

Spotlight 5: Gender equality and women's empowerment

Women are key actors in rural areas and engage in farm and non-farm economic activities to ensure their families' food and economic security. They contribute to agricultural and rural economies with their labour and knowledge of crop and livestock varieties, biodiversity and agricultural practices.

Globally, they represent 43 per cent of the agricultural workforce (FAO 2011) and in regions such as Oceania, Southern Asia and SSA, around 60 per cent of employed women work in the agriculture sector (UNSD 2015). As rural areas transform, opportunities emerge for rural women (and men) to engage in new and diversified income-generating activities and to improve their livelihoods.

But rural and structural transformations also present challenges for rural women, and the opportunities and capacities to benefit from these processes often differ widely between women and men, and between young and old. These differences underline the need for policies and investments to ensure that rural transformation is inclusive and sustainable and that growth reaches poor women and men alike.

Opportunities for rural women under rural transformation

Rural transformation can bring about potential benefits for rural women and generate new opportunities in the rural farm and non-farm sectors. Across the world, urbanization has been accompanied by stronger linkages between rural and urban areas, with more intense flows of people, money and goods between these sectors. Also, there are growing demands for agricultural goods and services, resulting in diversity in economic activities and the use of modern technologies and innovations in production processes.

These changes have increased livelihood options for rural women. Efficient and sustainable infrastructure and services (including water, energy and transport) are particularly

beneficial for women, especially for reducing workloads, improving health conditions and making travelling easier and safer.

Increased access to knowledge and education, technology, finance, and information and communications technology provides opportunities to raise rural incomes and take advantage of employment opportunities in the rural non-farm sector. Access to food value chains and markets offers commercial opportunities, while inclusive policy processes can empower rural women to take part in the decision-making that affects their lives.

Challenges and constraints

Structural and rural transformations also present challenges for rural women. Economic, social and political constraints often hamper rural women's ability to access more dynamic markets or develop lucrative businesses, preventing them from improving their livelihoods and from contributing to national economic growth. Existing statutory and customary laws in developing countries often restrict women's access to assets and as many as 30 per cent of women are excluded from economic decision-making within their own households.

Women have less access to formal financial services and, globally, only 47 per cent of women have an individual or joint account at a formal financial institution compared to 55 per cent of men (UNSD 2015).

Structural and rural transformations vary by region and pose distinct challenges for rural women. Gender disparities, which are often deeply embedded within social and cultural norms, also vary geographically. Nevertheless, some challenges are common:

- Increased rural-urban migration may present challenges for women who stay behind and face barriers to accessing the inputs needed to manage farms and businesses. Limited access to and control over a broad range of productive assets – from agricultural land,

technology and inputs, to knowledge and financial resources – hamper rural women's ability to be productive and support their families (World Bank and One Campaign 2014).⁸⁹ Evidence from six countries in Africa suggests that the gaps in agricultural productivity between women and men with similar-sized plots in a similar context range from 23 per cent to 66 per cent. In addition, many women have less access to labour, especially male labour, as cultural constraints may prevent women from hiring non-family labour (UN Women et al. 2015).⁹⁰ Even if they get male labour, evidence suggests that men tend to work less hard for a female employer (ibid.).

- Rural women also migrate and in some countries represent the majority of migrants. While migration may offer increased access to paid employment and to services, many women are often disadvantaged in access to decent employment, training, financial and physical assets, mobility and personal security and safety (IOM 2012).
- The changing role of agriculture under structural and rural transformations highlights the issue of rural women's access to land. In many countries, women face specific barriers in terms of land ownership and in nearly one third of developing countries, laws do not guarantee the same inheritance rights for women and men (UNSD 2015). Women represent fewer than 5 per cent of all agricultural holders in the countries in North Africa and West Asia for which data are available. The SSA average of 15 per cent masks wide variations, from fewer than 5 per cent in Mali to over 30 per cent in countries such as Botswana and Malawi (FAO 2011). Even when statutory laws ensure women's land rights, these rights are often not recognized by customary practices.
- As the rural economy diversifies, the rural non-farm sector becomes increasingly important and offers new employment opportunities. However, activities in this sector may require specialized skills that many rural women lack because of low

levels of education and training. Activities may also require mobility that is incompatible with a woman's household responsibilities. Hence, the growing wage employment in the rural non-farm sector tends to favour men, while women are more likely to engage in farming and as agricultural labourers. According to recent data from rural areas in SSA, just 43 per cent of married women aged 15 to 49 years and 68 per cent of men had any cash labour income in the past 12 months (UNSD 2015).

- The double burden of productive activities and domestic work continues to limit rural women's ability to participate in new income-generating opportunities. Rural women spend much of their time on domestic chores including collecting water and firewood, preparing and cooking food, transporting goods and caregiving. This is compounded by a disproportionate burden of unpaid agricultural work as many women are expected to work on family farms. As a consequence, in some regions, rural women typically work 12 hours a week more than men do (Blackden and Wodon 2006) and in developing countries, women spend, on average, three hours more per day than men on unpaid work (UNSD 2015). With more family members migrating, rural women, in particular young women, face additional workloads that limit the time they can spend on productive activities or education and training.

