



# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND CARE (WE-CARE)

## An overview

**WE-CARE**  
WOMEN'S  
ECONOMIC  
EMPOWERMENT  
AND CARE



**OXFAM**

## INTRODUCTION TO WE-CARE

For families in many parts of the world, household tasks such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, collecting water and caring for dependants take a huge amount of time and energy. Limited access to time-saving equipment, public infrastructure and services exacerbates this situation. For women, domestic and care work is often heavy, inefficient and unequally distributed, with women around the world spending two to ten times more hours than men on care.<sup>1</sup> This limits women's choices and undermines efforts to achieve gender equality and overcome poverty. Oxfam's WE-Care initiative aims to change this.

### Why Oxfam cares about care

Care has long been considered the responsibility of women. As a result, providing care falls disproportionately on their shoulders – limiting women's time to learn, to earn or to take part in political and social activities of their choice. This is an issue in every country; however, the effects of unequal care are more extreme in poor communities. Tasks such as laundry and cooking can take most of the day when there is limited access to water and fuel, let alone washing machines or stoves. Drivers of poverty, such as lack of services and exposure to disasters, increase the demand for care work – preventing women's empowerment and trapping families in poverty.

### To achieve women's empowerment, we have to address care

In recent years, heavy and unequal unpaid care has been increasingly recognized as a barrier to women's political, economic and social empowerment.<sup>2</sup> There is now significant evidence that investments in public services and time-saving equipment by governments, civil society and employers reduce the hours required for domestic work – improving people's wellbeing, driving economic development and reducing inequality.

### And we have to change social norms

For lasting change, there also needs to be a shift in social norms so that care work isn't seen as 'women's work' but as everyone's responsibility. This leads to a redistribution of care tasks from women and girls to men and boys, and creates new, positive norms that encourage men to care for their families and children. Without this focus, reducing hours spent on housework may result in women simply spending more hours on different types of unpaid care work, without changing their overall workloads. We also need to change norms which undervalue care, so that care work is understood as being critical to social and economic development. Attitudes need to change at every level – from individual to community to government – to ensure that care work is recognized, equally distributed, and invested in.

### WE-CARE: A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

WE-Care (Women's Economic Empowerment and Care) is an Oxfam initiative to make care work more visible as a key issue in achieving gender equality and overcoming poverty; and to ensure that communities, governments, development practitioners and the private sector work together to reduce and redistribute care work. It was launched in 2014 in five countries<sup>3</sup> within wider Oxfam programmes on livelihoods, health rights and women's leadership.

WE-Care uses an approach of involving stakeholders – community groups, governments, media, employers, religious leaders and others – to work together for change at many levels. We support families to understand carers' vital contribution to households and the benefits of sharing care responsibilities more equitably. We support Oxfam staff, our NGO partners and allies to learn from research and programme experience to improve how we contribute to women's empowerment and inclusive economic development. We support governments to recognize the value of care work to the economy and social wellbeing, and to provide better services and investments in care. Finally, we support the private sector to contribute to equitable, quality care provision in society through employment policies, public communications and investments in time-saving products and services.

#### WE-CARE OBJECTIVES: THE 4 Rs<sup>4</sup>

- Increase the **recognition** of care so care is considered valuable work, and women's and men's care roles are more visible.
- **Reduce** the drudgery of care work so poor families spend fewer hours on care tasks, incidences of stress and overwork are reduced, and so women and men can choose to spend more time on other activities.
- **Redistribute** responsibility for care more equitably between women and men, and between households and the state/employers.
- Facilitate the **representation** of carers in decision making and policy making, to raise care on the agenda.



Photo: Cineskrúpulos/Oxfam

## CASE STUDY A JOINED-UP APPROACH

Vidalina’s experience encapsulates WE-Care’s joined-up approach – gathering evidence, introducing time- and labour-saving equipment, changing attitudes on gender roles, and advocating for policy changes to support and invest in care.

