



Women's Economic Empowerment: an integrated approach



Women demanding their rights in Ghana.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

ActionAid's new strategy, *Action for Global Justice*, continues to place women living in poverty and exclusion as central to our work. One of the four programme priorities of the strategy is to **address the structural causes of violence against women and girls and secure women's economic justice.**

ActionAid's **Promoting Opportunities for Women's Empowerment and Rights (POWER)** project, a five year initiative supported by the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Netherlands, is working towards this priority and towards ActionAid's continued focus of prioritising women in all our work.

Working through local partners in Ghana, Rwanda, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the POWER project is focusing on a number of interlinked areas to achieve economic empowerment for women in rural communities. These areas are: **Unpaid Care Work; Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture; Access to Markets and Violence Against Women.**

The POWER project builds on ActionAid's extensive programme and policy experiences in these thematic areas. This newsletter is the first in a series aimed at sharing the work of the POWER project over its five year timeframe. How are the women in these communities better able to claim equal access to and control over their time and income? How can we work with others to change the social norms and other barriers that prevent this? How can we share this learning with others *and* ensure we are informed by others working in similar areas?

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Women in Rwanda determining the weight of the cow to know the dose of drugs it needs.
PHOTO: ANATOLE UWIRAGIYE, ACTIONAID RWANDA

Foreword from Korto



ActionAid International's Programme Manager for Women's Rights – **Korto Williams**, talks about the challenges that the POWER project will be addressing and how it will contribute to broader women's rights work.

The POWER programme will contribute to women's rights work within ActionAid and externally – both on a programming and policy level. The failure to recognize women's role and contribution to the family and in the public space has informed limited state investment in gender responsive public services in countries where ActionAid have programmes. This context is linked to our intersectional analysis of Unpaid Care Work, Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture and Violence Against Women and Girls - the focus of the POWER programme. Women are, in most of the countries where we work, held 100% accountable for care work within the family, thus resulting in the broader context of time poverty. The lack of investment in agricultural inputs, time to do productive work in the public sphere and cultural challenges affecting land ownership for women are key hindrances affecting not only access to economic rights and justice, but also women's rights generally within the continuum of violations, which include, the lack of access to education, FGM, forced marriage, rape, lack of participation in community and national governance processes and so forth.

Against this background, ActionAid approaches women's rights from an intersectional perspective, highlighting a significant recognition of multiple forms of oppression and discrimination and the fact that that we must shift from 'single issue' women's rights work. Feminist social transformation requires that we also address political and economic injustices – otherwise the gains that women's rights have made are always under threat, and progress for women remains uneven and unbalanced, particularly for the most disadvantaged women at the margins of capitalism.

The POWER programme aligns closely with other ActionAid work, for example work done on addressing structural causes of Violence Against Women and Girls and land rights, and we need to support learning exchanges. The Women's Rights International Platform is a critical space for learning as we have commitments to strategically identify and address the integrated issues of women's control over their bodies and women's economic justice and to do so in an evidence-based and impactful way; in our programmes and policy work, where relevant. This approach is central to ongoing development of case studies and research on Violence Against Women and Girls, and Women's Economic Empowerment. The POWER programme will enable us to have a reference to a new body of knowledge that reflects learnings and challenges across Africa and Asia in this sector.

Women demanding their rights

In all of the POWER project countries women live in patriarchal societies in which attitudes and practices often restrict their access to rights and prevent them from taking control of their lives.

For example in Pakistan, where patriarchal structures are generally stronger in the rural and tribal settings, 87% of rural women work in the informal agriculture sector and unpaid care economy. These women play a key role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food security, generating income and improving rural livelihoods and wellbeing. Yet, their participation in economic activities is severely limited and mobility is strictly restricted and controlled through the system of purdah (veil), sex segregation, and violence against them.

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“Women, who pay the highest price of unjust societies and patriarchal societies, must play a key role as change agents in order to shift unequal gender power relations”

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(ActionAid Strategy 2028: Action for Global Justice)

The POWER project is based on mobilising women’s groups in the four different countries. One of the outcomes of the project is that 21,000 rural women will be organised and are able to demand their rights as farmers and carers and will have greater influence in their households and communities.

The women come together regularly using an approach called ‘Reflection Action’ – an approach used by all ActionAid programmes. Within a Reflection-Action process, we are able to support people living in poverty to **analyse their situation, identify rights violations and work together and in solidarity with others to bring about change.** Group members gather together weekly to discuss and learn about different issues and identify specific challenges they are facing in their lives. The process looks at the connections between local, national and international levels. The women then look at ways to overcome the challenges through analysing the power practice.



