

Rural Women, Partner in the Development Process

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Despite some notable progress, gender inequalities persist worldwide, particularly in rural areas.

About 600 people, representing 63 countries and 20 international institutions, participated in an international conference organized by the National Union for the Women of Morocco, on “Rural Woman, Partner in the Development Process” in Rabat from March 8 to 10, 2013. The conference was endorsed by Princess Lalla Meryem and supported by the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Fisheries, the National Initiative for Human Development, the United Nations Development Program, and the Islamic Organization for Education, Sciences and Cultures. Morocco has shown leadership in promoting gender equity within its political and legislative frameworks, and its efforts have laid a foundation for women to play a more important role in the social and political development of the country; however, challenges persist.

The overall purpose of the conference was to serve as an international platform to exchange experiences on empowerment for rural women and to provide recommendations to the United Nations Economic and Social Council to better account for rural women in the post-2015 Millennium Development Goals. Aside from the recommendations, eight key messages can be highlighted from the conference. This briefing note describes these key messages.

1. Rural women play a key role in economic growth and food security.

Rural women are not equal partners in the development process in most countries, despite the fact that approximately one person in four falls into this demographic.¹ Indeed, it is often in rural areas that socioeconomic disparities between men and women are the most acute. According to the United Nations, women are generally three times less likely to find employment than men and, despite representing 70 per cent of the rural labour force, three out of four are unpaid. They thus often exist in the shadow of their male counterparts. Securing rural women's access to, and control over, resources (e.g., land, livestock, water, salary coming from their activities) can contribute to poverty reduction and the economic growth of an entire country.

Rural women also play a key role in food security. Their exact contribution cannot accurately be determined as women typically share the various tasks of food production with men.^{2 3} The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that if women had the same access to agricultural resources that men have, agricultural production could increase by 2.5 to 4 per cent and feed an additional 100 to 150 million people.⁴ Rural women play a key role in such activities as seed selection, livestock management, and crop gardening. Women have valuable traditional knowledge and, as stewards of agro-biodiversity, they have an important role to play in food security and climate change adaptation. Promoting rural women-led farming makes good economic sense.

2. Rural women are diverse and are facing new conditions.

The focus on rural women calls for an understanding of the relationships between women and men in rural areas (horizontal linkages) as well as the relationships between rural and urban areas (vertical linkages). Educating rural women will not be enough—there is a need to engage with and educate men as well. Ultimately, the approach should focus more on gender and familial issues than on women or feminism per se. It should also integrate a land-use context specific approach to account for sociocultural, economic and geographical differences. For example, gender issues in the Atlas region are not the same as in the Sahara region of Morocco. At the same time, workshop participants highlighted a range of similar, cross-cutting issues that rural women face across continents and countries. Rural women everywhere are living in a rapidly changing world, and conditions for women in rural areas should be studied in the current context of change (e.g., impacts of wars and conflicts on rural women—in Mali and the Sahel region in general, in Palestine in particular; impacts of the economic crisis in Europe on rural women; impact of globalization on biodiversity and rural women; impact of fair trade on rural women; impacts of migrations on rural women).

¹ wdi.worldbank.org/table/3.1

² www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf

³ It has been reported that 60 to 80 per cent of agricultural products from developing countries are grown by women but this figure has been challenged by the FAO since food is typically produced in developing countries by both women and men (www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf).

⁴ www.fao.org/docrep/014/am719e/am719e00.pdf

3. Rural women continue to be subject to various types of violence.

Two-thirds of rural women are subject to physical, psychological and economic violence.⁵ Economic violence refers to their lack of access to, and control over, key resources (e.g., land, water, livestock and energy). While rural women make up to 70 per cent of the active population,⁶ they have only 20 per cent of agricultural rights. Indeed, 70 per cent do not have land access, and approximately 17 per cent do not have access to inheritance after the death of a parent or husband (a trend that has recently changed in some countries such as Morocco). In many countries, men continue to keep the status of employer because they have access to, and control over, land through inheritance. Empowering rural women by facilitating their access to agricultural land and resources often requires changing existing formal and informal laws and regulations. Educated women are often discriminated against by men who prevent them from realizing their full potential. In the context of wars and conflicts, the issue of rape has to be addressed as a key priority. Women continue to be subject to violence even in relief and refugee camps. One way to address this issue would be to involve women in the management of these camps. To address the issue of violence facing women, the FAO calls for a human rights approach.

4. Promoting the education of rural women and supporting gender equity through capacity building and awareness raising of women and men must remain a top priority for governments.

