

Gender-equitable rural work to reduce poverty and boost economic growth

Decent work is central to reducing poverty and achieving equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. Unleashing rural women's socio-economic potential and fighting rural poverty involves tackling a number of decent work gaps: low productivity and low income jobs, lack of social protection, lack of basic work rights, and insufficient voice and representation.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In regions where agriculture is the main employer of rural populations, the number of working poor (with regular employment but in relative poverty due to low levels of income/pay) is particularly high. In 2008, 45.5% in South Asia and 58.6% in sub-Saharan Africa were in working poverty.¹
- In 2008, two thirds of employed women and men in sub-Saharan Africa worked in agriculture, mainly as contributing (unpaid) family workers or own account workers. In South Asia 44% of men and 70% of women workers, were engaged in agriculture.²
- Most rural women workers are unpaid family workers or self-employed, and exposed to precarious jobs and low pay.³
- Overall, rural women work longer hours than men. In Benin and Tanzania, women work, respectively, 17.4 and 14 hours more than men per week; while rural Indian women work almost 11 hours more than urban women and 12 hours more than urban men.⁴
- Some 170,000 agricultural workers are killed each year and millions more are seriously injured. Accidents are markedly more frequent among men, probably due to their use of larger and more dangerous machinery.⁵
- Rural work is largely uncovered by labour standards, in law and in practice, among others due to its largely informal nature. Since women predominate in the informal rural economy, they are particularly affected.
- Rural workers are poorly organized, and women's representation and voice in rural employers', workers', and farmers' organizations, where they exist, are low.

WHY IS ACTION NEEDED?

Equitable access to decent employment opportunities is particularly important for rural women, as a means to ensure their families' livelihoods and well-being, promote their own economic and social empowerment, and contribute to the growth of their communities.

1. Employment and income deficits

- In South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and East Asia, the share of agriculture in women's employment is higher than in men's (see Box 2). This is also the sector that contains the highest proportion of precarious jobs, mostly characterized by informal arrangements, low levels of remuneration, and little or no social and health protection.
- World food crises, unsustainable natural resource use, climate change and financial speculation involving agricultural trade, have disproportionate negative impacts on rural women and girls. This is due to their disadvantaged position in accessing resources (particularly land and credit), and their key role in fetching fuel and water and in food production.
- Gender norms dictate the role of women and men in agriculture and rural work. In some societies this restricts women's mobility and engagement in productive work outside their homes. Such norms vary from place to place, but are often slow to change.
- Women perform most unpaid household services and volunteer work; these are often neither recognized as work, nor are they included in employment statistics.



BOX 1 ILO's Decent Work⁶ Agenda

Decent work is work undertaken in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. The Decent Work Agenda is an integrated approach to promote rights at work, decent and productive employment and income for women and men, social protection for all, and social dialogue, with gender equality as a cross cutting priority.

- Rural women in developing countries are heavily burdened by their double roles as paid or unpaid workers and family care providers. The latter restricts their time and mobility to engage in productive work.
- Underdeveloped physical and social infrastructure in remote areas, including roads, telecommunication and transport systems, water supply, and health and child care, increase women's reproductive workload. This is increasingly compounded by droughts, environmental degradation, and HIV/AIDS that especially task women and girls to take care of their sick family members and orphaned children. As a result, girls in particular end up dropping out of school.
- Insufficient, or unequal access to education and training for rural youth, particularly girls, is a major constraint in attaining decent and productive employment in their adult life. It limits their capacity to run productive farm

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Agricultural cooperative in India

and non-farm enterprises, and to obtain skilled jobs and jobs in non-traditional agricultural export (NTAE) industries, that are better paid than traditional agricultural ones.

- Some women organize and successfully access credit (for example through group savings). More often however, women's limited access to financial services constrains their options for self-employment in agriculture, and crop choice. Their inadequate access to other inputs such as land, water, tools, technology, and additional workers are further constraints.
- While microfinance has provided some options for rural women's self-employment, including in non-farm activities, men tend to receive larger loans.⁷

2. Social protection deficits

- Despite high occupational health and safety risks at work in agriculture, agricultural workers are among the least protected, in terms of access to basic health services, workers' compensation, long-term disability benefits and survivors' benefits.
- Poverty and dependency are the plight of those too old to work, and, in developing countries, pension schemes rarely cover rural populations, particularly women.

3. Working conditions deficits

- In agriculture, pregnant women can face high reproductive health risks, and women are subject to violence at work, such as sexual harassment.
- Rural women are paid on average 25% less than men. Women workers in NTAE predominate in the more unskilled, increasingly casual and flexible jobs without social security and other benefits. Lack of minimum wages and stiff competition for paid work under any conditions lead to

large numbers of rural working poor, particularly among women.⁸

- Work in agriculture is often arduous and, without appropriate safety measures, involves risks, such as injuries or exposure to hazardous chemicals, including pesticides.

