

DESIGNING EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES FOR WOMEN FARMERS LIVING WITH TIME POVERTY



In this blog, Ranjitha Puskur and Mou Rani Sarker highlight the persistent and often invisible time poverty of rural women and how it affects their participation in extension activities. They highlight the implications of this for EAS provision and recommend necessary actions to mitigate the challenge and ensure women also benefit from the services.

CONTEXT

Across South Asia, women farmers shoulder a double workday: unpaid domestic and care work stacked on top of farm and livestock tasks. [India's official Time Use data](#) show women spent almost 5.25 hours per day on unpaid domestic work in 2019 and over 5.1 hours per day in 2024—even as participation in paid activities crept up. Men's comparable unpaid load is a fraction of this. Our [own research in Bangladesh shows](#) that women spent 5.59 hours per day in unpaid care work while men spent only 2.70 hours. The estimated [monetary value](#) of women's unpaid care and domestic work amounts to BDT 5,307 billion, which is equivalent to 14.8% of the national GDP of Bangladesh. In short, the time "tax" on women is persistent and significant.



WHY TIME POVERTY MATTERS FOR EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES?

This compresses women's available hours for training, field days, market visits, and helpline calls—precisely the channels through which agricultural knowledge typically flows. Time poverty is not only about hours; it interacts with mobility restrictions, safety concerns, and social norms.

Beyond simple time scarcity, women experience [multidimensional time poverty](#), where constraints arise not only from hours worked but from limited autonomy over how that time is allocated. Women's committed time to care and domestic responsibilities leaves little discretionary time for learning or rest. This loss of time agency worsens [gender gaps in technology adoption, market participation, and well-being](#).

Studies across [Bangladesh](#), [India](#), [Nepal](#), [Sri Lanka](#) and [Pakistan](#) consistently show that women's access to formal extension is lower than men's, more irregular, and often mediated by male household members. During COVID-19, [women's already low access to extension in India and Nepal](#) deteriorated further, with many relying on informal networks. Nearly half of farmers reported productivity losses due to a lack of timely information, underscoring how fragile and gendered the information pipeline is.



WHAT RECENT EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH ASIA SAYS

- **High unpaid workload constrains learning time.** [India's Time Use Survey](#) quantifies a sizeable, enduring unpaid workload for women, which limits their ability to attend trainings that are held at inconvenient times/locations.
- **Time poverty mediates productivity and learning through health and nutrition.** Evidence from India and Nepal shows that [heavy unpaid workloads limit healthcare access, dietary diversity](#), and contribute to [stress and fatigue that reduce women's productivity and learning capacity](#).
- **Formal extension reaches women less and unevenly.** [World Bank's India Situation Assessment Survey and sectoral reports](#) indicate that most advice still reaches households via male members or "progressive farmers," with content and delivery rarely tailored to women's roles (e.g., seed selection, weeding, fodder, small ruminants, and homestead crops).

- **Shocks amplify gaps.** Phone-panel evidence from India and Nepal during lockdowns documents [a sharper fall in women's access to formal advisory services](#) compared to men's. It highlights the effects of crop/location/caste on who receives help.
- **Digital dividends are not gender neutral.** Despite the expansion of mobile and digital advisory platforms, women remain less likely to own smartphones, access the internet, or use agricultural apps. In South Asia, the [gender gap](#) in smartphone ownership is 40%, and the gap in mobile internet use is 32%. These digital gaps reinforce existing inequalities in extension access, as digital services increasingly replace face-to-face channels.
- **Group platforms help.** [Leveraging women's self-help groups \(SHGs\)](#) improves women's access to information and some empowerment metrics, showing that delivery via trusted peer groups can offset individual time and mobility constraints.
- **Format and medium matter.** [Video-mediated, community-based trainings](#) (e.g., Digital Green with Jeevika in Bihar) increased women's adoption of climate-smart practices like SRI when the content, presenters, and schedules were tailored for women's availability.
- **Gender-responsive Rural Advisory Systems (RAS) systems remain nascent.** Country assessments highlight the limited number of female extension agents and programming that underweights women's time costs. [Pakistan's RAS assessment calls](#) for a redesign to ensure women can access digital and face-to-face advice.
- **Reducing drudgery multiplies impact.** Labour- and drudgery-reducing technologies (e.g., improved weeders, fodder choppers, water access, and efficient cookstoves) free up time that can be reallocated to income, learning, or rest—raising the returns to extension. Beyond agricultural tasks, [infrastructure investments in water, energy, and transport](#) significantly reduce women's time burden and enhance their participation in extension activities.
- **The scarcity of women extension agents remains a structural issue.** Women farmers are [less likely to access extension advice than men](#), mainly because frontline systems are staffed and scheduled around men's work patterns. Extension services that overlook women's time costs [inadvertently privilege men's participation](#) and reinforce information asymmetries.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES DESIGN AND DELIVERY

