

**United Nations Commission on the Status of Women**  
**Fifty-fifth session**  
**22 February – 4 March 2011**  
**New York**

## **INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

**The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and  
hunger eradication, development and current challenges**

**RURAL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK\*<sup>1</sup>**

**by**

**MARZIA FONTANA**  
**Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies**  
**University of Sussex**

---

\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

<sup>1</sup> This note draws on Fontana, M. with Paciello, M., 2010, 'Gender dimensions of rural and agricultural employment: a global perspective' in FAO, IFAD and ILO, 2010, *Gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment, pathways out of poverty: status, trends and gaps*. Rome: FAO, IFAD and ILO. For details on the case studies cited in this note and on sources please refer to the full report.

*Multiplicity of rural employment forms, strong link between production and reproduction*

Rural employment ranges from farming, to self-employment working in trade, to small enterprises providing goods and services, to wage labour in these, and wage labour in agriculture. Some of this work involves long hours and is not sufficiently remunerated. In rural settings women and men are often involved in more than one of these activities (and different contractual arrangements) simultaneously. They may need to change jobs, depending on the season, or may remain unemployed or underemployed for periods of time. Household production and market production appear to be more intertwined in rural areas than in urban areas (and pressures on households to provide goods and services both for sale and for the home are stronger). Caring for families, which is mostly on women's shoulders, constitutes a heavier time burden because of poor infrastructure, lack of facilities and of institutional support.

*Rural women's employment reduces poverty but does not always lead to emancipation*

Necessity and survival are more prevalent driving factors than 'choice' in rural women's livelihoods strategies, as opposed to rural men's. While women's employment income often makes a critical difference in the poverty status of their households, this does not necessarily mean that the individual situation of the woman concerned improves at the same time. She may have to endure exploitative conditions in the work place and/or enjoy limited access to family resources, as what is allocated to her may not reflect the full extent of her contribution.

The Decent Work Agenda launched in 2000 represented a critical step towards the goal of achieving just and equitable employment for both rural and urban women. Over the last ten years, the ILO and other actors, supported by this policy framework, have played an important role in advancing the understanding that the transformative potential of employment for women does not lie in mere access. Recent joint efforts of the ILO, IFAD and FAO with regard to rural areas are particularly promising.

*Decent work deficits remain acute especially for rural women*

Commitment to decent work is gaining wider acceptance in policy circles but implementation gaps remain. These are severe particularly for women in rural areas. Within the category of what the ILO defines as 'vulnerable employment', women continue to be the vast majority of 'contributing family workers' with no independent access to income, while men are much more likely to be found in 'own-account work' where they at least receive some form of payment. For instance, unpaid work on family agricultural enterprises accounted for 34 percent of women's informal employment in India compared with 11 per cent of men's. As for rural non-agricultural employment, women tend to be heavily concentrated in domestic services and other forms of home-based work. Domestic work often pays even below the agricultural wage rate (for example in Brazil). The location of this work within private homes makes it especially difficult to enforce legislation and offers women little potential to organise.

*Neither women nor men are homogenous groups and gender norms vary*

Neither women nor men of course constitute homogenous groups. Gender norms and practices shaping the world of work vary also by age, ethnicity, social status and roles within households. Rural employment patterns differ across countries and socio-economic settings and are changing in response to increased international trade, migration, climate change and other emerging trends.

*Need for a mix of policies and for context-specific measures*

Policies that can expand the range of rural women's employment opportunities and promote decent work include: measures to support education and training, interventions to improve access to various markets (such as to land and credit markets), labour legislation and active labour market policies, initiatives to strengthen frameworks for rights, welfare policies, and broader macroeconomic reforms that recognise the contribution of unpaid reproductive work. To be successful, such policies need to be designed as a package of reinforcing measures and implemented with attention to specific institutional settings and economic structures.

*Shifting rural women into non-agricultural jobs not always desirable*

For example, a strategy centred on encouraging the movement of rural women out of agriculture is not always viable or desirable. Rural non-agricultural employment is a potential income source but it is important to understand better under what circumstances it can lead to greater gender equality. In the more urbanized countries of Latin America, rural non-agricultural employment appears to be more prevalent among women than men, but, as already noted, women tend to be in the lowest-paid and most vulnerable forms of work, such as domestic services. Simply shifting low-productivity female agricultural employment into low-productivity non-agricultural employment is evidently not a route out of rural poverty and could contribute to reinforcing rural women's subordinate position in the labour market rather than expanding their access to decent jobs. These observations also invite caution in interpreting the expansion of women's share of waged employment in the non-agricultural sector as an appropriate indicator of women's empowerment as suggested under MDG 3.

