childcare, domestic, and agricultural tasks (Margolies et al. 2023), this does not challenge the gender norms that continue to define these tasks as women's responsibilities.

#### BOX 2

"Our culture says that a husband is the head and an elder of the household whether you are of the same age, and you need to let him decide what needs to be done. This is a family etiquette."

*Female Respondent from Malawi in Eissler et al. 2021*

**BOX 3**

“God did not create man for cooking. He created the woman for the kitchen. [Women do] housework because God has already given this strength to the woman, and to watch the children. It was God who made it so, and it was the woman who had to take care of the child.”

*Female Respondent from Benin in Eissler et al. 2021*

The findings from using the WEAI qualitative protocols provide important insights for policymakers and program implementers seeking to address some of the underlying norms that contribute to gendered disparities in time use.

**IV. Women’s time use and nutritional outcomes**

Women’s time use is a key pathway linking agriculture to nutrition (Johnston et al. 2018), but this relationship is complex and multifaceted (Figure 1). Although Van de Bold and colleagues (2020) showed that a program in Burkina Faso increased women’s time in production activities, the increased time did not adversely impact maternal and child nutritional outcomes. However, other data suggest potential trade-offs between women’s time in agriculture and nutrition. In a multi-country analysis using WEAI data from six countries in Asia and Africa, Quisumbing and others (2021) found that women’s workload was associated with lower body mass index (BMI), particularly among women in poor households. On the other hand, women’s

workload was associated with higher child dietary diversity, perhaps indicating some trade-offs that may occur within the same household. Using WEAI data from five countries, Komatsu and colleagues (2018) showed that women’s domestic work and cooking time were associated with greater dietary diversity for children. They also found that the relationship between women’s time allocation and nutritional outcomes may be mediated by other factors such as household socioeconomic status.

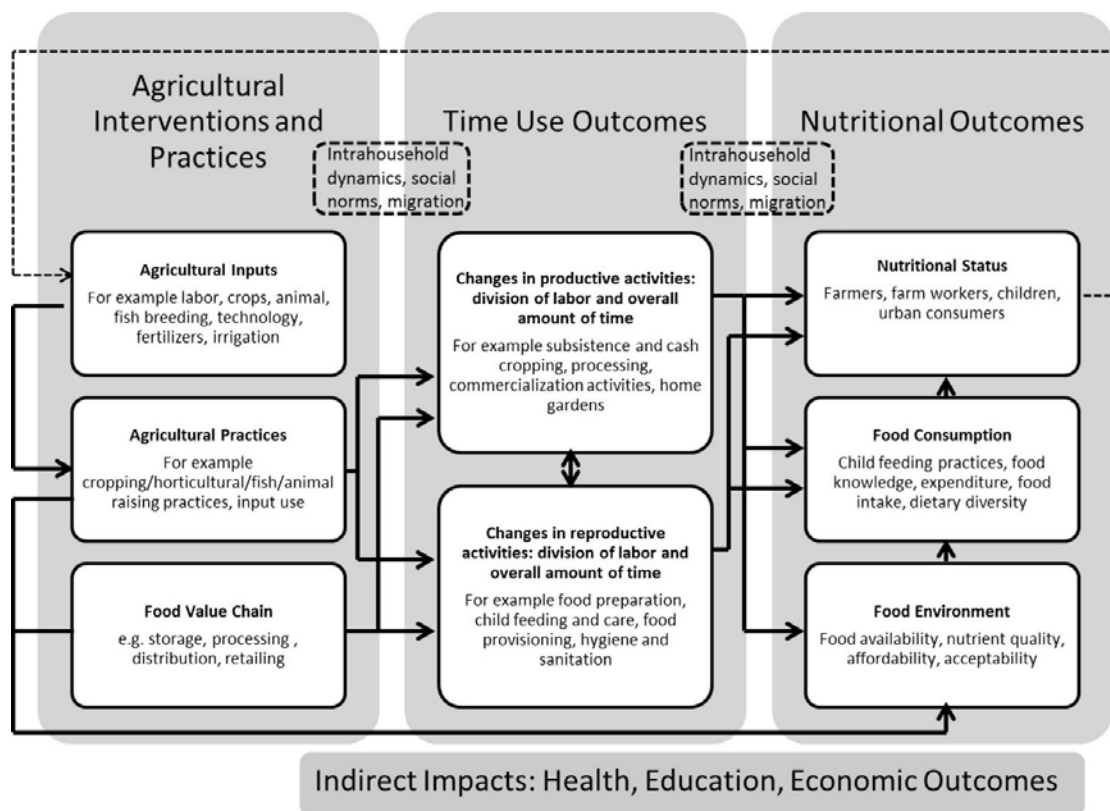
The evidence on the relationship between women’s time use and nutritional outcomes provides researchers with potential research questions to be explored in future impact evaluations.

**Conclusions**

The WEAI time use module, combined with qualitative methods, provides valuable insights into the complex factors influencing women’s time allocation in agricultural settings. However, limited evidence exists on how women’s time use affects off-farm work and broader economic participation. This brief highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing gender disparities in time use, considering the influence of social norms, women’s agency, and potential trade-offs with nutritional outcomes. To design effective interventions that empower women, mitigate unintended consequences, and enhance nutrition and well-being, policymakers and researchers must further explore these relationships. Expanding the use of WEAI time use data will be crucial in closing evidence gaps and informing gender-responsive policies that enhance economic opportunities and well-being for women in agriculture.

**Figure 1.** Women’s time use in the agriculture–nutrition linkage

Source: Johnston et al. 2018.



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