



Measures to Improve the Lives of Women and Children in Rural Areas

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Introduction

Improving the lives of women and children in rural areas is a major problem for the United Nations (UN). While global attention has shifted to the immense migration of people from the countryside to cities, where a majority of the world's people soon will live, difficulties of rural life remain serious and hard to address. Rural poverty and deprivation are the basis for migration to cities and foreign countries, the engine driving global social dislocation and tensions. Unless it is addressed effectively, problems caused by mass migration can only worsen.

For women and children in the countryside, problems often are much worse. They often are left behind or abandoned when men move away in search of work. Resources and services are scarcer, increasing the suffering of those left behind. This adds to pressure for women and children to join the global migration to the cities and foreign countries.

Many women and children suffer and face hardships because of inequality, social disadvantages, endemic poverty and deprivation. Unfortunately, women and children in many impoverished countries, and especially those remote from centers of wealth and power, do not have the voice and opportunity to fully make a change. It is important to improve the lives of women and children everywhere, and especially in developing countries. Despite the fact that women and children often have the least opportunities, they are the future of the world. There is agreement among global leaders that the UN system should take action to create

resolutions for the unfortunate women and children, especially in rural areas.¹



Picking through garbage in rural India.
Credit: Associated Press

The scale of the problem was outlined by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Director of the agency *UN Women*, when she explained that:

‘Rural Women make up 25 per cent of the world's population and in developing countries they make up 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force that produces much of the world's food.’

‘It is no wonder that the Secretary-General calls rural women the backbone of rural communities, where in many households, they have the key responsibility for food security, education opportunities and healthcare.’

‘And yet that backbone is under threat, as increasingly, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation are forcing

¹ Lakshmi Puri, ‘Rural Women’s Empowerment — the Road to Gender Equality & Sustainable Development, IPS-Inter Press Service, 7 May 2018,

<http://www.ipsnews.net/2018/03/rural-womens-empowerment-road-gender-equality-sustainable-development/>



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rural women to migrate in search of land where they can produce food and improve their families' lives. This leads to instability, isolation, and marginalization. Frequently, male family members leave to seek work elsewhere...'

'Food and agricultural initiatives often disregard differences in the roles, labour burdens, assets and access to resources of rural men and women. But if women in rural areas had the same access to land, technology, financial services, education and markets as men, they could increase agricultural production and reduce the number of hungry people – and among those, the women and girls who often eat least,' she added.'²

With these problems in mind, in 2009 the United Nations General Assembly passed a path breaking resolution calling for the *Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas* (A/RES/64/140).³ The resolution was a first for the Member States of the UN, in which they recognized that problems of poverty cannot be solved through one-size, single-dimensional policies aimed at alleviating all poverty.

Instead, the UN agreed, some problems are more serious and harder to solve. Poverty, especially rural poverty, is gendered; its consequences often are worse for women. Responses by the international community must address women's specific needs. Otherwise, they will waste resources and fail to alleviate the problems they are supposed to be targeted at.

General Assembly Resolution 64/140 of 2009 also stands out for setting a precedent of focusing on Member State governments, asking them to recognize the gendered aspects of global rural poverty and adjust their national policies to better match these needs. Too many countries, the resolution inferred, have policies that are superficial or deceptive. By addressing all poverty together, governments effectively leave women out of the picture. This happens despite the fact that women often are crucial decision-makers, and essential as the victims and potential solution to rural poverty.

The most forceful initiative by the 193 Member States of the United Nations comes through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in 2015 to guide global development priorities through the year 2030.⁴ Alleviating the poverty of women and children is a prominent part of the SDGs, especially Goals One and Six, on Poverty and Women.⁵ But agreeing on concrete action, especially for women and children in hard to reach places, has been harder. Differences between member States of spending, control over aid programs, and political oversight continues to inhibit action. There is much more for the Member States to do to ensure that action matches goals.

