



Investing in skills for socio-economic empowerment of rural women

Skills development is key to improving rural productivity, employability and income-earning opportunities, enhancing food security and promoting environmentally sustainable rural development and livelihoods. Despite rural women's major role in agriculture and other rural activities, higher barriers in education and training limit their participation in more productive and remunerative work, perform managerial and leadership roles and participate fully in the development of their communities. Targeted action is needed to dismantle these barriers.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Education and training are powerful tools against poverty and hunger, and for women's empowerment. Educated women are more likely to be healthier, have higher earnings and exercise greater decision-making power within the household.¹ Evidence from some African² and South Asian³ countries show that they are also more likely to ensure that their own children are educated, thus breaking the cycle of poverty and hunger.
- Over two-thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate people are women,⁴ many of whom live in rural areas. In Cambodia, 48% of rural women and 14% of rural men are unable to read or write.⁵ In Burkina Faso, the illiteracy rate for women is 78% compared to 63% for men.⁶ The global secondary school attendance ratio of rural girls is 39% as opposed to 45% for rural boys (compared to 59% and 60% of urban girls and boys respectively).⁷
- When women receive the same levels of education, experience and farm inputs as men, there are no significant differences in male and female farmers' productivity.⁸
- Evidence from Asia suggests that better education enables rural workers to find high-paying non-farm employment, whereas a lack of education tends to limit their choices to agricultural and low-wage non-farm employment.⁹
- From a developmental perspective, investing in girls' education has the highest rate of return of any possible investment in developing countries:¹⁰ educated mothers have fewer children and are also more likely to send them to school, thereby raising the productivity of future generations, increasing their income, and generating sustainable growth.¹¹

WHY IS ACTION NEEDED?

Education and training are essential components of any strategy to improve agricultural and non-farm productivity and pull households out of poverty. Learning about improved production technologies and methods, new products and markets, business and life skills (such as health management, decision-making, self confidence, or conflict management) can make a big difference.¹² Skills development is particularly important to rural women who are more likely to be contributing family workers, subsistence farmers or home-based micro-entrepreneurs in the informal sector, or performing low-paid, unskilled work as seasonal workers.¹³ Women often have different training needs than men, linked to their domestic work and care responsibilities, as well as to gender-based divisions of labour for managing or undertaking specific tasks in crop, livestock, forestry or fish production and processing.

1. Gender biases in education and training start early and accumulate

- Primary and secondary school enrolment has improved significantly for rural girls in many countries.⁷ Yet, rural girls generally continue to suffer disadvantages in access that tend to accumulate throughout their lives as basic education is often a prerequisite for further skills development. Thus, women receive less vocational training than men.¹³
- Women are less likely than men to be reached by agricultural extension workers. From the last available official survey (1988), only 7% of agricultural extension services in Africa were directed to women farmers and only about 11% of all extension personnel were women.¹⁴
- Women make less use of formal or informal apprenticeship systems,¹⁵ which often operate in male-dominated trades.



- Self-employed women are not regarded as entrepreneurs in many rural communities and thus have difficulty accessing entrepreneurship development training and services.

2. Social, cultural and economic constraints can limit rural girls' and women's education and training

- Social norms: some household decision makers have negative attitudes towards educating girls and give lower priority to girls' education, especially if women's remuneration is lower than men's and employment opportunities are scarce. In addition, girls are seen as relatively "transitory assets", not worthy of long-term investment, as they often leave their parents' household upon marriage. As families tend to rely significantly on girls to help with household chores, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for younger siblings, there are also higher opportunity costs for girls' education in most cultures.¹⁶

BOX 1 Girl-friendly schools see enrolments soar in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, where 73% of all girls never finish primary school, the Burkinabé Response to Improve Girls Chances to Succeed (BRIGHT) project implemented by Plan International in 2005-2008, increased enrolment, retention and graduation rates among girls through supportive learning environments and child-friendly classrooms. BRIGHT worked closely with local communities, that were able to acquire school furniture and textbooks, build houses for teachers to support recruitment and retention of good teachers, dig wells to provide safe drinking water in schools, and construct separate male and female latrine blocks and hand washing facilities. Students and communities were also taught sanitation and personal hygiene. Students received a midday meal and those attending at least 90% of the time received a take-home food ration. Some schools provided child care centres where mothers could leave their youngest so their older daughters could go to school while they worked in the fields. Enrolment often far exceeded original estimates and some classrooms now have more girls than boys.