A women's group in Bangladesh undertaking leadership training
PHOTO: RANAJIT KUMAR PAUL, SKS FOUNDATION, GAIBANDHA

Within the POWER project a total of 19,206 rural women over the four countries have been organised into groups so far and are actively participating in group meetings. In Ghana there are 200 rural women's groups, with 32 women in each group. Esi Atindaa is a member of one of these groups:

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“The group has really helped me to make my life better and now I am not afraid to ask for things that we need as women in the community, we have a strong voice” says Esi.

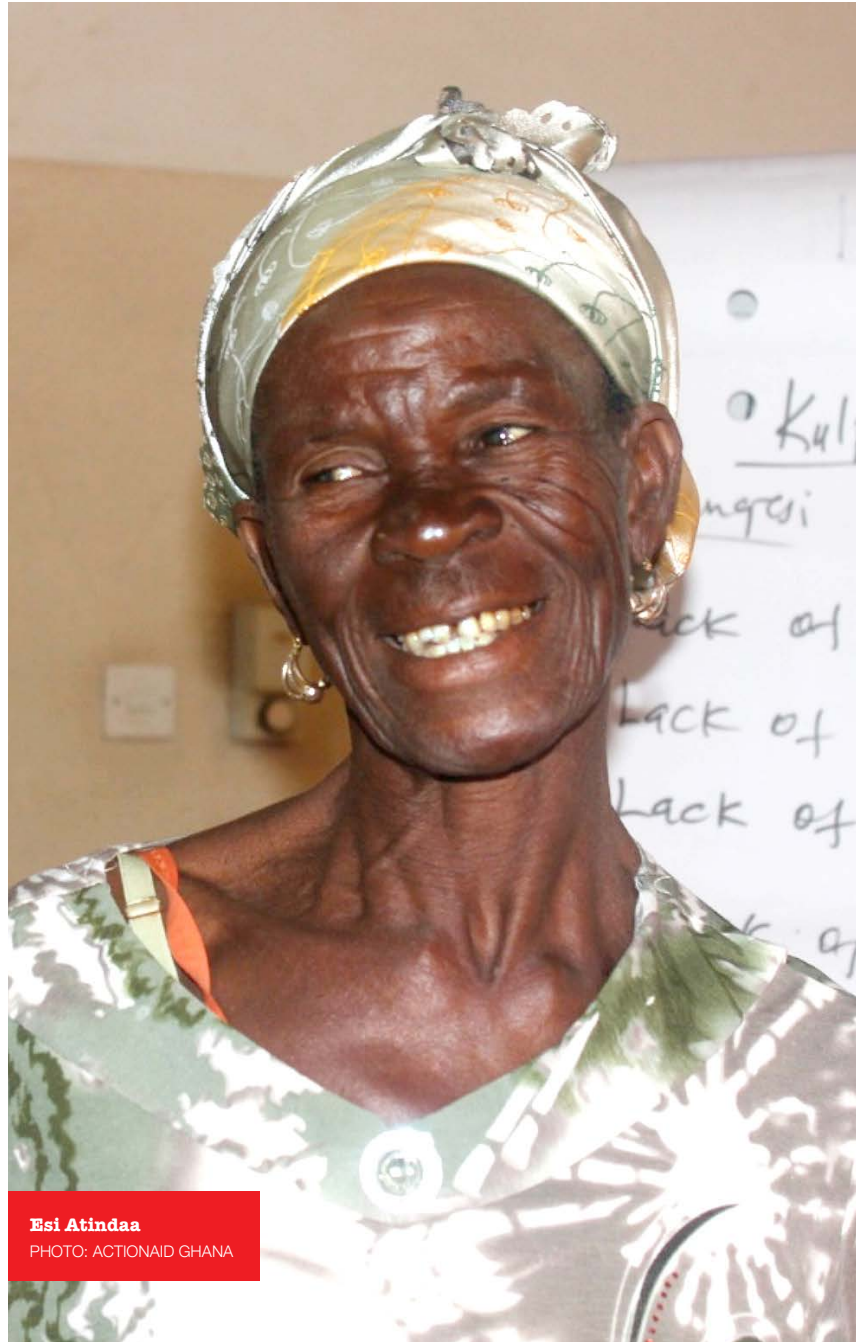
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Standing in her community in the Upper East region of Ghana, Esi waves her arms and a tiny smile spreads on her face as she says this.