² 'Rural women's empowerment critical to UN Sustainable Development Agenda – Ban', UN News, 15 October 2016,

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/10/542882-rural-womens-empowerment-critical-un-sustainable-development-agenda-ban>

³ 'Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 2009, 64/140, *Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas*, <http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/64/140>

⁴ *Empowering women and girls in rural areas to achieve the SDGs and Africa's Agenda 2063*, UN Women, 13 March 2018,

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/3/news-csw62-empower-women-and-girls-in-rural-areas-to-achieve-sdgs-and-african-agenda-2063>

⁵ *Sustainable Development Goals*, New York: United Nations, n.d., <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>



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Hard life
Credit: Mallika Aryal/IPS

Background

The UN General Assembly works to find solutions for human rights and controversial issues pertaining to a certain demographics within a society. Therefore, working towards goals that express a humanitarian policy with Member States take action to debate and solve social problems. Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural) strives to maintain human rights. It focuses on social issues that affect broad demographic groups, including disparities in education, life-span, political, and social rights, rights of children, discrimination, drug control and crime.

These social issues are most likely affected by the security of the states such as, lacking resources, hunger, scarcity of water, and climate change. Lack of education makes all of these problems substantially worse, since the victims may be unaware of their rights or avenues for seeking help.

For example, between the years of 2000 to 2008, statistics show that in 42 countries, women and children in rural areas were most likely to not be

enrolled in school or receive an education compared to women and children in urban areas were much more likely to have access to education, health care, employment and support services. Rural women represent over two-thirds of the 796 million people in the world who are illiterate. With the illiteracy of women and children in rural areas comes extreme poverty and hunger, which often makes it a liability to members of their households.

As of 2011, almost 70 percent of women were unemployed, lacking resources to provide for themselves and family. This leads to malnutrition and underweight children, making all their problems worse. In these impoverished areas also comes poor health services and rampant disease. Women and children in rural areas are most likely to be exposed to disease, most vulnerable to infection, and often least able to seek treatment.

Globally, girls and women 15 years old and older are most likely to be exposed to or living with the HIV transmitted disease. Reducing the risk of infection is just one of the problems women and children in rural areas have to deal with. In recent studies, the average life-span of women in rural areas is marked lower than women in towns and cities, where support services are more readily available.

For all these disadvantages, ironically, it is women in rural regions who are responsible for much or most support for their families. Although deprived themselves, they are expected to provide most of the food, clothing and shelter for their children. If women are not educated, it is unlikely their children, especially their daughters will be, too. The list of gendered responsibilities is long, creating a long list of unmet responsibilities and needs.⁶

⁶ Jamison Ervin, , 'Rural communities: A hotspot for sustainable development', *United Nations Development Fund*, 15 February 2017,

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2017/2/15/Rural-communities-a-hotspot-for-sustainable-development-.html>



Current Situation

Rural women and children face not just problems of discrimination, but manifold social disadvantages. These disadvantages make the rural women and child lack human rights with a consistency of being able to live a life just as urban women and children. Today, rural women and children are the most likely to be poor, lack access to assets, education, healthcare, essential services, and to be affected by climate change. Rural women and children make their own communities and they work hard to keep them functioning, which is why rural women and children deserve full protection of labor rights.

Around the world, one-third of all women work in agriculture. An enormous number of rural women are limited to economic opportunities in the hopes of finding better work. Rural women are diverse with experiences in care and domestic work but, they are not covered by labor laws or social protection measures. Rural women have experience in working within agriculture but have unequal access to land and other productive assets needed for income, food, childcare, and a well-being. Rural women and children in underdeveloped countries such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, Cambodia, and Liberia have a life expectancy of 64 percent. Meaning rural women and their children face 64 percent chance premature death, due to the conditions they live in.

According to the UNICEF (United Nations Children Fund) the worst conditions often involves countries with weak revenue and armed conflict such as South Sudan, regions of Nigeria and Syria, all affected by have an extensive concern on child malnutrition which results from poverty. UNICEF also identified heightened risk for rural children of poor access to education, and poor ability to get it when it is available. In some parts of the world, especially in Africa and South Asia and Southeast Asia, 25 percent of children never attend school, and many of the rest never receive more than rudimentary instruction.

Even wealthy countries are not immune to the effects and dangers of rural poverty. In the United States, for example, rural populations are declining, and taking essential services with them, leaving residents in worse and worse situations. As populations drop, schools and clinics close, social services are relocated further away, and people become more isolated. Population loss for rural America as a whole has averaged just -0.07 percent annually in recent years. But this loss has not been evenly distributed across all rural counties. The number rural counties losing population reached an historic high of 1,351 during 2010-16, with a combined population loss of just under 790,000.