Vidalina (pictured above) lives in the Boyaca region of Colombia. In 2015, she took part in the Rapid Care Analysis and discovered that she was spending eight hours a day doing unpaid care work in addition to seven hours’ work in a plant nursery. Much of her time was spent cooking on an inefficient and smoky coal stove. After assessing needs and discussing options with women and their families, Oxfam and local partners<sup>5</sup> ran a pilot project, training all family members – not just women – in how to use gas stoves. This has dramatically reduced the time people spend on cooking, and men are ‘modelling’ their new cooking skills to other men in the community.

The survey also started a conversation in families and communities about who does what tasks and why – changing long-held attitudes on gender roles. Vidalina says: “Now everyone [in the household] participates. Before, my husband would never cook – but with the new stove it’s easy and he makes dinner now. Before, he questioned why I was involved in the farmers’ markets. Now he understands that the benefits are not just for me but for the whole family.”

Oxfam also supported a national association of rural women to contribute their demands for the government’s rural development plan, including greater recognition of and investment in care. Vidalina and others took part in forums with national-level policy makers to share their personal experience of the work overload that rural women deal with in their daily lives – and to call for change.

## IN FOCUS: THE WE-CARE APPROACH

### 1. Collecting evidence on care work

Currently, unpaid care work is rarely researched, leaving much of women’s work uncounted and unrecognised. Women’s groups and development practitioners require practical, low-cost tools and guidance about how to assess and promote changes in care. WE-Care has developed innovative methodologies to improve context-specific understanding of care provision, informing our community interventions and national-level advocacy:

- The Rapid Care Analysis involves women and men in assessing how care is provided in their communities, identifying what is difficult, how care work impacts on their lives and opportunities – and documenting the community’s proposed solutions.
- The Household Care Survey gathers evidence on time use, on social norms, and on access to equipment, infrastructure and care services, mapping pathways for more equitable care provision in households and communities (see p.5).

## 2. Supporting communities to address heavy and unequal care work

Building on evidence from the Rapid Care Analysis and Household Care Survey, and the community's own proposals, WE-Care works with partners and others to implement practical solutions and advocacy strategies.

For example:

- We're working with communities and local governments in Zimbabwe and the Philippines to improve water points, introduce communal laundry areas and pilot affordable, effective washing devices that make washing clothes simpler and less time-consuming (see right).
- In project areas in Colombia, fuel-efficient stoves have replaced dirty and inefficient coal stoves – dramatically cutting the time needed for cooking. Men and boys have joined cooking classes, enjoying sharing in preparing meals (see p.3).
- In communities in Uganda and Zimbabwe, about 50% of households in the project area are now using bicycles and wheelbarrows to fetch water and firewood. In the past, men used bikes only for personal errands while women walked long distances to collect water and other necessities.

## 3. Changing perceptions on care and gender roles

WE-Care works to change perceptions about care work – so that instead of being seen as unskilled 'helping out' in households, care is understood as vital, skilled work which delivers a major contribution to local and national economies. And we challenge gender roles and shift care responsibilities between women and men – so that care is not seen as women's business, but as everyone's business. For example:

- Mass awareness-raising campaigns are reaching people at community and national levels. In Uganda, a radio show on care hours worked by women and men reached six million people. We aim to reach 19 million people worldwide through our 'Lightening the Load for Women' initiative with a global multinational company (see right).
- In project communities, 'change agents' and role-model families are raising awareness of the benefits of women and men sharing care tasks. Dialogue meetings supported by local government and cultural leaders are changing perceptions – promoting care work as skilled, and crucial to both family wellbeing and economic development.
- In Zimbabwe, the programme is undertaking research into gender-based violence related to care work and will use the findings to promote change, with the support of high-profile public figures.

## 4. Advocating for change

WE-Care evidence is being used to influence local, national and global level policy and practice – highlighting both the current patterns of heavy and unequal care, as well as what works to make positive change. For example:

- In Uganda, we're working with academic partners and women's organisations<sup>6</sup> to produce nationally

representative data on care. We're discussing the findings with the Uganda Bureau of Statistics and building evidence to support calls for higher budget allocations to care-related services and infrastructure.