Source: <http://plan-international.org/what-we-do/education/girl-friendly-schools-see-enrolment-rates-soar>

- Women's triple work burden: Women's reproductive responsibilities (household and farming cycles) restrict their time for training and economic activities and may be incompatible with fixed training times and duration.
- Gender-insensitive facilities: Long distances to schools/training institutions, lack of public transport, lack

of safe and accessible boarding, and sanitary facilities in schools/training institutions, as well as lack of female teachers and trainers, are factors which can greatly impede female education and training in rural areas.

- High cost for untailored curricula: Higher education and training fees may be prohibitive to women who often have little cash of their own and limited bargaining power to access household money for training. Furthermore, education and training curricula and delivery are not always adapted to women's learning needs.
- Unsuitable attitudes among trainers: Trainers and educators sometimes have discriminatory attitudes towards girls and women who often fear sexual harassment and insecurity in attending schools and training institutions.

3. Lower work status traps women in a vicious circle with limited development perspectives

- Rural women's limited access to productive resources, lower educational levels, and social norms about appropriate work for women tend to confine them to lower paid, lower status work where opportunities for skills training and advancement are reduced, thus perpetuating their lower status.
- Widespread patterns of insecure employment and temporary and precarious contractual arrangements in many rural enterprises discourage employers from offering training to women.
- Vocational education and training for rural women are often limited to a narrow range of female-dominated fields that reinforce their traditional roles and responsibilities. While improving their opportunities to generate income, such training limits the chances to benefit from newer, non-traditional fields, such as information and communication technologies (ICT), renewable energy and Non-Traditional Agricultural Export (NTAE) industries. These can offer women higher earnings, more skilled technical or managerial jobs,¹⁷ and greater opportunities to respond to environmental degradation and climate change.

WHAT ARE THE POLICY OPTIONS?

Skills development for rural women and men often requires a combination of training in formal settings (such as schools and training institutions) and



Training on new equipment in Côte d'Ivoire.

non-formal ones (such as community groups, NGOs, and learning from family and peers). It can comprise basic education, vocational and life skills training, entrepreneurship training, and agricultural extension services. Policy makers should design and implement a package of complementary measures to address the specific needs of rural people at different levels.

For children, the Ministry of Education should work together with relevant local authorities and partners to:

1. Stimulate participation in basic education¹⁸ with gender-sensitive approaches

Extend girls' participation in free, quality basic education on an equal basis with boys by promoting a gender-responsive learning environment¹⁶ which includes:

- Safe school facilities and separate sanitation facilities; safe and gender-friendly transport to schools and/or building of schools in strategic locations near underserved areas.
- School times and hours that allow for seasonal agricultural or household work.
- Incentives for teachers (including female ones) to work in rural areas.
- Legislation and/or school rules against sexual harassment¹⁶ and gender-awareness training for teachers.
- Improved curricula that respond to rural realities, such as combining agricultural training with conventional subjects. The Junior Farmer Field and Life School in Mozambique, for instance, has its own learning field where pupils grow vegetables. This "local curriculum" improves diets by introducing new vegetables to the community and teaches children practical skills.¹⁹
- Information, to raise parents' awareness about the importance of educating girls and financial incentives

(such as vouchers), and/or non-financial incentives (such as meals at school, take-home rations) for families of school children. Involving families and communities in planning and managing rural education systems can help ensure that they respond better to the needs and aspirations they have for their children.

