

**United Nations Commission on the Status of Women**  
**Fifty-sixth session**  
**27 February – 9 March 2012**  
**New York**

**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

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

**Focus: Economic Empowerment of Rural Women**

**PROMOTING RURAL WOMEN'S ACCESS TO INCOME-  
GENERATING OPPORTUNITIES AND SOCIAL  
PROTECTION**

by

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## **Introduction**

Rural areas are heterogeneous in terms of income generating activities. While agriculture remains the main source of livelihood for the majority of rural population in developing countries, a large proportion of rural households modify their economic activities in a variety of ways under different conditions. Farm households may intensify, extensify or diversify their agricultural production or expand their activities outside agriculture. Rural income diversification is nowadays rather a norm than an exception: among 25 studies conducted on rural income sources in Sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of non-farm income was on the average 45 per cent of the household's total income.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear also among the OECD countries that farm households derive a significant share

start-up capital, are typical income earning activities of rural women in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Entry barriers, including the need for initial investments, may prevent women from participating and seizing the opportunities offered by the more dynamic segments of the rural non-farm sector.<sup>5</sup> Girls and women in rural areas often have more limited access to education than boys and men, which combined with their household responsibilities means that they are more involved in informal than formal employment. Lack of basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy and negotiating power, and vocational education prevent rural women

The country reviews<sup>9</sup> revealed that farm women work mainly in professional or managerial

workers on family farms, and as paid or unpaid laborers on other farms or agricultural enterprises.

In many regions women's responsibilities in agricultural production have increased as men have migrated to urban areas or abroad in search of better opportunities. The Eastern Zambia case study<sup>13</sup> revealed that woman-headed households are 30 per

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depopulation, with a higher proportion of youth and women leaving creating an unbalanced gender structure. In the rural municipalities close to urban areas the level of wellbeing is higher and average income above the national average.<sup>20</sup> These areas offer good employment opportunities also for women. Experience has proved in Finland that different rural areas call for differentiated rural development measures.

We need also better, localized and gendered understanding of the functioning of the labor, land and credit markets and of the demand for goods and services produced in rural areas in order to realistically analyze constraints and opportunities for rural women's income generation.

### **Promoting rural women's economic empowerment and income generation**

Addressing rural women's economic empowerment efficiently calls for legislative and policy level changes, institutional reforms as well as concrete and small steps at the grassroots level. Closing the gender gap in agriculture and rural development increases agricultural production, improves food and nutrition security, promotes pro-poor growth and strengthens long-term national economic development.

First of all, the development measures should be based on better and context-specific understanding of rural women's income generating capacities, constraints and opportunities. This requires gender disaggregated data collection and analyses and information also on rural women's time use, asset ownership, unpaid and paid work and income as well as on their physical, institutional, social and economic environment.

As the economic disparity between urban and rural areas is increasing in many countries, there is a need for comprehensive, gender-sensitive rural development policies and programs that take the specificities of rural areas into account. In addition, it is necessary to integrate rural development and gender issues into sectoral policies and programs and also monitor the impact of sectoral policy measures on rural development, including their impact on rural women.

Addressing the prevailing gender inequalities in income generation requires institutional reforms that support women's access to education as well as to land, credits and other productive resources. It is also essential for the governments to ensure that laws guarantee equal rights for men and women to control assets and receive services. More equal sharing of the household duties, up-graded social services in rural areas and introduction of labor-saving technologies would free up women's time for more remunerative uses.

Ensuring women's access to decent work requires particular attention. Implementation of international labor standards at the national level through sound labor legislation, codes of

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<sup>20</sup> OECD 2008. Rural Policy Reviews: Finland.



conduct and ethical standards will establish the basis for decent employment.<sup>21</sup> In addition, rural women would benefit from awareness raising and education on labor conditions and employment rights. Tailor made social protection programs that target gender specific vulnerabilities can prevent the most vulnerable women from falling into ever deepening poverty.

The new information and communication technology makes a difference in rural development. In particular mobile phones appear to reduce the physical labor of travel to discover information and the transaction costs of money transfer, and increase the ability of women entrepreneurs to coordinate all their duties also in developing countries.<sup>22</sup> Ensuring that rural women have access to ICT may significantly contribute to their economic empowerment.

The participation of rural women in the preparation and implementation of rural policies and programs is a must. For example the Finnish Rural Development Policy has greatly benefitted from the work of the Women's Working Group for Rural Development that has introduced women's perspectives in a previously male dominated policy. In addition, rural women's active participation in the Local Action Groups has contributed to more gender-sensitive local level development.

Rural women's own organizations play an important role in women's social and economic empowerment. In Finland these organizations have mobilized rural women and established a platform for learning and sharing, raising women's self-esteem and giving them a voice throughout the past decades. Rural female entrepreneurs have also established new organizations, including cooperatives and resource centers, to support networking and collective action in marketing of products and services. Invaluable social capital has been built among rural women through these org(v)-5.91

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