- In Ethiopia, we're engaging with key allies such as the national Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations and the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs to advocate for better care infrastructure and services.

*"The WE-Care training made me understand that if we work together as a team, we can improve the welfare of our family."*

Alex Otema, Palabek Ogili sub-county, Uganda

## CASE STUDY WORKING WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

WE-Care believes that the private sector should be a significant ally in efforts towards women's economic empowerment. Companies' investments, employment policies and public communications can promote shared care responsibilities between women and men; the sector also has a crucial role in providing products and services to reduce time required for domestic work. Companies can also advocate with governments for better water and energy infrastructure and public services to reduce long hours of care.

In 2016, Oxfam and Unilever launched the first global partnership of its kind to advocate for recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work. The 'Lightening the Load for Women' initiative is implemented in the Visayas and Mindanao in the Philippines and three districts<sup>7</sup> in eastern Zimbabwe. It aims to support positive changes for more than 380,000 people, around 60 percent of whom will be women and girls. This will be achieved by improving water infrastructure; finding practical ways to reduce the time it takes to do household tasks; and promoting positive norms to encourage more equal sharing of care work.

A key innovation of the programme will be to prototype creative, low-tech, low-cost laundry solutions and combine this with activities to shift social norms, both of which can be replicated on a mass scale. Working with the private sector, governments, media, research bodies, NGOs and financial institutions, the communications and learning from the project aim to reach an estimated 19 million people worldwide.

*"Oxfam's expertise in water and women's rights means we are in a strong position to pioneer a new and effective approach. We have already seen strong results from our pilot projects, with men sharing care work with women, and investments from local governments. Working with Unilever will help us achieve far greater scale and impact."*

Alex Lankester, Head of Corporate Partnerships at Oxfam

**CASE STUDY**  
**CHANGING PERCEPTIONS IN UGANDA**

**FLORENCE ALUR**

“For the bigger part of our 12-year marriage, I was the quintessential traditional Acholi wife who spent most of her day performing unpaid care work around the house and in the garden. David, on the other hand, liked to hang out with his friends at the bar and he would beat me up for the slightest mistake.

“The [WE-Care] training inspired David to join in the house and farm work. When both of us are working, we complete the tasks much faster, creating free time for income-generating activities. The benefits materialised surprisingly quickly; we have increased our productivity and raised enough money to invest in an ox, so we can cultivate larger areas of land. We’ve also been able to buy a motorbike to make it easier to get around.

“Although we experienced resentment from many people in the community, the tangible results of sharing responsibilities and planning together motivate us to work harder... lately, I have noticed that a couple of our neighbours have started to copy what we do because they want to make the same progress as we have.”