Poverty, conflict and discrimination against girls are putting more than 1.2 billion children – over half of children around the globe – at risk for an early end to their childhood. Many of these at-risk children live in countries facing two or three of these grave threats at the same time. In fact, 153 million children worldwide are at extreme risk of missing out on the childhood they deserve because they live in countries characterized by all three threats. Many Americans think child poverty is an urban issue. But in 2016, 23.5 percent of children in rural areas were impoverished as compared to 18.8 percent in urban areas. On the county level, between 2012 and 2016, 41 counties in the United States had child poverty rates of 50 percent or higher, 93 percent of which (38 out of 41) were rural.

Role of the United Nations

Historically the most important role of the UN in this field has been drawing attention to the problem and establishing priorities for global action. The UN works most effectively when it can count on close cooperation with Member



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States.⁷ The UN has had less success persuading Member States of cooperate as donor and recipient governments to invest more systematically on these problems.

In 2005 a landmark UN Secretary-General Report established global priorities for action on the poverty of women and children in rural areas.⁸ Priorities outlined there include:

- Establishing land and property rights for women, including rights of control over property after marriage and equal inheritance rights.
- Establishing access to credit, to start and maintain farms and small businesses.
- Strengthen support for public goods, especially shared grazing areas and water resources.
- Employment and income-generating programs, allowing women and their children to benefit from the economy outside the home.
- Education and training, including primary education for adults and children, and especially education for women in agricultural communities.
- Support for women's decision-making authority, enabling them to make independent decisions over their income, property, children, employment and work.
- Attention to household structure and gender, so women are able to move freely outside the homes, in their fields, villages and communities, without fear of attack.
- Migration, where women are especially at risk of intimidation and violence, including sexual violence.
- HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support services.

Although the issues are not without controversy, the Member States of the United Nations agree that women and children in rural areas can collectively drive global progress. Women can contribute and benefit from the transformational economic, environmental and social changes that are required for sustainable development. To act on these achievements the Member States must first address the discrimination and deprivation that women and children in rural areas endure. Many women and children lack a great grave of security such as, access to land, markets, finance, social protection and services.



Who does jobs no one wants to do?
Credit: Oxfam

Most of these discriminatory laws and practices include governing inheritance and gender biased land reform that privileges men over women. UN Women Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka stated that women's rights to access, use, ownership and control of land and other resources will help women claim their land within gender inequality. It is critical for UN women to address these concerns for women's rights and to promote the leadership of rural women shaping laws and policies. For instance in 2008, *The International Day For Rural Women* was created by the UN General Assembly. Also, OHCHR (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) is working to maintain every child and women in a rural area to have a sustainable life. Ultimately the UN plays a role in improving women and

⁷ 'Rural women', *UN Women*, 2018, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/rural-women>

⁸ *Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas: report of the Secretary-General, A/60/165.*

New York: United Nations, 2005, https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mai/nsite/policy_and_research/un/60/A_60_165_en.pdf



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children's rural development, food security, natural disasters and rural poverty.

A wide range of UN agencies can be called upon to help implement policies. From the focus on education of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to the efforts of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to abolish child labor, to the Children and Youth Programme of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), to the nutritional work for mothers and young children provided by the World Food Programme (WFP), to disease-eradication campaigns by the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN system is there for children.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have proven an especially strong foundation for coordinating global action. Since all UN Member States accepted the SDGs by consensus, support is strong. Many specific SDGs are aimed at the needs of rural women.⁹

What none of these organizations or programs have are large budgets. If asked to focus more on the problems of rural women and children, they require new funding, or cuts to existing programs.

Country and Bloc Positions

African Union (AU): Improving the lives of marginalized and impoverished women and children in rural areas is important for all African countries. There is growing recognition that only rural development can slow migration to the cities or out of their home country.

African Member States welcome coordinated assistance, but divide on how to channel it. Some welcome aid and donor government oversight to ensure the highest possible

effectiveness. Others demand that aid first be coordinated with their domestic policies and goals; they want to maintain their own national oversight. And a few African Union states face difficult domestic political problems, and face pressure to allocate foreign aid through supportive individuals and groups, even at the risk of corrupt activity, or giving unfair advantages to privileged groups.

China has greatly built up its foreign aid program and welcomes opportunities to invest in rural health and welfare, as well as projects that support rural women and children. While China sees itself as a developing country—with hundreds of millions of people still in rural poverty—and prefers that other countries show more generosity, it is willing to act globally, under some circumstances. Sometimes it expects commercial advantages for its development assistance, which some accuse it of viewing as an investment above all. But China is willing to invest and accepts some degree of international coordination and supervision.