1. **Start from time budgets, not training calendars.**
Use rapid time-use diagnostics (by season and by day) before planning EAS activities with women. Map peak workloads around sowing, weeding, fuel/water collection, and care routines (school timings, meal prep). Schedule micro-sessions (30–45 minutes) at off-peak windows and closer to home. A one-time simple FGD with women will help get this information.
2. **Design for proximity and predictability.**
Replace one-off, distant trainings with recurring, local touchpoints, e.g., courtyard sessions, SHG meetings, village childcare centres, or livestock vaccination days. Planning to conduct them at the same time or on the same days periodically (every week, fortnight, or month) reduces planning costs for EAS and helps time-constrained women plan and be prepared to attend.
3. **Integrate men and community leaders.** Engaging male household heads, religious leaders, and local elites in dialogues about the redistribution of domestic and care responsibilities is critical. Evidence from gender-transformative agriculture programs in [Tanzania](#) demonstrates that when men share household tasks, women's training attendance and technology adoption significantly increase (Farnworth et al., 2023).
4. **Prioritise content aligned to women's tasks and decisions.**
Focus on domains where women already invest time: varietal choice for homestead plots, weed/soil/moisture management, seed storage and management, nursery raising, small

livestock health, fodder, and post-harvest handling—areas often omitted in mainstream demos yet critical for yield and quality.

5. **Offer multi-channel delivery.**

- **Group video/IVR/WhatsApp voice notes** in local languages for low-literacy users.
- **Missed-call callbacks** and **“ask-an-expert” time windows** outside cooking/childcare peaks.
- **Message bundling** (e.g., weekly “packets” timed to the crop calendar) to reduce repeated connection costs.

6. **Put more women in last-mile roles.**

Recruit/mentor women para-extension workers (from SHGs, FPOs, and dairy cooperatives). Where travel norms are constraining, pair mixed-sex teams so women can attend without stigma. [Country assessments](#) show the system is far from parity and that [female agents ease access for women](#).

7. **Bundle time-saving tech with advice.**

The extension that demonstrates drudgery-reducing options (weeders, tarpaulin threshing, choppers, mulching, safe water access, efficient stoves) increases uptake because women directly feel the time dividend. Such technologies help free up time for learning and earning—connect this with government schemes that could support it.



8. **Recognise shocks and care burdens.**

Build remote continuity plans (IVR hotlines, village champions) so advice doesn’t evaporate during crises. The India–Nepal panel evidence showed productivity losses when information dried up, and women were hit hardest.

9. **Use women’s groups as “extension hubs.”**

Institutionalise SHGs/FPO women’s collectives as formal nodes for demos, input linkages, and helpline referrals; this cuts per-woman time and transaction costs and has shown empowerment and information gains.

10. **Monitoring what matters (with gendered, time-aware indicators)**

Track not just “how many women attended,” but:

- **Time to access advice:** average minutes from home to training/demo site; waiting time; session length.
- **Scheduling fit:** percentage of sessions in off-peak windows for women by season.
- **Continuity:** percentage of women receiving at least two touchpoints/month during peak seasons.
- **Agency and reach:** share of women who can contact an agent directly (not via a male relative); share served by women or mixed teams.
- **Drudgery/time dividends:** minutes saved/week from introduced practices or tools; self-reported reallocation (learning, paid work, rest).
- **Outcome equity:** adoption and yield/quality gains disaggregated by sex of the information recipient (not just plot manager).

POLICY ACTIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS, DONORS, AND EAS PROVIDERS

1. **Institutionalise time-use diagnostics** in project appraisal and work plans; require gendered calendars for each crop/livestock value chain.

2. **Fund women para-extension networks** (stipends, transport, childcare allowances, safety protocols) and set service-level targets for women's direct reach.
3. **Mandate multi-channel advisories** (voice, video, in-person) with local-language, low-literacy formats and off-peak delivery windows.
4. **Bundle drudgery-reduction in farm operations** and measure time savings as a core outcome.
5. **Leverage SHGs/FPOs as formal extension nodes** with micro-budgets for screenings, demo plots, and hotline facilitation; evidence links group platforms to better information access and empowerment.
6. **Protect advisory continuity during shocks** through IVR hotlines, scheduled callbacks, and broadcast "advice bursts" aligned to crop calendars; this mitigates the gendered collapse in access seen during COVID-19.
7. **Bridge the digital gender gap** by expanding access to affordable smartphones, lowering internet costs, promoting digital literacy, and establishing women-only digital learning hubs.
8. **Invest in rural care and infrastructure** by developing community childcare centres, ensuring safe transport, and improving water and energy systems.

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