Actions to promote women's empowerment

Over the past two decades, the issue of rural women's empowerment has grown in prominence on the international development agenda. Organizations, such as IFAD, and civil society organizations have strongly advocated for a focus on rural women in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the newly adopted Global Goals and their targets.⁹¹ The 20th anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action also provided an occasion to renew commitment and political will towards gender equality and to ensure that

the interests of rural women are included on the global agenda.

Enabling transformation of rural areas in a manner that is both inclusive and sustainable requires an analysis and understanding of issues to address gender inequalities. Some entry points are:

- Access to and control over productive resources and assets is essential for rural women to participate in and benefit from economic activities and to diversify their income base. This is especially so as many rural men migrate and women are left to manage the farms or family businesses. Rural women also need access to extension services, training and business development to be able to take advantage of emerging markets and enter into business partnerships.
- Access to decent employment opportunities is crucial for reducing poverty, particularly for rural women and youth who make up a growing proportion of the rural labour force in many developing countries. However, the challenge is that the majority of rural jobs are in the informal sector (box S5.1).
- Developing the skills and knowledge of rural women and girls – through training in literacy and numeracy, or vocational, technical and managerial training – enables them to participate more in development interventions and business opportunities. As the rural non-farm sector becomes more specialized, many women will be unable to benefit from employment opportunities unless they acquire new skills. Hence, education and skills development enhance capacities and equip rural women, particularly young women, for success in both agricultural and non-agricultural employment.
- Fostering women's participation and leadership in rural organizations and community groups and supporting women's groups are required to strengthen their voice and influence. Rural women need more control over the decisions that affect their lives, including in public affairs, in user groups, such as farmers' organizations (FAO and IFAD 2015) and at community and household levels. Empowering women at the household level is also important for their overall well-being and that of their families (box S5.2) (World Bank 2012).⁹²
- Investing in rural infrastructure and labour-saving technologies is essential to lessen the burden of water and firewood collection and to allow access to markets with products. Labour-saving technologies are also needed to enable women to increase their productivity, reduce drudgery and have a manageable workload so they can participate in economic activities, decision-making processes and development opportunities.

BOX S5.1 Supporting decent employment for rural women in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the IFAD-supported Sunamganj Community-Based Resource Management Project has formed labour-contracting societies (LCS) for infrastructure development, creating a rare opportunity for women to earn cash income. LCS members receive training and are then contracted to conduct part of the project's construction work.

Women account for 40 per cent of LCS members and report that LCS is an important chance for them to improve their economic and social situation. Women's wages, hours of work and benefits are equal to those of their male colleagues. Many invest their earnings in income-generating activities. Some women also make road blocks, which they can do near their homes with flexible timing, thus allowing them to continue with homestead gardening, looking after their children, etc. The roads have made travelling easier, more affordable, and safer, enabling women to travel to nearby cities and markets to buy goods and to visit hospitals/doctors or relatives. Road maintenance has generated regular employment for the poorest and most disadvantaged women.

Source: IFAD 2013: Report on IFAD's Development Effectiveness.

BOX S5.2 Supporting women's self-help groups in India

Self-help groups are an effective way to strengthen the decision-making and economic power of women in South Asia's patriarchal societies. The self-help groups are organized around a common purpose, such as savings and loans or economic activities. Most of these groups are women only and usually have strong social agendas, like supporting disabled people or people with HIV/AIDS, or addressing domestic violence, alcoholism and caste-related issues.

The groups serve as forums for women to learn new skills and gain confidence. They enhance members' social status, support joint action and are a safe place to discuss and solve problems. Women hold and control the group's working capital and profits, and can keep them safe from appropriation by husbands or male relatives. In some cases, women can negotiate for their wider interests, such as having a greater say in family decisions, banning alcohol consumption in their village and developing insurance products that meet their needs. The informal, homogeneous groups are a good way to empower women and allow them to have their voices heard.

In India, IFAD supports the Tejaswini Rural Women's Empowerment Programme, which has promoted 75,000 such groups, reaching over 1 million women. In places where self-help groups have federated into apex organizations, these organizations play a crucial role in improving production, marketing and value addition. The organizations promote value chain approaches and partnerships with financial service providers. With improved confidence and training, women have participated in local elections and community decision-making bodies.

Source: IFAD 2013: Gender and rural development brief: South Asia.

Involving women in user groups for natural resource management is essential both for finding solutions that benefit women and for building skills in preserving natural resources.

- Strengthening implementation of gender-related policies at the national level and working with government institutions to develop mechanisms for implementation are fundamental to promoting gender equality and addressing structural inequalities.⁹³ Support is also needed to make existing policies more gender-responsive and to develop new gender-targeted policies.

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