

# Gender equality in the rural sector: The ever-present challenge

*The theme for this year's International Women's Day – Empower Rural Women, end poverty and hunger – highlights the need to tackle gender inequalities in the rural sector. Women living and working in rural areas are often perceived and treated as second-class citizens. Despite the low level of recognition given to their work, their socio-economic contribution to the welfare of their households and communities is immense. In this interview, ILO Gender Bureau Director Jane Hodges discusses the many facets of the plight of rural women.*

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## **1. What is the situation of gender equality in the rural sector?**

Some 70 per cent of the world's poor are concentrated in rural communities. These are communities that rely on agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock to make a living. Within these communities, the poorest of the poor are often women and young girls who lack regular and decent employment, and who may face hunger and/or malnutrition, and poor access to health, education and productive assets. Although gender inequality varies considerably across regions and sectors, there is evidence that, globally, women benefit less from rural employment, whether in self- or wage-employment, than men do.

## **2. Why are women in rural areas generally poorer and face worse living conditions than men?**

There are various reasons. For starters, women are disproportionately employed in low-quality jobs, including jobs in which their rights are not adequately respected and social protection is limited. Another reason related to the above is that women tend to get paid less than men (around 25 per cent less, to be more precise). That doesn't mean they work less, on the contrary. The problem is that much of the work they do is not valued and remunerated accordingly. In fact, most rural women are unpaid family members. This not only lowers their labour income but also is likely to increase their stress and fatigue.

## **3. What are the causes of women's disadvantaged position?**

Gender inequalities in rural employment exist and persist because of a range of interlinked social, economic and political factors. However, there is a specific cause that outweighs all others: the invisible but powerful role of social institutions that disempower one sex above the other. These include traditions, customs and social norms that govern the intricate workings of rural societies, and which act as a constraint on women's activities and restrict their ability to compete on an even footing with men. We're not saying that urban-based women are not faced with poverty ... but that the context of rural communities places an added strain on equal opportunities.

## **4. Can you give some examples of these traditions and customs?**

Yes: here's one example that will sound true to anyone who has lived and worked in isolated rural areas; the commonly held view that it is a woman's obligation to work in the home, cooking, cleaning, and looking after children and the sick and the elderly. Here's another: the belief that women are less able to manage assets. The idea that women have to obtain their husbands or guardians permission to leave the house. Or even social - sometimes legal - restrictions that do not allow women to have any property or inheritance rights. These practices are extremely difficult to eradicate and are detrimental to women's capacity to develop as productive members of society; they stifle women's economic empowerment.

## **5. Why does gender inequality in rural employment matter?**

First and foremost, because not providing women with equal opportunities is a violation of their human rights. Second, because we will not eradicate extreme poverty (as called for by the MDGs) until we acknowledge the fact that women are disproportionately represented among the poorest of poor in rural areas. Third, and this is something that not only applies to rural areas, gender equality makes great economic sense. It is well established that educating and providing women with opportunities to take part in skilled paid employment provides benefits to their families and communities in the form of lower fertility rates, decreased child mortality, improved child health nutrition and levels of education. Finally, the fight against child labour will be almost impossible to win unless parents (mothers and fathers) can produce or earn sufficiently to ensure their family's livelihoods.

## **6. Is the global economic crisis having a specific impact on women in rural employment?**

The financial crisis arrived at a time when many people in developing countries were already facing hardship because of the food and fuel crises. It is hard to quantify the impact of the current crisis in terms of gender equality, but certain trends can be predicted. For example, it is plausible to anticipate that in most countries women will be expected to assume the primary responsibility for acting as safety nets of last resort and for ensuring that their families will survive. At the same time, rural women's unpaid work burdens are likely to further intensify, especially in low-income households and especially when State-run facilities (even the few that actually reached rural areas) are cut as part of austerity measures. Also, it is possible that rural women, more than rural men, will be increasingly offered precarious employment with poor prospects and that their children's health, as well as their own health will deteriorate. During Mexico's 1995 crisis, for example, infant mortality rates increased most in the areas where women's work participation increased, with girls being affected the most.

## **7. What is the ILO doing to promote gender equality in rural areas?**

A lot! Women face inequalities in all the pillars of Decent Work: standards and rights at work, employment creation, social protection and social dialogue. That's why for the ILO gender equality is a cross-cutting issue. The ILO has implemented a number of projects that promote gender equality in rural areas. One of them is the [Cooperative Facility for Africa](#), which promotes cooperative development across the continent. The ILO recently organized a participatory workshop at the Cooperative College of Kenya to discuss strategies for encouraging women's participation on co-operative boards. The ILO's [Women's Entrepreneurship Development Programme](#) is in its third and final phase. The aim of this project is to enhance economic opportunities for women by carrying out affirmative actions in support of women starting, formalizing and growing their enterprises, and by mainstreaming gender equality issues into the ILO's work in enterprise development. In [Timor-Leste](#), the ILO is supporting the Institute for Business Support (IADE) and the National Directorate for Rural Development (NDRD) of the Ministry of Economy and Development in boosting local economic development, enhancing government service delivery and creating quality employment in rural areas by expanding market access for MSEs, strengthening local contractors and improving the provision of business development services.