European Union: the 28 Member States of the EU are highly supportive of the SDG process and coordination of development assistance. They are especially sensitive to the plight of women and children left behind after waves of migration. Generous with their development budgets, with strong public support at home, they also demand high standards of accountability, making sure that programs in recipient states are effective, that benefits reach their intended targets. They are willing to sacrifice control to assure results, but insist on careful oversight and careful measures of effective implementation. They are less enthusiastic about new funding, however, and may insist that new programs be funded by cutting old ones.

Latin America receives less foreign assistance than it used to, as its economies have developed.

⁹ Monica Evans, 'To realize the Sustainable Development Goals, focus on rural women', *Global Landscapes Forum*, 18 October 2018,

<https://news.globallandscapesforum.org/30371/to-realize-the-sustainable-development-goals-focus-on-rural-women/>



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In Central America, a special problem is promoting security, so that investment will be effective. This means first finding way to reduce crime and corruption. Other parts of Latin America are highly supportive of coordinated assistance, including help to women and children in rural areas. But politically these areas and groups are weaker and less likely to get the help they need, their fair share. Overcoming those hurdles remains a widespread regional issue.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): The 120 Member States of UN's largest voting bloc expect the world's richer countries to contribute to global development goals, including aiding rural women and children. They welcome foreign assistance, but ask that new projects not endanger old ones. They often resist foreign oversight over the way aid is spent, preferring to maximize their national control—ostensibly in defense of sovereignty—when possible. There is disagreement among the NAM member states on this important issues.

The United States is reducing its foreign aid investments, dealing with global inequality by strengthening its borders and military action abroad. It still invests in development assistance and support aid to rural women and children, so long as assistance does not increase spending.

America's general preference is for more action by for-profit corporations and non-governmental, especially religiously based organizations, that also help marginalized populations. This makes the United States a weaker actor that it used to be, and increasingly isolated in international bodies like 3rd Committee. This seems acceptable to the country's current leadership and politically popular with many of its voters.

Proposals for Action

Establish national and regional poverty observatories to better monitor the needs of

local residents. Without hard data, it is impossible to allocate development and humanitarian assistance correctly. It is impossible to measure the needs of women and the kind of programs required to alleviate suffering. Observatories—staffed by trained social scientists experts on nutrition, agriculture, the environment and women's needs—offer break through benefits in aid targeting and program decision-making. An advantage of observatories is they facilitate better policy, but do not dictate what those policies should be. They leave implementation up to the Member States, be they aid donors or host countries.

But poverty observatories are not without controversy. Many donor and host country governments resent the loss of control over aid programs. The most support comes from host governments in Latin America and parts of Africa, and donor governments in Europe, Australia, Canada and Japan. Opposition comes from some major donor governments, suspicious at the loss of control, such as Russia and the United States, and recipient countries like India and some African governments, suspicious about the loss of control in allocating aid beneficiaries. Other countries such as China, are cautious on the issue, but generally follow the global consensus.

Call for a conference to coordinate aid to better deal with the problems of rural poverty among women and children. A conference could be for donors only, or include donors and recipient countries. The General Assembly could establish the goals for a conference as well, instructing it to set specific targets for poverty reduction. While most Member States like the idea of coordinating development assistance, some—such as China and the United States—prefer to maintain control over the way their assistance is spent. Even some recipient states prefer to maximize their control over funds and projects in their territory.

Set target goals for female rural poverty alleviation. Widely discussed targets include faster progress to eliminate these severest forms



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of rural poverty, eliminating the greater suffering of women and children, or requiring donors to be more generous in their support. General targets are established in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, but many donors especially believe these are too vague and too patient, calling for eradication of rural poverty by the year 2030.

Recommend female management of aid and development programs designed to assist and empower women. Without direct supervision by women, it is argued, programs are vulnerable to diversion away from their designed goals. Aid

and development money can be re-directed toward goals aimed at men, especially when men are more political powerful. Ensuring that women benefit, as designed, might require stronger intervention in the design of these programs. But requiring female leadership is controversial. Many Member States lack sufficient numbers of trained female development professionals, others are cautious about granting authority to women, while many resent being told what to do goals for female development leadership will have to be negotiated with supportive and skeptical governments.

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(Note: this report of GA debates is the best summary of specific country positions on the issue)

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