



**TITLE:** ENHANCING THE CAPACITY OF RURAL WOMEN

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**FORUM:** THE GLOBAL FORUM ON FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION (FSN) – RURAL WOMEN: STRIVING FOR GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACTS.

Forum's questions:

**Question 1: What are the main challenges rural women and girls are facing today?**

- The context of rural livelihoods has changed significantly during the past 20 years, with significant implications for rural women. Is our understanding of the challenges rural women and girls are facing still up-to-date?
- How do the needs and priorities of rural women differ based on their age, education, household composition, resource base and cultural context?
- How do some rural women manage to move forward and become successful entrepreneurs, whereas others are trapped in a life of food insecurity and poverty?

**Question 2: Are we using the right approaches and policies to close the gender gap?**

- How can the policy gap be closed? Most countries have ratified international and regional instruments to protect and enhance women's rights. Yet, in many countries there is a gap between the policy framework on gender and what actually gets delivered, including the failure to mainstream gender considerations into other policy frameworks, such as food security and nutrition policies.
- Why is it so challenging to convince the private sector to engage with rural women as economic actors, despite the evidence demonstrating that this generates profitable outcomes?
- As we approach 2020, what are the emerging economic opportunities for rural women? Are current capacity development programmes enhancing the right set of skills for rural women and girls? How can we better update them?

**Question 3: How can we best achieve gender transformative impacts?**

- What can be done to strengthen women's voice and wellbeing in the household and the community? Many initiatives focus on empowering women in their productive role and as members and leaders of producer and community groups. While they become empowered in the public space, this does not necessarily translate into improved household dynamics and quality of life.
- Has sufficient attention been paid in engaging men and boys for positive behavioral change? Do they understand the links between gender roles and inequalities, and their impact on the productivity and wellbeing of their households? Are their needs being overlooked, resulting in their marginalization and disengagement from household development?
- What approaches have proved successful to address deeply rooted gender norms, power relations and social institutions?

# 1

Undeniably, life in the rural areas has experienced change in the past two decades. Whether the change has been positive or negative for its dwellers, however, depends on where in the world you look. Positive change can be attributed to the inclusion of rural people's interests in most national discussions. There have also been numerous inquiries made by private actors into the livelihoods of rural women, the most recent being a declaration by the Associated Country Women of the World to convene the first International Forum on Rural Women and mark the International Day of Rural Women<sup>1</sup>. This attention has led to rural electrification projects, construction of proper transport systems and incorporation of technology in rural agricultural schemes. Conversely, in other countries such as the USA the widespread closure of rural industries such as Rubbermaid and Smith Corona and outsourcing of production to cheaper labour markets has left many people unemployed, both male and female<sup>2</sup>. It is important to also acknowledge that for some rural women, life has remained virtually unchanged throughout the decades. Their respective governments have not been able to promote development in these regions; some deliberately.

In spite of the numerous leaps and bounds made, there is still a chasm between the sexes. Inequality exists at every level of society. In rural areas, however, is where these inequalities manifest in their rawest form. Young girls are forced into early marriage. These marriages have very low success rates, more often leaving the woman to raise the children unaided. Needless to say, this deprives them of a high quality education leading to economic stagnation. Older women lack proper geriatric care as they are more likely to be the only dependable source of sustenance for their families. After all, it has been reported that women spend 90% of their earned income on their families compared to 30% of men. In Africa, Asia and even Latin America, culture has been by far the biggest impediment. We have zealously clung to beliefs that insist on the submission of women.

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In Kenya, where rural urbanization has been a relative success, it is not uncommon for rural communities to even engage in cross-border Female Genital Mutilation. This is despite enactment of a statute directly criminalizing this activity<sup>3</sup>. Even more noteworthy, leaders from those particular communities that have risen to national leadership positions have completely ignored these activities in return for political support.

Regardless, a considerable number of women have risen to wealth and good fortune. As easy as it is to attribute this to plain hard work and sweat, it goes deeper. The reality of the situation is that there are simply no success models in the rural setting. If there are, the pathways are highly limited, marred with obstacles and almost miraculous. Almost always, the attainment of success is contingent on either physically leaving these areas or an internal dissociation from the 'small-town' mentality by these women. In truth, the rural definition of success for women lies on their ability to marry and produce children. A girl may actively pursue their primary and high school education but it rarely goes beyond that; a life of academic success and its accompanying returns are a fantasy in that environment.

## 2

The battle for policy reform and institution is gradually being won. With the exception of countries like Sudan, U.S.A, Tonga, failing to ratify the *Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW)<sup>4</sup>, many countries have made considerable efforts to effect policy that furthers gender equality. Even so, the disconnect between ratification and implementation of relevant policy is equally global. Rural women are especially vulnerable to these failures because of their isolation. It is time to focus on other fronts. It is time to realize that any and all the policies we conceive are at their core, only an ideology. The only reason, for example, that Constitutions govern nations, is because the individual citizens have agreed to abide by their stipulations.

