

# Leaving No One Behind: Women in Rural Communities Are Key to a Sustainable, Food Secure Future

*Mohammad Naciri, Regional Director,  
Regional Director for Arab States, UN Women*

Globally, women make up 40% of the agricultural labor force, both formal and informal, in unpaid and paid work in fields and on farms. Yet, women are also the largest unpaid care workforce, women are less likely to own land – with only 13% of agricultural landowners globally being women<sup>1</sup> – and more likely to work on family owned land for free, without access to markets or new technologies. Women spend much of their time on work inside the home, contributing to and running households, with no recognition of this work, and no wages to call their own. While they often are best placed to accurately identify the immediate needs of their families, in many communities, they are not making decisions on how the household income is spent.

As noted in the Secretary General's report on Rural Women, "rural women and girls are disproportionately affected by poverty, exclusion and the effects of environmental and climate change"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, women and girls living in rural areas are less likely to absorb shocks, recover from crisis, and be able to create a sustainable future for themselves and their families.

In light of the 2030 agenda, and under the notion of leaving no one behind, we have an obligation to focus on women in rural areas, who, unless they are empowered to become resilient to external (and internal) shocks, will continue to bear the brunt of climate change and inequalities that will hinder our collective prosperity and development.

That is exactly what the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) had as a priority theme in March 2018, when member states, civil society and UN entities gathered to focus on Challenges and

opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls in the commission's 62nd session.

Just as in the Secretary General's report, the Commission, in the agreed conclusions adopted on the last day, noted that the foundations for a sustainable, gender equal, Agenda 2030 are already present, in the Beijing platform for action, CEDAW and other internationally ratified conventions and protocols. The Commission highlighted recommendations for ensuring that Agenda 2030 can be achieved and that women and girls living in rural areas have the rights and tools needed to be part of the solution; for there can be no solution without them. Notably, the Commission outlined three broad areas of action, with specific guidance under each, and in adapting the document made a commitment to the recommendations made.

## **Strengthen normative, legal and policy frameworks**

The conclusions call upon member states that have not already done so to ratify international conventions and review reservations on these, as well as design and implement policies that protect and promote women's human rights. This includes ensuring full access to justice, living a life free from violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Furthermore, they call for a review of women's landownership policies, notably referencing that these should be free from any discrimination based on the marital status of a woman, on a par with that of men. As a crosscutting issue, the conclusions called to "integrate a gender perspective into the design, implementation and evaluation of and follow-up to development policies, plans and

<sup>1</sup> UN Women infographic <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2018/2/infographic-rural-women>

<sup>2</sup> Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls: Report of the Secretary General, 2018 <http://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2018/3>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw62-2018>

programmes, including budget policies.”

Women’s empowerment is not a stand-alone issue, just as in Agenda 2030, the solution lies not with one ministry or one government entity alone. To truly address inequalities, we must ensure that women’s empowerment is prioritized across sectors and budgets and that the gap between the women’s rights agenda and broader national planning is bridged. We know that when women participate equally in the workforce, and in the economy that nations are more likely to prosper. Creating an enabling environment that empowers women to do so is key, therefore, for the 2030 agenda.

### **Implement economic and social policies for the empowerment of all rural women and girls**

By far the most comprehensive of the three areas, this section focuses on a call for member states to strengthen macroeconomic policies, business opportunities, and recognize the role of women in sustainable agricultural and rural development. Furthermore, more action is needed to strengthen the role of women in attaining food security, protect women’s employment rights, women’s access to health and education. This section has a heavy focus on the joint responsibility of safe and fair work, and a recognition of women’s agency and a joint responsibility in ensuring this. Furthermore, focusing on women’s access to finance is key, as we know that women are less likely to access micro credit and loans in many countries due to a variety of barriers, including social. Key here is also the recognition and unequal distribution of unpaid care work and women’s unrecognized contribution

to on and off-farm production. Globally, women currently spend 1-3 hours more on unpaid care work compared to their male counterparts, with the hours being higher in certain countries. Unpaid and unrecognized care work and commitments also prevent women from being able to actively pursue paid work, education and professional growth, which in turn deters development as a whole. The CSW58 conclusions call for a review of this and a redistribution of unpaid care work, including breaking down negative stereotypes of men in caregiving roles – recognizing that social barriers also affect men.

### **Strengthen the collective voice, leadership and decision-making of all rural women and girls**

Perhaps most importantly, this section calls for women’s agency across decision making processes ; and that women fully participate in the design and implementation of policies and have a meaningful role in decision making processes, including in the management of natural resources, responses to natural disasters and conflict and recovery processes. The importance of women’s leadership is immense, moving away from a dialogue of victimhood to empowerment. In the same vein, the Commission recognizes the contribution of civil society organizations and women human rights defenders and calls upon member states to support their important work. In doing so, a clear signal is sent that the agency of women is indeed a fundamental right, not an afterthought, and that all policies do require women at the table in decision making to be truly sustainable truly attainable.