Gender-focused investment in agriculture with the aim to increasing the productivity of staple food production and policies enabling integration of female landless labourers into dynamic agricultural export sectors may be more appropriate strategies in particular for agriculture-based countries such as most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. These strategies and focus would appear of special relevance in the context of the current food crisis.

Policies that will make a difference to rural women's labour market options will vary also according to the category of work concerned. Self-employed women are likely to gain the most from improved market contacts, strengthening of property rights and better access to credit. Women in waged work will benefit the most from the extension of labour legislation beyond permanent workers and the better enforcement of labour laws. Both will benefit from support for their care responsibilities, skills upgrading, training about legal rights, extension of social protection measures to the informal economy and promotion of associations to represent their interests in the public domain.

*Two main enabling policies: addressing rural women's unpaid work and enhancing their capacity to mobilise*

Having emphasised the relevance of an integrated set of interventions in different areas to build on complementarities between policy measures and to foster synergies, this note wishes to stress the importance of two key cross-cutting issues which are preconditions for progress in achieving the goal of decent work for rural women. These involve: (a) addressing rural women's unpaid

workloads, and (b) building women's capacity to mobilise collectively and to play an active role in claiming their rights.

#### Addressing rural women's unpaid workloads

Rural women effectively act as a safety net of last resort to ensure their family's well-being and to compensate for limited or absent physical infrastructure and social provision by state and local institutions. Their unpaid work has important economic functions that are rarely recognized and valued: it is key to food security and to maintaining adequate levels of productivity among the rural labour force. The disproportionate share of unpaid care work that falls on rural women relative to men restricts the time they have available for paid activities. Family responsibilities may also limit women's ability to participate actively in workers' cooperatives and other organizations, and to mobilize for their rights.

A number of policy options to reduce and redistribute unpaid work in rural areas are available.

One option is the *provision of services and labour-saving technologies and infrastructure* through the state or other actors. Public investment in roads, rural electrification and improvements in water and sanitation infrastructure can significantly contribute to reducing rural women's unpaid work and generate many other benefits (such as better health for women and their families). The provision of electricity, for example, would dramatically decrease the time that women in remote rural areas spent in collecting fuel and cooking. Cereal mills, other equipment for food processing, pressure cookers, refrigerators and other affordable home-based technologies can also significantly help to reduce the time and energy rural women must invest in food preparation, and improve food availability and incomes from food sales off-season.

A successful example is provided by an IFAD/UNIDO project which supplied diesel-powered multifunctional platforms in 12 villages in Mali. As a result, many women could shift their labour inputs to income-generating activities, leading to considerable increases in their money earnings. Both production and consumption of rice were reported to also have risen in the communities involved. One main reason for the success of this project is that women beneficiaries were involved from the beginning in its design, management and implementation.

Public works programs which generate employment through infrastructure projects have helped low income households to cope with sudden or seasonal fluctuations in employment. Well designed employment guarantee programmes can simultaneously fulfil the two objectives of generating jobs for both women and men and creating assets that reduce aspects of women's domestic workloads, with important gender redistributive implications. This is more likely to happen if women and communities are directly involved in the design of public works. In Peru, for example, women's direct participation in the design of a rural roads project ensured greater priority given to their needs. Upgrading included not only roads connecting communities, but also many non-motorized transport tracks used mostly by women and ignored by other road programmes. As a result, women started to participate to a greater extent in markets and fairs, spent less time obtaining food and fuel supplies, and 43 percent of them reported to be earning higher incomes.

A second policy option is the *provision of reliable and affordable support for care responsibilities*. The provision of care is of most immediate relevance to agricultural wage

workers but it can also support women in self-employment by promoting their access to more distant markets or into better non-agricultural waged work. The most common form of person care in rural areas is still through family members, including older (mostly female) siblings looking after younger ones. Other forms of care are still rather poor and mostly including small-scale initiatives run by voluntary organisations such as Mobile Crèches supporting women with young children working in the construction sector in India. A recent social audit of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in Tamil Nadu, India indicates that about 70 percent of the women interviewed had no child care facilities at the worksite despite the provision of the NREGA that ‘in the event that there are at least five children under the age of six at the worksite, one of the female workers should be deputed to look after them and she should be paid the same wage as other NREGA workers’. There is an urgent need to support more government-funded rural day care centres, as well as strengthening rural community services for the elderly and other forms of social protection.