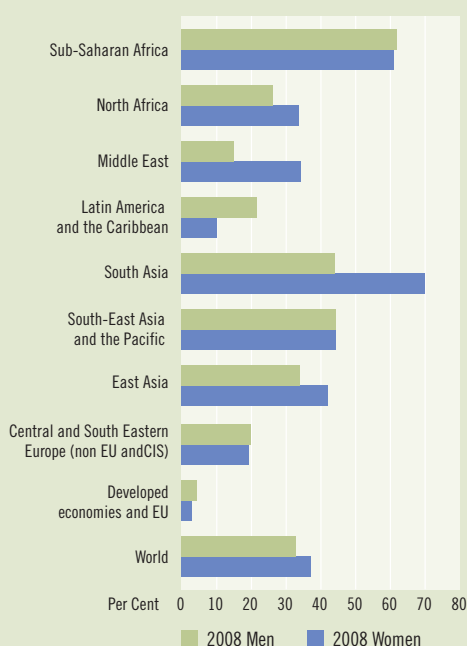
4. Labour rights deficits

- Fundamental rights and principles at work – abolition of child labour, forced labour, discrimination, and freedom of association and collective bargaining – apply to all workers but often are not respected or even known in rural areas.
- Some 60% of child labour is in agriculture (four fifths of which are unpaid workers).⁹ Girls are particularly vulnerable, as they are more likely than boys to be sent or sold by their parents at a young age into bonded labour, as in South Asia.¹⁰
- Much rural work is not covered by national law because of widespread informality. Labour laws are often not applied due to weak labour inspection.

5. Social dialogue deficits

- Rural women, especially indigenous women, can face cultural and language barriers, accentuated by lower education and mobility, in their contacts with urban dwellers.
- Networks such as employers' and workers' organizations, and labour market institutions such as employment services, are sparse and have limited capacity in rural areas, and women have less access to them than men.
- Rural women's presence in workers' and employers' organizations remains low (11-35% of total membership)¹¹, leading to lack of voice and representation in policy-making and programme development.

BOX 2 Share of agriculture in employment for women and men, 2008 (%)



Source: Based on figures in Table 2e in ILO: Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges (Geneva, 2010)

WHAT ARE THE POLICY OPTIONS?

1. Boost employment and income opportunities equally for women and men

All policy makers should seek to:

- Stimulate action, coordination and coherence among all relevant actors and institutions at the local, national and international levels, in developing and implementing policies and programmes for rural gender equality.
- Establish mechanisms to ensure fair and more stable prices of food and other agricultural goods nationally and internationally, especially for crops cultivated by women, in order to guarantee fair and stable income/wages for farmers.
- Support domestic market integration, access to foreign markets, and diversification of income and employment opportunities, favouring higher value-added rural activities, for both women and men.
- Integrate gender concerns into key drivers of economic growth: capital investment, human resource development, and market development.
- Use territorial approaches to promote rural employment and poverty reduction, integrating gender differentiated priority needs of women and men.
- Invest in essential public goods such as physical and social infrastructure, agricultural research and extension, and education and training; with a special eye on the different needs of women and men. These also facilitate creating employment and income opportunities for unemployed and underemployed women and men.

Ministries of Agriculture and rural institutions should:

- Increase productivity, particularly in women-intensive rural sectors, among others by providing up to date training to women, and facilitating their access to improved technologies.
- Involve women farmers in environmental protection and natural resources management, including through training, and promote “green jobs” for both women and men, particularly for those most vulnerable to climate change.
- Promote equitable access to, and productive use of land by women farmers through gender-sensitive agrarian reform, promoting land rental markets and services to small farmers,



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Equipment operator in China

joint titling of land/assets, and revising discriminatory inheritance laws.

Ministries of Economy, Labour and Education, together with private businesses and rural institutions, should:

- Support rural entrepreneurship, especially targeting women,¹² including through training, lowering gender barriers to credit, creating a women-friendly and conducive business environment, strengthening agricultural extension and business services.
- Expand the network of labour market institutions, such as employment services and their linkages to schools (to provide early career guidance), training and entrepreneurship support institutions and extension services, ensuring equitable access to rural women.
- Increase the breadth, depth and “women-friendliness” of financial services in rural areas, as a key strategy for providing capital for women-led rural businesses and farms, through gender sensitization and support for rural financial institutions.
- Ensure equal access to basic education and skills development opportunities for girls and young women (as in the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools initiated by FAO¹³) to enhance their productivity and employability, using culturally sensitive tools. Training and awareness-raising among teachers, extension staff, and men and women themselves can change the persistent gender norms and stereotypes on occupations.

2. Extend social protection to rural populations

Ministries of Finance and Social Affairs should:

- Improve gender equality in access to basic services (schools, health care, child care) in rural areas, by investing in their supply (infrastructure, staff,

etc.) so as to reduce women’s vulnerability and increase their capacity to access more remunerative jobs and opportunities. Use cash transfers and/or insurance mechanisms to increase the demand for services, specifically targeting poor rural women.