However over a decade ago, she lost her husband and was far from happy or empowered. *“I have one daughter, and five boys. When my husband passed away, the land we farmed on and everything was taken away from me by his brother. He sold the vast land, and because our culture requires sons to own lands, and not daughters, he gave each son a plot of land but my sons migrated in search of jobs and I was left without anyone to support me, to farm or to take care of my younger children and myself.”*

Esi talks about the impact that the POWER project is now having on her life and the lives of other women in her community.

“After attending discussions at the group level on Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture practices, I went from harvesting two bags to triple that amount. The Women’s Association helped each other to farm, and so I can now plant and harvest millet, corn, and groundnut and get three bags each. I have bought and started rearing a small number of animals through the



Esi Atindaa
PHOTO: ACTIONAID GHANA

contributions from the group meeting members. I can sell some of these to pay my children’s school fees.”

As Chairlady of the Pwalugu Women’s Association, Esi Atindaa, has added her voice to those of other women in her community and the result has been overwhelming.

“All the heads of the various women’s groups held a meeting with ActionAid partner, Widows and Orphans Movement, to discuss the needs of our various communities: essential

infrastructure and amenities we will need. We went together as a unit to talk to the chief of our community to give us a land. He spoke to the land owners and now they have given us land for free to build a grain bank where we can store our harvest and sell it. We also met with the Member of Parliament of our constituency and he has helped us obtain building materials from a quarry located in the community. ActionAid gave us a rice processing centre, now we are building a grain bank ourselves”, she exclaimed proudly. “Our voices are being heard.”

Unpaid Care Work

Evidence suggests that women's economic empowerment cannot be achieved without addressing women's unequal workload, which reinforces gender inequalities. In all four of the POWER project countries, women's economic participation in paid work is low and time spent on Unpaid Care Work (UCW) is disproportionately high compared to men. Women living in rural areas, where basic infrastructure and services are lacking, are even more affected by the unequal burden of Unpaid Care Work. Girls and women spend long hours fetching water, collecting firewood, doing laundry, preparing food, caring for children and elderly, as well as carrying out agricultural duties.

In Pakistan, according to UN Women Report (2015), rural women do almost 5 hours of UCW per day compared to 0.5 hours for men.



Women in Pakistan involved in UCW.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID PAKISTAN

The POWER project aims to ensure that UCW is recognised and more highly valued within households, communities and government, more evenly distributed within households and that hours spent by women on UCW is reduced, resulting in more free time for women to engage in social, economic and political activities.

The time diary is a tool for women and men to see clearly how much time they are spending on different activities, especially Unpaid Care Work.



Dipti, Bangladesh
PHOTO: NOORE JANNAT PROMA,
ACTIONAID BANGLADESH

Across the POWER project so far 13,000 women and 2,000 men have completed a time diary at least once as part of sensitisation around Unpaid Care Work.

Dipti Rani (28) from Bangladesh is one of the many women who have participated in the time diary process. She talks of her experience of community sensitization to the issues around Unpaid Care Work.

“I hope, through the POWER project activities, participating in meetings, talking with different people, joining the trainings I could know and learn more. If I face any problem I could say others about it....Life is getting tough. If I stay unaware of things, I may stay behind and my family will suffer”, says Dipti.

Dipti lives in the Gaibandha district in Bangladesh. For the first time in her life she got engaged with a Women's Group through the POWER project. She was then selected as the president of the group.

Dipti's initial reason for getting involved with the Women's Group was to learn from others in regard to her own challenges. Though being part of the project she learnt about issues that affect women in her community such as Unpaid Care Work (UCW), Human Rights, Women Rights and Violence against Women. Now she understands that teasing, beating, abusing emotionally or physically should all be considered as violence and must be addressed. She also became aware about the potentially harmful effects of practices such as early marriage and dowry payment.

Dipti shared what she had learned about Unpaid Care Work with her family and husband. She has 3 children who are all studying. Her husband is a small business man with

his own tea stall business. He was convinced by the arguments around the burden of unequal Unpaid Care Work and started helping with household chores. He is very supportive and now participates in Spouse Meetings with other people in the community. Since being involved with the Women's Group, with 25 members from her neighborhood, Dipti feels courage. They are participating in weekly 'Reflection-Action' meetings together and know that working together, becoming united, they can bring positive change for their development. Now they feel they would be able to place any demand before the local authority or relevant person to secure their rights.