A third option includes support to civil society initiatives that *promote behavioural change around gender roles and encourage a fairer distribution of care work between men and women*. An innovative project trying to achieve this objective is offered by Sonke Gender Justice Network in South Africa, which combines advocacy (for example a national campaign on ‘Brothers for Mothers’) with participatory workshops on health and sexuality to encourage men’s involvement in the care of children, particularly in rural areas affected by HIV/AIDS.

#### Enhancing rural women’s capacity to mobilise for collective action

Laws and policies intended to advance gender equality do not automatically translate into concrete outcomes without sustained actions on the part of civil society actors. Civil society organizations, including many women’s organisations, have frequently been the force that led changes in laws and policies. They have also exercised bottom-up accountability to ensure and improve their implementation.

For example, in countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America, governments have been enacting legislation to guarantee women’s property and inheritance rights. The efforts of women’s groups and civil society organisations engaged in promoting land and property rights for women have been important in translating legislation in ‘real’ access to assets. Women’s Land Access Trusts in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, for instance, function as intermediaries between low-income women and governments, finance institutions and the private sector. These Trusts have been successful in mobilizing land from local authorities, using the savings of women’s groups and housing cooperatives. Another promising case is provided by Nicaragua, where the number of women landowners has increased as a result of legislation to this effect along with dissemination campaign and training initiatives accompanying it, thanks to the active lobbying of well organized rural women.

An interesting example in the area of labour rights is offered by Women Working Worldwide, a UK-based network organization, which worked closely with local trade unions, to promote rights awareness among 6 000 permanent and casual female rural workers in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. It appears that such training increased women’s confidence and their ability to negotiate with employers, leading to greater women’s unionization and creation of new women’s committees. In Tanzania, farm managers were trained on women workers’ rights, resulting in a

general improvement in worker-management relations and greater space for gender concerns in collective bargaining agreements.

A successful initiative in the area of water infrastructure is provided by SEWA's water campaign in Gujarat. The project was about improving access to safe and reliable drinking water and involved, among others, training women to repair hand pumps. Women's collective action was a crucial ingredient of the success. Women were initially reluctant to participate because water infrastructure was regarded as male territory and men were expressing hostility by refusing to drink water from a source built by women or to work on water structures that women managed. SEWA's district-level functionaries and village women leaders facilitated a process of mobilization through meetings, solidarity group formation and capacity building, and acted as interface between the local women and the water board. As a result, workloads from collecting water were reduced, enabling women to devote more time to remunerated employment or to rest. The project seems to have had a significant empowerment effect on women and on their willingness and ability to participate in the public domain, including involvement in local council meetings and formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) for savings.

As all these examples show, building rural women's capacity to mobilise and act collectively is a critical condition to ensure that interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in a range of decent work related dimensions-- from training to land reforms to measures to reduce unpaid work-- have concrete effects. As the cases described in this note illustrate, a variety of innovative forms of associations are emerging in response to the challenge of organising vulnerable female rural workers.

Some associations are primarily economic and aimed at promoting the skills and qualifications of their membership or bargaining with employers. Others combine livelihood concerns with a broader range of gender equity concerns and aim to represent women's interests in the public domain in relation to the state, employers and society at large. Research from South Asia suggests for instance savings-led SHGs created to meet rural women's practical needs tend to perform very effectively in building women's agency on a number of other fronts. SEWA in India offers definitely the best example of organizing women in both rural and urban areas. SEWA usually adopt different forms of organization strategies that combine trade union activism, cooperative formation and provision of services such as health care, child care, insurance and housing to its members.

Recent rapid advances in information and communication technologies, and in particular mobile phones, offer significant potential not only for facilitating rural women's access to market contacts, information on crop prices and job opportunities but also as a mobilisation tool for claiming rights. Examples of creative ways of using mobile phones are provided by Grameen Village Phone in Bangladesh, and similar such initiatives in Cameroon, the Philippines, Rwanda and Uganda.