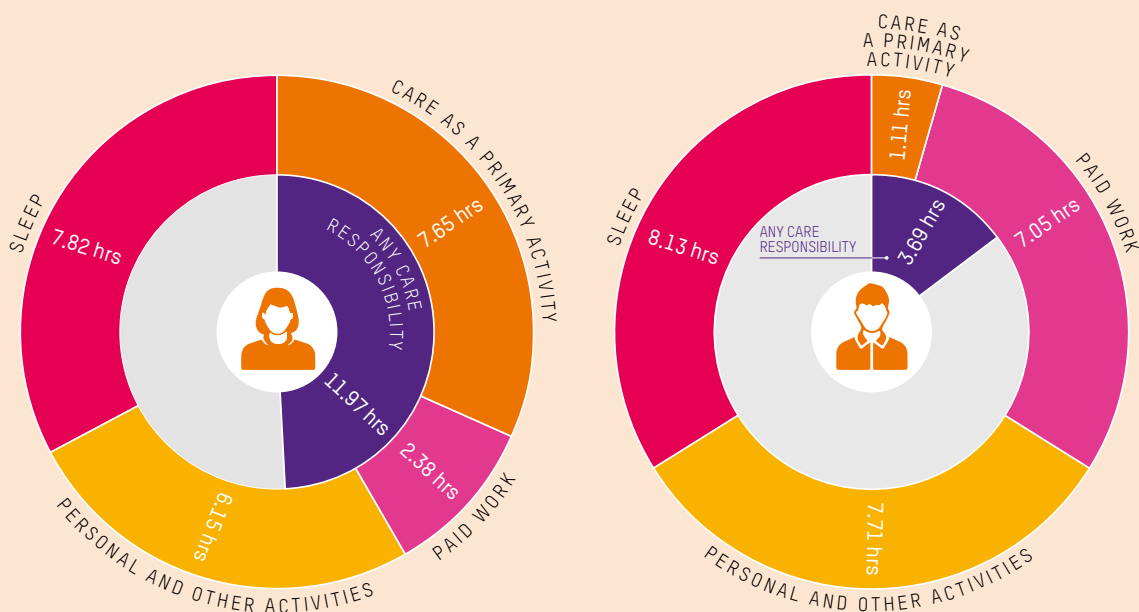


**WE-CARE FINDINGS ON WOMEN’S UNPAID CARE WORK**

In 2015, Oxfam conducted Household Care Surveys to gather evidence in selected rural communities in Colombia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The combined findings showed that women spend more hours than men on total work – paid and unpaid – while spending less time on leisure and personal care. The findings from the project area in Lanao del Sur Province in the Philippines are shown below.

The study demonstrated the importance of gathering evidence on hours spent on supervision – the long hours when women are responsible for looking after children or dependent adults help explain why women carers struggle to attend training, travel to markets or take on paid work (see ‘any care responsibility’ below).

**FINDINGS FROM THE PROJECT AREA IN LANA DEL SUR PROVINCE, THE PHILIPPINES**



Average hours spent on different activities by surveyed participants in the previous 24 hours

## WE-CARE KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- WE-Care's Rapid Care Analysis and Household Care Survey have been used in over 20 countries. They are widely recognized by development actors, companies and donors as practical tools for building evidence on unpaid care to influence development policy and practice. Online guidelines and training webinars increase access for practitioners worldwide.
- WE-Care teams have carried out effective advocacy and influencing using research findings, making presentations at more than 20 national advocacy and media events in six countries, and at eight international forums including events run by DFID, UN Women, and the International Association for Feminist Economics.
- Local organizations have used evidence from WE-Care research to engage with stakeholders, to win investments from government authorities and private companies, and to implement innovative strategies to shift social norms about care.

## LOOKING FORWARD

WE-Care is now stepping up advocacy and influencing at the national level to raise the profile of unpaid care work in policy debates, and press for increased investments in care services and infrastructure. The programme has already contributed to evidence that reducing and redistributing care work is fundamental to eradicating poverty and promoting gender equality. WE-Care aims to work with other NGOs, companies and government allies to expand the debate on unpaid care so that it becomes central to national and international development agendas, leading to a major shift in policy and practice, attitudes and behaviour.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid\\_care\\_work.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> The inclusion of women's unpaid care work in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 and in the report of the UN High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment are evidence of the growing traction of care work on the global development agenda.
- <sup>3</sup> Colombia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Uganda and Zimbabwe.
- <sup>4</sup> Based on the 'Triple R' concept initiated by economist Diane Elson in: D. Elson (2008) *The Three R's of Unpaid Work: Recognition, Reduction and Redistribution, paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Unpaid Work, Economic Development and Human Well-Being*, UNDP, New York; and expanded on by Oxfam, ActionAid and IDS to include the fourth 'R', representation.
- <sup>5</sup> Participating communities are involved with Oxfam's Mercados Campesinos (Farmers' Markets) initiative, while many women are members of Oxfam's partners the ANMUCIC (National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women) and the San Isidro Foundation.
- <sup>6</sup> The Economic Policy and Research Centre, Makerere University's School of Gender and the Uganda Women's Network.
- <sup>7</sup> Zvishawane, Umzingwarne and Bubi.

## FIND OUT MORE AND GET INVOLVED

For more information and to download resources, go to: [www.oxfam.org.uk/care](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/care)  
Or contact Thalia Kidder: [tkidder@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:tkidder@oxfam.org.uk)

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