<sup>4</sup> <http://undocs.org/en/E/CN.6/2018/L.8>, p.10

The Commission on the Status of Women, therefore, sets out a robust call to action for member states, emphasizing that rural development is linked to overall sustainable development ; and both are directly linked to women's empowerment and gender equality. One cannot have one without the other ; and women's rights, therefore, and the rights of women in rural areas, do not exist in a vacuum.

So what next? We have the evidence, we have agreed upon conclusions outlining the commitment of the Commission and member states. Now the real work begins. Creating lasting, impactful change requires more than words on paper and the translation of commitment into action.

### **UN Women's Response:**

Empowering women in rural areas requires much more than political commitment, it requires that we better understand the deeply rooted causes that drive much of the inequality women and girls in rural areas face. The solution, therefore, goes far beyond addressing the immediate agricultural concerns, to addressing the need for a systematic shift in power dynamics that creates a space for women and girls in rural areas to have an equal playing field. Today, that is not the case, and evidence tells us that more than 50% of rural women lack literacy skills, poor rural women are less likely to have access to the internet and technology, and a rural girl is two times more likely to be forced into marriage as a child compared to her counterparts in urban areas.

UN Women's response to this is a comprehensive intervention, focusing on removing barriers to inequalities and empowering women and girls, men and boys at the community and national level to become policy influencers and shape the development of their countries.

Specifically, UN Women is promoting income generation and women's income security by expanding decent work opportunities and access to gender-responsive social protection. Working in partnership with other UN agencies, UN Women provides vocational training and opportunities that enable women to connect to the broader market, coupled with policy revision and reform to ensure a safe and fair working environment for women and

men. Recognizing the importance of ICT literacy, UN Women has created a platform that allows women to access real-time financial information, mobile payment, and ICT capacity building.

Beyond direct support to women farmers, UN Women recognizes the inter-sectoral nature of gender inequalities, and couples agricultural technology, access to opportunities, with work on food security, nutrition and ending violence against women and girls. One example of empowerment through targeted interventions is in Egypt, where UN Women has worked with Villages Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA). A total of 1,036 VSLA groups in Upper Egypt were established, comprising 18,844 members (92% of which are women). The VSLA methodology is designed to target poor and marginalized women in rural communities and enables them, through participation in the savings and loan groups, to better manage household cash in an efficient and flexible manner, while investing in income generating activities that can secure and stabilize cash income. In addition, VSLA members receive trainings on social empowerment and financial illiteracy. Over the past 3.5 years, weekly savings have increased 3 to 4 times, demonstrating women's confidence in managing their own capital.

### **The Importance of Partnerships:**

UN Women's work on empowering rural women and girls would not be feasible without targeted partnerships and the expertise of other UN agencies, civil society and member states to mention but a few. None of UN Women's work is done in isolation. Capitalizing on the expertise of each partner, UN Women works with agencies such as WFP, FAO, UNDP, UNFPA to mention but a few. Each agency is a leading actor in their area of expertise and niche. UN Women brings a strong UN coordination and normative mandate to the table, which means that existing solutions by other stakeholders, that have been proven to work, can be adapted to have a strong women's empowerment element. In doing this, the outreach is far greater, and the impact larger. Empowering women in rural areas goes beyond empowering their families alone, ensuring women's leadership is crucial in making communities more resilient to climate change and increase food security.

In all the countries where UN Women is active,

<sup>5</sup> UN Women infographic

women-led civil society organizations are key to successful implementation. Ensuring that community driven solutions are at the front and center means a greater chance for crossfertilization of knowledge, and long term success in programming as the ownership remains at the local level.

At the regional level, UN Women partners with key organizations and inter-governmental bodies as an entry point for policy dialogue. This includes, inter alia, the Union for the Mediterranean, the African Union, the Arab League, etc. Having a space for inter and intra-regional dialogue is imperative to strengthen political buy in and will and to share best practices among member states.

### **Conclusion:**

Agenda 2030 sets forth an ambitious agenda for sustainable development, it calls upon all of us to do our part. As the world is increasingly becoming more urbanized and digitized, the notion of leaving

no one behind becomes all the more important. If we do not invest in rural areas and do not invest in the lives of women and girls who live there, we will not be able to progress, we will not achieve food security, make communities resilient to shock, and be able to bounce back from natural disasters. To increase productivity and efficiency in an environmentally sound manner, we cannot leave half of the population – the very half who often know their communities best – behind. Meaningful engagement of women in all decision making processes, meaningful engagement of women in income generation and productive employment is the key to sustainable development. That was clear during the Commission on the Status of Women, in the hundreds of events organized by member states and civil society on the margins, and that remains clear in the evidence we have, the statistics we gather and the changing environment around us. Agenda 2030 is our collective responsibility, now we must step up to ensure a sustainable, prosperous and equal future for all women and men, boys and girls.