- Gender sensitive curricula to improve the classroom environment and “dismantle” stereotyped profiles of rural women and men that reinforce inequality and inequity in households and the world of work.

For youth and adults, the Ministries of Agriculture, Rural Development, Labour and Education should work closely, together with strategic local partners (local governments, schools and private institutions, extension services, employers’ unions) to:

2. Ensure that targeted education and training strategies are included in national policies

- Develop a gender-responsive strategy for education, training and entrepreneurship development that responds to the needs of rural girls and women (following ILO’s *Recommendation concerning Human Resources Development: Education, Training and Lifelong Learning, 2004 (No. 195)*).
- Establish clear objectives, indicators and evaluation mechanisms to plan and assess the education and training programmes for both rural women and men.²

BOX 2 Home counselling helps keep girls in school in Cambodia

In Cambodia, where only around 30% of boys and 10% of girls attend secondary education, many rural parents do not see the economic benefits of schooling, preferring their daughters to help with household or farm work, or work in garment factories. In the mid 2000s, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, supported by UNICEF, launched the ‘Child-Friendly Schools Initiative’. One of its key components involves community research to identify gender-related barriers to education and determine how to increase awareness about gender equality. In grades 5 and 6 it provides home counselling to girls at risk of dropping out of school and to their families. Female teachers and/or volunteer mothers serve as “girl counsellors”. Teachers inform a counsellor when a female student misses more than three days of school, and the counsellor visits the student to identify with her and her parents the causes and appropriate solutions. Many girls return to school after this counselling, although more is needed as some girls do not and others drop out again.

Source: UNICEF – http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cambodia_39364.html



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HIV/AIDS orphans harvesting crops in an FAO Junior Farmer Field and Life School garden in Mozambique.

- Collect sex-disaggregated statistics and qualitative data on rural and urban women and men in education and skills training to improve programme design and evaluate progress.
- Conduct gender-sensitive analyses of economic opportunities, assessments of the related skill needs, and ensure that rural skills development takes into account the local socio-economic contexts.

3. Increase participation in gender aware technical and vocational education and training in rural areas

- Increase the quality and quantity of gender-responsive vocational education and training institutions in rural areas.
- Support, design and deliver gender-responsive community-based training initiatives, including skills training in employment-intensive infrastructure programmes, especially in areas lacking formal educational institutions.
- Develop targeted strategies to allow rural women to access formal and non-formal vocational education and training. These include:
 - Reducing financial barriers for rural women to access skills training (for example, through stipends).
 - Considering the timing and location of training and developing flexible curricula that fit rural women’s needs.
 - Increasing the number of women trainers and agricultural extension workers, and providing gender awareness training to trainers and other staff of training institutions (including on issues related to sexual harassment and to gender stereotypes in households and the world of work).
 - Providing infrastructure support and facilities, including accommodation, safe and female-friendly transport facilities, childcare services and tool kits.

- Developing curricula that match rural women’s needs, taking into account the different kinds of local or indigenous knowledge and skills they have, and complementing them with up-to-date knowledge and technology.
- Raising awareness among rural women, their families, communities, and training institutions, about the benefit of training women in non-traditional trades, in using new technologies, and in traditionally male occupations.
- Developing gender-sensitive delivery mechanisms that match rural women’s and men’s different needs, such as mobile training units and extension schemes and distance learning using mobile phones, radio and internet.

BOX 3 The Education for Rural People Partnership (ERP) Toolkit

The ERP Toolkit provides education and training materials for extension staff, farmers, teachers, trainers and children, youth, and adult learners involved in formal and non formal rural education. It contains children’s books and cartoons, skill manuals, planning guides for extension workers, teachers and trainers. Materials are divided by topics (such as land rights, livestock and pastoralism, and book-keeping) and organized by education and training level and type, including primary, secondary, vocational and higher education, non formal education, literacy, and skills for life.