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Although gender equality is often presented as a stand-alone goal, there is agreement that progress on any and all of the SDGs will be minimal if gender equality is not prioritized. Arguments and evidence from the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)* find that lower levels of discrimination against women are linked to better outcomes in several areas, including educational attainment, child health and food security. For example, where women have a more equal status in the family, children are more likely to complete primary school, even when allowing for differences in country income level, urbanization and the fertility rate. Where women have greater “physical integrity” (control over their own bodies), child health outcomes improve. Similarly, countries where women lack any right to own land have on average 60% more malnourished children<sup>5</sup>. At *The Farm Management Association of Nigeria’s 2004 Conference*, it was presented that African women have mainly shouldered the responsibility for domestic food production and processing. FAO (1983) estimates show that in West Africa, 60-90 percent of the domestic farm and marine produce are handled by women. Women farmers work on the average from 10-14 hours in many parts of Africa and carry multiple responsibilities for food, water, fuel, housework and childcare making their agricultural productivity lower than it need be<sup>6</sup>. Private companies are aware that supporting rural women will increase profits. Paradoxically, few to none are investing huge amounts of money in efforts to improve their competitiveness by promoting women’s empowerment in their supply chains; even though many strive to project the image of a gender-sensitive (or transformative) company. In fact, *OXFAM’s Behind The Brands* revealed that despite women contributing 43% of the agricultural labour force, the big ten food companies are barely prioritizing women’s support; with the best, Coca-Cola, scoring a 6 out of a possible 10. Efforts have been made, however, by the likes of Kellogg’s (making the most significant leap in the past year), Unilever and MARS<sup>7</sup>. A lot more could be done but, in a capitalistic world, the truth is that it will require significant buy-in to support differentiated empowerment for female workers.

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Most companies are also reluctant to focus on a female workforce in areas where increased mobility of women results in an increase in gender-based violence. This translates to sporadic interruptions of the production chain.

### 3

It's time for mankind to look inward. In Stanislaw Lem's words: "*Mankind has gone out to explore other worlds without having explored his own dark passages and secret chambers; and without finding what lies behind doorways that he himself has sealed.*" The root causes of gender inequality are only partially understood. We need strategies that will directly target cultural norms and informal institutions in societies. Otherwise, the impact of any external efforts will only be temporary. These norms are largely to blame for the perceived lack of interest by the private sector in engaging with rural women as economic actors despite its proven benefits and the fact that Africa has been described as the region of female farming per excellence, with women, particularly in the rural areas regarded as the hidden productive force in the countryside<sup>8</sup>.

In conclusion, the hearts of men must embrace the value of gender equality. Cultural and religious beliefs still insist on separation of gender roles often to the detriment of the woman. Drafting of policy without first addressing these roots only serves to build resentment as opposed to respect between the sexes. In Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she scribed, "... *I appeal to their understandings; and, as a fellow-creature, claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a help meet for them! Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens.*"<sup>9</sup> She could not have summarized better.

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# References

- <sup>1</sup> Ruth Shanks AM, 'International Womens Day 2017' (Associated Country Women of the World, 1 February 2017) <[www.acww.org.uk/assets/iwd17.pdf](http://www.acww.org.uk/assets/iwd17.pdf)> accessed 5 August 2017
- <sup>2</sup> Casey Quinlan, 'The Particular Struggles of Rural Women' *The Atlantic* (U.S.A, 12 June 2013)
- <sup>3</sup> Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2011
- <sup>4</sup> Ruth Shanks AM, 'International Womens Day 2017' (Associated Country Women of the World, 1 February 2017) <[www.acww.org.uk/assets/iwd17.pdf](http://www.acww.org.uk/assets/iwd17.pdf)> accessed 5 August 2017
- <sup>5</sup> OECD, 'Gender equality and women's rights in the post-2015 agenda: A foundation for sustainable development' (OECD and Post 2015 Reflections Element 3, Paper 1) <[www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/POST-2015%20Gender.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/POST-2015%20Gender.pdf)> accessed 5 August 2017
- <sup>6</sup> K.I Ogbonna and E. Okoroafor "Enhancing The Capacity Of Women For Increased Participation In Nigeria Mainstreaming Agriculture: A Re-Designing Of Strategies", Paper prepared for presentation at the Farm Management Association of Nigeria Conference, Abuja, Nigeria Oct. 19-21, 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> OXFAM, 'Behind the Brands' <[www.behindthebrands.org/issues/women/](http://www.behindthebrands.org/issues/women/)> accessed 5 August 2017
- <sup>8</sup> Dumont, 1969:105; Borserup 1970
- <sup>9</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Vindications*, 288
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