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 capacity to engage 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.

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 skills, as well as life skills (such as health management, decision-making, self-confidence, or conflict management) can make a big difference. 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.

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

- Although primary and secondary school enrolment has improved significantly for rural girls in many countries, they 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.
- Women are less likely than men to be reached by agricultural extension workers.
- Women make less use of formal or informal apprenticeship systems, which often operate in male-dominated trades.

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. 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 persons are women – many of whom live in rural areas. In Cambodia, 48% of rural women and 14% of rural men are unable to read or write. In Burkina Faso, the illiteracy rate for women is 78% compared to 63% for men. 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).
- 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.
- 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.
- From a developmental perspective, investing in girls’ education has the highest rate of return of any possible investment in developing countries: 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.

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Girl-friendly schools see enrolment rates soar while they worked in the fields. Enrolment centres where mothers could leave their youngest food ration. Some schools provided child care in schools, construct separate male and female for teachers that helped recruit and retain good and graduation rates among girls through 2005-2008, increased enrolment, retention and graduation rates among girls through

### Box 1 Girl-friendly schools see enrolment rates soar

In Burkina Faso, where 73% of all girls never finish primary school, the BRIGHT project (Burkinabe Response to Improve Girls' Chances to School) was implemented from 2005-2008. Increased enrolment, retention and graduation rates among girls through

### Legal and social norms and attitudes

- Positive attitudes towards the ben- efits of educating girls and lower pri- ority for girls’ education, especially if women’s remuneration is lower than men’s and employment opportuni- ties are scarce. In addition, girls are seen as relatively “transitory assets” not worthy of long-term invest- ment as they leave their parents’ household upon marriage.  

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### Gender-insensitive facilities, curri- cula and attitudes

- Long distances to schools/train- ing institutions and lack of public transport.
- Lack of safe and accessible board- ing, and sanitary facilities in schools/training institutions.
- Fear of sexual harassment and in- security in attending schools and training institutions.
- High education and training fees, while women generally have little cash of their own and limited bar- gaining power to access household money for training.
- Education and training curricula and delivery already don’t address women’s learning needs.
- Trainers and educators who often have discriminatory attitudes to- wards girls and women.
- Lack of female teachers and train- ers, especially in rural areas.

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

- Rural women’s limited access to pro- ductive resources, lower educational levels, and social norms about appro- priate work for women, tend to confine them to lower paid, lower status work where opportunities for skill training and thus advancement are reduced, thus perpetuating their lower status.
- Widespread patterns of insecure em- ployment relations and contractual arrangements in many rural enter- prises, such as temporary, precari- ous jobs, do not encourage employ- ers to offer 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 this may improve their income-generating opportunities, it will not give them the chance to benefit from newer, non- traditional fields, such as information and communication technologies (ICT), renewable energy and in Non-Traditional Agricultural Export (NTAE) industries that can offer women higher earnings and more skilled techni- cal or managerial jobs.  

### 4. New challenges require more creative, gender-balanced approaches

- Environmental degradation and climate change pose threats to subsistence farming and call for new technologies, alternative crops or growing processes which demand new skills. Evidence suggests that climate change affects women and men differently and their skills needs may thus also differ.

### 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), non-formal settings (such as community groups and NGOs) and informal ones (such as learning from family or peers). It can comprise basic education, voca- tional training, life skills training, entre- preneurship training, and agricultural ex- tension services. Policy makers should aim at designing and implementing a package of complementary measures to address the specific needs of each cat- egor y of rural individuals. These include the following policy options:

1. Ensure a targeted education and training strategy

- Develop a gender-responsive strategy for education, training and entre- preneurship development that responds to the needs of rural girls and women (following ILO’s Recommendation concerning Human Resources De- velopment: Education, Training and Lifelong Learning No. 195 - 2004).  
- Set clear objectives, use indicators and establish evaluation mechanisms to monitor the education and training programmes for rural people.  
- 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 and assess- ments of the related skills needed, and ensure that rural skills develop- ment activities take into account the local socio-economic context.

2. Stimulate participation in basic education with gender-sensitive approaches

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

- Safe school facilities and separate sanitation facilities; safe and gender-friendly transport to schools and/or building of schools in strategic loca- tions near underserved areas.
- School times and hours that allow for school and non-school household work.
- Incentives for teachers to work in rur- al areas, including female teachers.
- Legislation and/or school rules against sexual harassment, and gender- awareness training for teachers.
- Improved curricula that respond to rural realities, such as combining ag- ricultural training with conventional subjects. The Junior Farmer Field and Life School in Cambodia, for instance, has its own learning field where pupils grow vegetables. This “local curriculum” activity improves diets by introducing new vegetables to the community and teaches chil- dren practical skills.
- Information, to raise parents’ aware- ness about the importance of edu- cation of girls and financial incentives (such as vouchers), and/or non-fi- nancial incentives (such as meals at school, take-home ration) for fami- lies of school-age children.

3. Increase participation in gender- adapted technical and vocational education and training

- 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 lack- ing economic opportunities, such as rural women’s and men’s differ- ent needs, such as mobile train- ing, units extension services and distance learning using mobile phones and internet.  
- Develop gender-sensitive de- livery mechanisms that match rural labor demand. Women’s differ- ent needs, such as mobile train- ing, units extension services and distance learning using mobile phones and internet.  
- Designing interventions to include women who are the most disadvan- taged, such as women with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, associated with armed forces or ex-combatants.
- Provide infrastructure support and facilities, including accom- modation, and safe and female-friendly transport; mobile phone childcare ser- vices and tools kit.
- Developing curricula that match rural women’s needs, take into account the different kinds of indigenous knowledge and skills they have, and complement them with up-to-date knowledge, such as climate change. Raising awareness among rural women, their families/commu- nities, and training institutions, about the benefits of girls’ enrolment in non-traditional trades, in using new technologies, and in tradition- ally male occupations.

### Box 2 Home counselling helps keep girls in school in Cambodia

In Cambodia, where only around 30% of boys and 10% of girls reach secondary school, many rural parents do not see economic benefits from 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-based training of teachers and other barriers to education and determine how to increase awareness about gender equality, and provides home-based training for girl-headed families at risk of dropping out of school and to their families. Female teachers and volunteers serve as “girl counselors”. Teachers inform a counselor when a female student misses more than three days of school, and then the counselor meets the student to identify with her and her parents the causes and appropriate solutions to keep the student in school after this counselling, although more is needed as some girls do not and others drop out again.  

### Conclusion

- Encourage girls to study technical sub- jects, for example, through scholarships.
COMPLEMENT VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL TRAINING WITH NUMERACY AND LITERACY TRAINING FOR 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.

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.

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. Trainees’ increased income-generating activities also generated greater respect for women in the community, and many experienced increased mobility, self-esteem and socioeconomic empowerment.

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Endnotes


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