Transformative change cannot be achieved with new policies and strategies alone; it also requires awareness raising and capacity building. Eradicating illiteracy among rural women should remain a top priority and, in many cases, this requires a reform of the current education system. Adequate educational programs for rural women are imperative for their full participation in development initiatives, and the programs need to be accessible and relevant to the cultural contexts in which women live. Appropriate information-sharing systems need to be developed, as well as pedagogical tools and educational, advocacy and counselling centres. In addition, continuous training should help women access modern technology and provide guidance on agricultural production. When provided in certain contexts where local culture is a barrier to change, awareness raising and gender equity training programs for men and women could enhance mutual understanding and enable a shift in mentality towards (and within) rural women. The limited role imposed on rural women is a cultural pattern passed down from generation to generation and must change. Raising awareness of the possibilities to improve their situation is fundamental. Enabling dialogue among rural women in various parts of the world and linking them to women living in urban settings can facilitate this change. Gender equity awareness for local elites and decision-makers is also important, as women need to be integrated within the decision-making spheres so they can initiate change. Weak government planning and cultural barriers that typically ignore the needs of rural women are formidable obstacles to empowerment. There is a need to build the capacity of women to facilitate their participation in local development policies.

⁵ www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/endviol/

⁶ www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf; www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/facts-figures.html.

5. Political and legislative progress towards gender equity is being made in various countries, but implementation remains a challenge.

In various countries, politics and laws to promote gender equity are already in place, and gender studies have already been undertaken. In Morocco, for example, important legislative reforms have been made, including the revision of the election code to improve women's participation and the integration of men's and women's political, social, and environmental equality in the new 2011 constitution.⁷ Currently, the Government of Morocco is also undertaking a reform to mainstream gender issues into the national budget. The King of Morocco has recognized that women need to play a bigger role in the political and economic development of the country. In practice, the country's National Initiative for Human Development launched in 2005 is supposed to support this vision by improving women's access to health infrastructures. In Palestine, gender has already been mainstreamed in key policies and a gender unit has been formed. However, in most countries the implementation of existing policies and strategies often remains a major challenge (e.g., Morocco, Croatia). Despite progress, strategies are often not followed by action plans, and the condition of rural women in Morocco, as in many countries, remains a major concern. Governments and civil societies often accumulate various isolated actions towards gender equity without clear linkages to existing strategies. Development policies should, therefore, also have gender indicators to monitor and evaluate progress. The participation of rural women in local government still needs improvement: they should be involved in the crafting, development and implementation of local policies. Establishing quotas for women in local government remains controversial but is often viewed as necessary. It is essential to establish normative and legal frameworks for equal opportunities and access to resources between men and women.

6. The economic empowerment of rural women requires better access to, and control over, key resources including information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The economic life of rural women continues to be mainly limited to the household. To encourage rural development we need to empower rural women. The role of women in the agricultural sector should be improved by expanding their involvement beyond production to the levels of transformation, distribution and commercialization, traditionally dominated by men. Women need to exploit every possibility within the entire product value chain to receive better levels of remuneration. Gender equity product standards and certification schemes could be developed to garner premiums among potential consumers. Enhancing women's participation in trade will require improving their entrepreneurship skills as well as their access to financial assistance, micro-finance and cooperatives. Rural women should have better access to distribution and information networks, and communication technologies to commercialize their products and increase their incomes. This may involve reforming agrarian laws or enhancing subsidies that empower women (i.e., support for children's nutrition, and education and tax waivers for land ownership). Both the public and private sectors need to promote the role of women and empower them to be more active in socioeconomic development by providing them with more means and resources to improve their condition.

⁷ Fourteen important gender equity directives have been included in the Moroccan constitution.

7. Rural women remain invisible in the media or are typically pictured as stereotypes.

The media should play a key role in promoting gender equity; however, in most countries the media is absent in rural areas. In addition to the lack of journalists able to report on the status of rural women, the limited information provided often continues to convey stereotypes such as photographs depicting them always carrying water and firewood. These stereotypes should be changed to promote a new image of the rural woman (e.g., showing rural women selling their products through the Internet). There is still a tendency to impose a specific image of what development for rural women means, without involving rural women themselves. Governments, in collaboration with civil societies and the private sector, should facilitate rural women's access to the media and to ICTs. In many countries, the invisibility of rural women is further exacerbated by the lack of gender-disaggregated data. This reality is reflected in the absence of historical documents of women recounting their significant contributions to development.

8. Establishing strategic networks is imperative to improving the condition of rural women.

Networking can be a catalyst for women's empowerment because a critical mass is necessary to initiate change. Establishing networks at national and regional levels is important to prevent women's isolation and enable advocacy for their rights. For instance, in many developing countries women lack the customary right to own land: therefore, structured lobbies and laws are needed to protect their rights and help them fight for their needs. Women need to learn to work together, and women's associations can be strengthened if they are organized. These networks can provide rural women with a much-needed platform upon which they can advocate for their needs and empower them to become more active participants and beneficiaries of sustainable development. For instance, rural women networks can contribute to protecting fundamental rights and facilitate access to capacity building opportunities, media and financing.

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