

**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



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

