



Rural women are resourceful economic agents who contribute to the income of families and the growth of communities in a multitude of ways. They work as entrepreneurs, as farm and non-farm labourers, in family businesses, for others and as self-employed; while they take on a disproportionate share of unpaid work at home. However, their contribution is limited by unequal access to resources as well as persistent discrimination and gender norms which need to be addresses to allow the realisation of their full potential.

#### **Did you know?**

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.

Most rural women workers are unpaid family workers or self-employed, and exposed to precarious jobs and low pay.

Rural women are paid on average 25% less than men.

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.

Gender norms dictate the role of women and men and also their opportunities regarding type of work, both in urban and rural areas. In some societies these norms restricts women's mobility and engagement in productive work outside their homes. For example women's entrepreneurship is not broadly accepted in many societies and women face attitudinal obstacles in starting, consolidating and developing a sustainable business. In addition, rural women are often thwarted by discriminatory property, family and inheritance laws and practices.



Rural women in developing countries are heavily burden by their double role as paid or unpaid workers and family care providers. The latter restricts their time and mobility to engage in productive work and limits their time for schooling, training and economic activities.

The limited access to productive resources, lower educational levels, and social norms about appropriate work for women tend to confine them to lower paid, lower status work where opportunities for skills training and advancement are reduced, thus perpetuating their lower status. Further, vocational education, training and entrepreneur programmes for rural women are often limited to a narrow range of female-dominated fields that reinforce their traditional roles and responsibilities. While improving their opportunities to generate income, such training limits the chances to benefit from newer, non-traditional areas that can offer women higher earning and more skilled technical or managerial jobs.

**Did you know?**

Over two-thirds of the world's illiterate people are women, many of whom live in rural areas. In Cambodia, 48% of rural women and 14 % of rural men are unable to read or write. In Burkina Faso, the illiteracy rate for women is 78% compared to 63% for men. The global secondary school attendance ratio of rural girls is 39% as opposed to 45% for rural boys (compared to 59% and 60% of urban girls and boys respectively).

When women receive the same levels of education, experience and farm inputs as men, there are no significant difference in male and female farmer's productivity.

Micro and small enterprises offer a number of particular advantages for rural women: flexible hours, location on or near women's houses, ease of entry, and links with local markets. However, rural female entrepreneurs also face particular challenges entering new and lucrative markets and expanding their business.



Rural women's presence in workers' and employers' organisations remains low (11-35% of total membership), leading to lack of voice and representation in policy-making and programme development.

Child labour is also widespread in rural areas and girl child workers form a significant part of the agricultural workforce. Child labour is detrimental to long-term health, education and higher-level skills acquisition, and decreases the chances of decent employment in youth and adulthood.

**Did you know?**

Cooperatives are a prominent form of sustainable enterprise for women in rural areas. When they adopt gender-sensitive practices, they can increase women's empowerment, voice and representation in decision-making, provide a business network, enhance access to markets and services, and (consequently) facilitate economies of scale.

Low rates of female land ownership can hinder access to financial assets that are necessary to set up a business. Available information suggests that less than 20% of agricultural land holdings in developing countries are operated by women (10% in Western and Central Africa and in the Near East and North Africa).

## Policy options/recommendations

The factors that limit women's productivity in the rural sector are manifold and diverse and the programmes and services aimed at assisting rural women need to address all four aspects of the Decent Work Agenda.

### Employment creation

- 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.
- Encourage or initiate rural public works programmes. Include women both as workers (including in high-levels tasks) and as decision-makers in the planning and implementation phases so that products and services delivered reflect women's needs and thus contribute to enhancing gender equality in rural employment.
- 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, joint titling of land/assets, and revising discriminatory land laws.
- Increase the breath, 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.
- Expand rural women's access to science, technical education, mobile phones, computers, and other information and communication technologies.



### Strengthen social dialogue

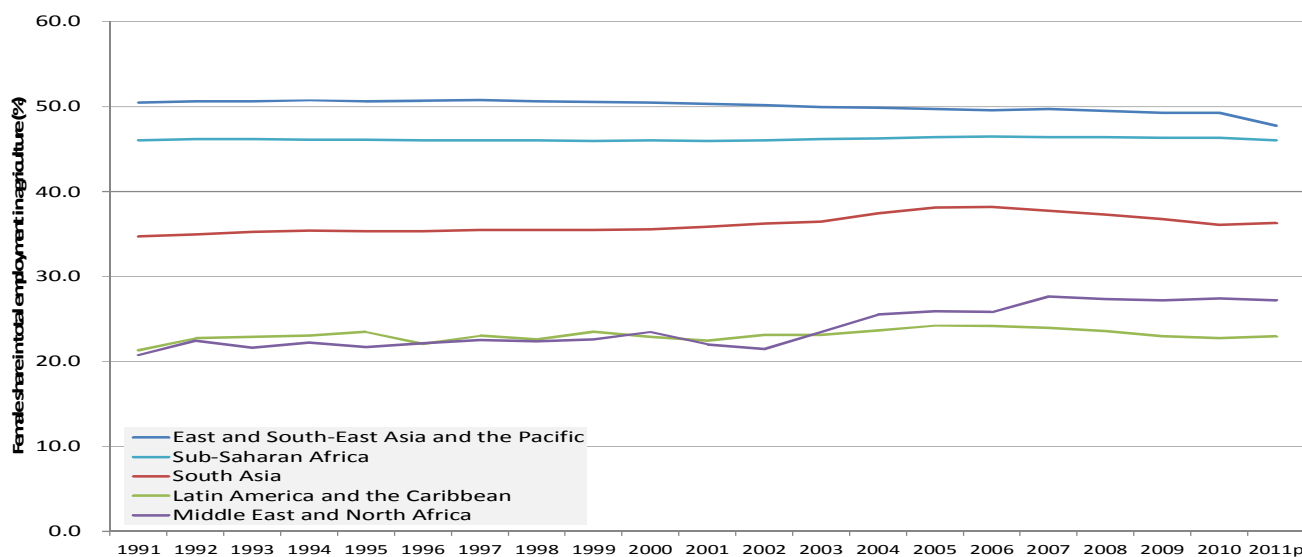
- Ensure explicit inclusion of rural and gender issues in the key national policy frameworks to be addressed in social dialogue, including employment policies.
- Promote tripartite social dialogue and consultation at national and local levels, enhancing especially rural women's representation and voice.

### Social protection

- 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.
- Develop social security schemes for men and women informal entrepreneurs, including cash benefits for maternity leave or child cash benefits and childcare arrangements to increase women's ability to mitigate risk and engage in business.

- Promote the social protection floor, which is an integrated set of social policies designed to guarantee income security and access to essential social services for all. Such social transfers can be particularly important to women by giving them greater control over how household income is spent.

**Figure 1. Female share in total employment in agriculture by selected regions, 1991-2011 (%)**



Note: 2011 are preliminary estimates.

Source: ILO - Trends Econometric Models, October 2011.

### Promote rights at work

- Encourage ratification and support implementation of key equal rights in International Labour Standards: especially Convention no. 100 on Equal remuneration (1951), and no. 111 on Discrimination in employment and occupation (1958).
- 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.

### Sources

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