- Improve fiscal equity, efficiency and social inclusion through appropriate taxation, with the objective of providing minimum social protection to rural women and men.
- Extend the coverage of basic universal pensions to older people, particularly women. Brazil, for example, provides non-contributory pensions equivalent to the national minimum wage, and Chile has introduced pensions for women (“Amas de casa”).
- Improve the design and governance of social security programmes, particularly in low-income countries, for efficient delivery of adequate benefits and equitable access for rural women.
- Guarantee access in rural areas to basic social assistance for the poor and unemployed, ensuring equitable access by both women and men.
- Foster policy integration at national and local levels to achieve synergies between social security, employment and other social policies enhancing social inclusion, particularly for poor women.

BOX 3 “Women’s empowerment through employment and health” project (2001-05)¹⁴ in Bangladesh

Targeting over 6,000 income-poor Bangladeshi rural women, this project used an integrated approach consisting of decent work practices, awareness-raising, technical skills, bookkeeping, entrepreneurship development, business management training, and access to micro-credit and micro-health insurance. This was combined with initiatives to enhance relevant ministries’ capacity to promote women’s employment and women workers’ rights, and to increase women’s participation and leadership in trade unions. As a result, the proportion of women project participants mainly doing household work fell from 31 to 22% while the proportion of women with business as their main occupation rose from 27 to 56%.

3. Improve rural working and living conditions

Ministries of Labour should work closely with social partners at national and local levels (employers’ federations, farmers and workers’ unions, health services) to:

- Define minimum wages, set at adequate levels, to help protect the workers most at risk and combat gender



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Mother and children collecting firewood in Senegal

discrimination in pay, particularly at the bottom end of the pay scale.

- Actively promote a more equal division of paid and unpaid work between women and men, particularly through publicly supported childcare arrangements, to strengthen families' social and economic security.
- Strengthen Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in farm and non-farm activities to protect rural women and men workers, while improving enterprise performance.
- Provide for maternity protection at work to safeguard the health and economic security of women and their children. Pay special attention to occupational hazards, which are particularly prevalent in agriculture.
- Include agriculture in OSH policies and programmes and in awareness-raising activities promoting a preventive OSH culture; and addressing special gender issues such as maternity protection, sexual harassment, and HIV/AIDS.
- Develop and support concrete, practical and affordable measures

to improve the safety, health and working conditions of women and men small producers and rural workers. The Work Improvement for Neighbourhood Development (WIND) methodology, for instance, empowers families on a gender equality basis to undertake simple, rapid, low-cost and sustainable improvements in work and other aspects of their rural life.¹⁵

4. Promote rights at work

- Encourage ratification and support implementation of key equal rights in International Labour Standards: especially Conventions no. 100 on Equal remuneration (1951), and no. 111 on Discrimination in employment and occupation (1958); as well as others related to safety and health, labour inspection, social security, minimum wage and rural workers' organizations.
- Ensure that rural small producers and workers, particularly agricultural workers, are covered under national labour and other relevant laws and regulations, and are protected in practice.
- Ensure that the rights of particularly vulnerable groups of rural workers, such as small farmers, migrant workers and indigenous peoples, especially girls and women, feature on the policy and programme agenda and are effectively protected.

5. Strengthen social dialogue

Ministries of Labour should adopt a gender sensitive approach when working with social partners, so as to:

- Ensure explicit inclusion of rural and

gender issues in the key national policy frameworks to be addressed in social dialogue, including employment policies.

- Promote tripartite social dialogue and consultation at national and local levels, enhancing especially rural women's representation and voice¹⁶.
- Strengthen state institutions and the rule of law in rural areas, particularly in conflict-affected regions, integrating women's and girls' specific concerns and vulnerabilities.
- Strengthen labour administration and labour inspection in rural areas, to provide effective protection in law and practice, and enhance their gender sensitivity.
- Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of local administrations and public service delivery, and their gender equity and transparency.
- Increase the outreach and engagement of employers' and workers' organizations in rural areas, enhancing especially rural women's representation and voice in them.



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An extension worker talks to a group of farmers in Brazil

Endnotes

- 1 ILO. 2010. *Global Employment Trends*. Table A12a; and ILO. 2009. *Key indicators of the Labour Market*. Box 4b. Geneva.
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- 16 ILO. 2008. Op. cit. See also IFAD: <http://www.ifad.org/events/gc/33/speech/farmer>. [http – Women participating in an IFAD farmers forum stated: "Effective and representative producer organizations can provide a powerful instrument to make rural women's voices heard, so that we can have a greater influence over decisions that affect our lives and livelihoods. But as of yet, our voices have been heard too rarely in our organizations."](http://www.ifad.org/events/gc/33/speech/farmer) Rome.

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