

Women's Empowerment and the Cold Hard Reality Called "Double Burden"

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When women are everywhere, a woman is always somewhere. They are in the farm ploughing the fields, up on the mountains picking up tea leaves and coffee beans. Women are in the market selling fruits and vegetables, and in the offices working 24-7 as lawyers, teachers, and engineers. Being the other half that makes up the world's population, various studies have documented women's involvement in various economic activities which contributes to women's labor force participation rate of almost 50% globally¹. The statistic arguably has not taken into account women's roles and contributions in the informal sector and invisible paid work which in the end, if calculated, may add up to a larger figure. The trend owes much to the shift in the gender role as a family's provider over the years that allows more and more women to join the workforce and generate income. Meanwhile, not much has been seen as to how women and men are distributing work around the house. The role of a family's caregiver and homemaker is still very much assigned to women². Women in many parts of the world are faced with difficult situations of having to take up a larger portion of responsibility of doing domestic chores and bringing money to the table. Experts later coined a phrase 'double burden' to describe women's state of having to juggle between work and home, a reality born out of an imbalanced division of labor between women and men.

Women's economic empowerment is largely a result of numerous efforts done by the international community to make sure women are capacitated and are able to assert meaningful participation in different spheres of life. Among which was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted in 1979 and ratified by 189 countries globally. CEDAW, among others, aims for women's equal access to and equal opportunities in political and public life. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action specifically called for gender mainstreaming in which, among others, women's involvement in development policies and programs was highlighted. In Indonesia, the call was translated further into a national commitment by adopting the Presidential Instruction No. 9/2000 on Gender Mainstreaming in National Development. Indonesia went further by releasing regulations on mandatory quota for women's participation in legislative election and village meetings. All are in the name of putting more women out there so that women would have more access to broader opportunities. The intention is to encourage women not only to be there, but also to have meaningful existence and good quality of life.

It is however important to also note that any effort of empowering women will instead drive women to the edge of the so-called hard reality of a double burden if it is not being complemented with men's goodwill to change and share. While women's empowerment aims primarily at providing women with the necessary access and opportunities to improve their participation and control over various resources, men's empowerment functions to find ways to make men aware of the gender inequalities that women have been experiencing and to engage men further to achieve a more equitable society that equally benefits both women and men. This approach needs to be put into consideration in any development program that strives for the betterment of livelihood and well-being of women and men. Aside from providing access to new knowledge, skills and technology to improve their livelihood, women and men need to also be provided with the knowledge on gender relations and the importance

¹ World Bank. (2017). Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+). Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>

² Bingham, J. (2016). 'New men' still not doing fair share on domestic front - but what chores do they do? Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/10/new-men-still-missing-on-the-domestic-front/>

of sharing to achieve common goals to create a more fair division of labor between women and men outside and inside the house.

Hivos is among the few of development entities that manage to combine the two aspects. In Indonesia, Hivos is the pioneer of community-based renewable energy initiative that has been providing solar- and biogas-powered electricity for so many impoverished communities³. In addition to the capacity building to operate and maintain the biogas digester, Hivos also conducted gender impact assessment by measuring how far women and men were involved in housework and farm work and accordingly, undertook gender trainings by using Gender Action Learning System (GALS) as the tools. Through GALS, women and men are asked to identify the types of labor each contributes in order to generate household income and to analyze whether there are gaps they can address collectively to obtain an optimum result. From there, they would plan their dream together and set strategies to get there. For many of them, the experience serves as an eye opener to gender-based inequalities that are often overlooked and accepted as norms. Imbalance in the division of work and decision making would soon be detected in which women are usually the ones who do everything around the house, yet are still required to spend more or less the same amount of time in the farm alongside their husbands. GALS also demonstrates how women are seldom consulted in primary decision makings and oftentimes do not have the final say on strategic matters around the house as well as in the communities.

In the project, GALS serves as an instrument to minimize the unwanted gender-related impact from the newly available energy source. The last thing the program wants is for women to have additional work when the new electricity kicks in. Seeing the harsh reality of the double burden that many women are experiencing, now that the more stable electricity is available, it is not all surprising if it in turn causes women to do more during the night either to prepare for food or to do additional work for money such as weaving cloth or plaited mats. It is hoped that, through the gender awareness trainings, men will get more involved in housework to equally share the workload, whereas women will get more involved in strategic decision making within the households and the communities. It is only when women and men have more equitable power relations with one another that they will be able to fully benefit from the electricity.

The phenomenon of the double burden does not happen only in the villages. The need to juggle between home and work is real and also experienced by many working mothers in urban cities. This phenomenon in Indonesia was documented in a study conducted by the Asia Foundation in 2013 on women's SMEs in Indonesia, which demonstrates women's disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities such as child care and household duties. Interestingly, while women in general do not view this as an unwanted burden, it still can limit their participation in business⁴. Similar results were documented by Regmi (2011) in Nepal in which women's burden has not decreased along with their involvement in various income generating activities, but instead has multiplied⁵. The same study also reveals that women's income is often under-estimated despite its significant contribution to the families' welfare. In the case of the double burden in urban communities, experts argue that the formulation of policies within the workplace that would allow working fathers to take paternity leave when their child is born or sick⁶, and to have flexible working hours and more opportunities to work from home without the risk of a penalty to enable them to be more

³ For list of Hivos projects in Indonesia, see <https://hivos.org/country/id/projects>

⁴ The Asia Foundation. (2013). Access to Trade and Growth of Women's SMEs in APEC Developing Countries: Evaluating the Business Environment in Indonesia.

⁵ Regmi, S. (2010). Women's Micro-business Creation for Women's Empowerment or Family's Welfare? Case of Nepalese Rural Women. Japan: Ochanomizu University.

⁶ Barker, G., & Pawlak, P. (2011). Men, Families, Gender Equality and Care Work in *Men in Families and Family Policy in a Changing World*, 9 – 40. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. New York: UN.

involved in house chores⁷ is considered particularly beneficial for balancing work and family time. These initiatives would, in turn, contribute to a changed perspective that childcare and housework are shared responsibilities in which men should also take their active roles.

Finally, it is unfortunate that even today the double burden is a reality that many women in many societies still continue to struggle with. Longtime opponents of gender equality would quickly claim that women brought this to themselves along with the empowerment and emancipation that women have long fought for and concurrently benefitted from. But truth be told, as evidenced by various scientific studies, it is obvious that women's double burden is the direct result of the fact that men cannot let go of their privileges nor are they willing to share some of the workload. The reality is, like it or not, inconvenient for both women and men as it prevents households and communities from realizing their full potential and achieving the maximum benefit of development. Engaging men in the road to women's empowerment and gender equality then becomes not only important, but also necessary. With more men on board, it is only a matter of time until the cold hard reality of women's double burden becomes a soon-to-be-forgotten memory.



"Women farmers work hard both in the farm and at home. Imbalance in the division of labor between women and men later transforms into the phenomenon of women's double burden."

⁷ Lyness, K. S., Gornick, J. C., Stone, P., & Grotto, A. R. (2012). It's all about control worker control over schedule and hours in cross-national context. *American Sociological Review*, 0003122412465331.