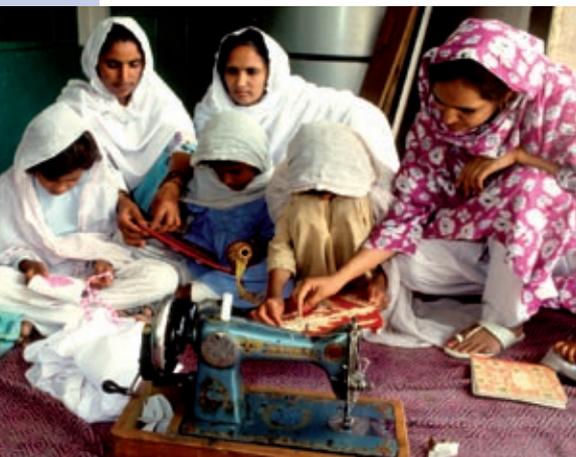
Source: FAO ERP website / Teaching and learning materials – <http://www.fao.org/erp/en/>

- Designing interventions to include the most disadvantaged women (such as women with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, or those associated with armed forces or ex-combatants).
- Expand rural women’s access to science, technical education, mobile phones, computers, and other information and communication technologies to facilitate their access to quality education and training, such as distance learning. Encourage girls to study technical subjects, for example, through scholarships.
- Complement vocational and technical training with numeracy and literacy training for those rural women who need it. Women, particularly the most disadvantaged, may also need training on gender issues and life skills, such as health and nutrition, confidence building, negotiation and leadership skills.

BOX 4 Solar Systems Training in Rural Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, where 70% of the population lack electricity, women are most affected as they need energy for cooking and other household tasks. Grameen Shakti microloans financed the installation of over 100,000 solar home systems in rural areas and trained local youth and women as certified technicians and in repair and maintenance. This provided women employment opportunities and improved their daily lives, while solar systems are facilitating business start ups such as mobile phone centres, repair shops and handicrafts.

Source: UNEP (2008): *Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable, Low-Carbon World*. UNEP, Nairobi.



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Farm women at a sewing class conducted by a female extension worker in Pakistan.

- Link women with mentors/masters via apprenticeship systems. Upgrade traditional and informal apprenticeship systems by improving working conditions or combining apprenticeship with formal vocational training or links with business associations.

4. Support women's self-employment and encourage linkages between national training systems and socio-professional networks

- Combine technical and entrepreneurship training, for example through community-based initiatives, as many rural women make a living through self-employment.
- Strengthen the capacity of entrepreneurship service providers to better address the needs and capabilities of rural female entrepreneurs.
- Provide post-training services such as access to credit or savings programmes, business development services, training in product design and marketing, and linkages to new markets. New markets, especially value chains, can also provide women opportunities to adopt new technologies and production practices.
- Support rural women's networks and groups, such as cooperatives.

Groups can lead to informal learning of skills and provide the collective power that may be required to reach new markets.

BOX 5 Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE)

TREE is an ILO community-based training programme implemented in Asia and Africa. It promotes income generation and employment opportunities for disadvantaged women and men by providing them with skills and knowledge they can use in their communities. Its strategy involves planning with local partner institutions; careful identification of economic opportunities and training needs assessment in the community; designing and delivering relevant skills training; and post-training support to facilitate trainees' access to wage or self employment.

In Bangladesh, TREE encouraged women to enter non-traditional trades such as repair of appliances and computers. The approach combined technical and business training with training in gender issues and gender sensitization sessions for trainees' families, communities and partner organizations. In rural Pakistan, where social norms restricted women's participation in training outside their homes, female resource persons went to villages and trained rural women at home. The increased income-generating activities of trainees also generated greater respect for women in the community and many experienced increased mobility, self-esteem and socioeconomic empowerment.

Source: ILO: *A Generic Manual on Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE)*. http://www.ilo.org/skills/what/projects/lang--en/WCMS_103528/index.htm

Endnotes

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