Dipti also received trainings on Organizational Management and Women's Leadership on behalf of her group. Slowly she is becoming much

more confident. In fact she is eager to be educated and support more actively to the group. **".... Now I do not hesitate to talk with people, which was unthinkable for me four months back"**



Across the POWER project so far 13,000 women and 2,000 men have completed a time diary at least once as part of sensitisation around Unpaid Care Work. PHOTO: ACTIONAID GHANA

606 groups have been trained so far in all the POWER countries on participatory budget monitoring and tracking to address issues around Unpaid Care Work with local and national governments and decision makers.

ActionAid recently organized an international webinar to consider links between Unpaid Care Work and Violence Against Women: what the links and challenges are and how we can influence policy. Click here to read more about this intersection of thematic areas (AAI website <http://www.actionaid.org/2017/02/actionaid-leads-online-debate-unpaid-care-work-and-links-violence-against-women>).

Climate Resistant Sustainable Agriculture

Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture (CRSA) is an initiative that ActionAid and partners have been developing, based on the science and practice of agroecology and the recognition of people's rights to food. It represents an effort to incorporate in our work the new challenges posed by climate change and its impact on poor people's lives.

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"We will promote agro-ecology as CRSA is a means of strengthening food systems and the capacity of smallholder farmers to adapt to climate change"

(ActionAid Strategy 2028: Action for Global Justice)

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It is based on the design and implementation of site-specific adaptation strategies aimed at reducing vulnerabilities and increasing the resilience of smallholder production systems.

Pakistan, one of the POWER countries, ranks high for climate vulnerability. Climate changes create additional challenges for farming activities and so, given the significance of agricultural production in Pakistan, it is vital that new environmentally sustainable techniques like CRSA approach are tested and shared. This ensures that women farmers are better prepared for the impacts of climate change and that the activities will not deplete existing natural resources.

Many women smallholder farmers in rural areas depend on agriculture but can only practice it on a small scale

for their own consumption or have challenges accessing markets if they do produce more. Many of these rural women also experience the burden of unequal Unpaid Care Work, which limits them from having time to engage in more productive work.

Within the POWER project, CRSA is used as a tool to save time, to reduce Unpaid Care Work and to increase productivity. One of the indicators of the project is that 50% of women will report improved yields as a result of using CRSA techniques and agricultural inputs by the end of the project.

In Rwanda, the POWER project has so far provided a total of 292 cows to help women smallholder farmers with access to manure for soil fertility and milk to fight malnutrition for the whole family.

Rosalie, one of the women in Rwanda given a cow, explained how the cow will help her overcome many of her problems.

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“Getting fertilizers for my garden has been a big challenge. It required me to look for money to buy the manure at times, but now that I have my own cow, finding fertilisers is not a problem. My crops will now grow perfectly well.”

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Rosalie and her cow, Rwanda.
PHOTO: ANATOLE UWIRAGIYE, ACTIONAID RWANDA

The women who received cows share the manure with the group members who don't have cows. This activity was also challenging some cultural norms that only men are eligible to own a cow.

As well as learning to look after the cows, the women learn about a variety of other CRSA methods. For example composting, rain water harvesting, community seed banks, minimizing use of chemicals, and planting specific trees for animal fodder and soil erosion

control and soil fertility improvement. These will all support the women to better face the impacts of climate change, to improve the sustainability of their livelihoods and to save time.

In Bangladesh 200 women's groups received training on vegetable gardening, in light of CRSA. Here is Rashida showing the bottle gourd that she produced in her homestead garden after she received training.

One challenge regarding CRSA is convincing policy and decision makers of the benefits of this approach. Part of the reason for this is because those who will benefit, such as women in rural communities, do not have as strong a voice or platform as the more powerful big companies. The POWER project aims to play a role in documenting the alternatives - showing that CRSA can work - to show governments and other decision makers the benefits.



Rashida and her bottle gourd, Bangladesh.
PHOTO: NOORE JANNAT PROMA, ACTIONAID BANGLADESH

For further information, visit:
actionaid.org/Pakistan actionaid.org/Ghana actionaid.org/Bangladesh
actionaid.org/Rwanda **or contact** Jane.Lennon@actionaid.org
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ActionAid>

Next steps... We will soon be getting the results from the **extensive baseline survey** being carried out by an external consultant in the communities where the POWER project is being implemented. This will provide us with extensive information on the whole range of areas that POWER is focusing on. The information is being collected through a mix of household surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and policy and document analysis. These results will provide a baseline for the project, will inform the ongoing POWER activities and will also provide broader learning and evidence for ActionAid as a whole. More on this in the next newsletter.