

Contribution from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) to the Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) – Rural women: Striving for gender transformative impacts.

In response to the 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 behavioural 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 marginalisation and disengagement from household development?
* What approaches have proved successful to address deeply rooted gender norms, power relations and social institutions?

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**Development policy and rural contexts** (in relation to questions 1 and 2)

Challenges to the empowerment of women and girls living in rural settings cannot be generalized, either across regions or within countries. A variety of socio-cultural, economic and political factors specific to their different contexts create these challenges. Nevertheless, while in some respects challenging, these contexts can also contribute to creating enabling conditions to empower women. In this regard, for example, there may be variation in the organization of rural communities, including in the way in which households are structured. In some cases, a matriarchal form of social organization may prevail rather than a patriarchal one. The conception of family in African societies can differ from those found in other regions. Families in Africa can include community members and others beyond the nuclear family. Furthermore, the experience of women in rural areas is diverse, with the most disadvantaged included those with disabilities, pregnant or lactating, single mothers, widows, the chronically sick and the elderly. The economy in rural areas also varies, with some households deriving their income from agriculture, while others make a living from non-agricultural activities including the provision of services, such as tourism. That said, from, a global point of view, rural areas tend to be the poorest and the most deprived in relation to public services such as roads and transportation, sanitation, electricity, clean water and school facilities.

*Key point*: International and national development policy aiming to reduce gender inequalities and strengthen the empowerment of women should take into consideration the needs and priorities of women living in rural contexts that are diverse, while also learning from the similarities within and across rural areas, in order to effectively bring about change. Policy also needs to be flexible enough to adapt to rapidly changing contexts. For example, rural settings can be affected by conflict or natural disasters, which have an impact on the configuration of households, and on the already impending need for basic services, and the employment demands from various sectors.

**Entrepreneurship, sustainable livelihoods and the relevance of education for women’s empowerment** (in relation to questions 1 and 2)

It is important to have a common understanding of what it means for women to be entrepreneurial. There is a long history of attempts to define entrepreneurship. In our discussion, we adopted an understanding of entrepreneurship involving women being able to set up and run their own enterprise/business in ways that enable them to increase their socio-economic contribution to their household and society, while, at the same time, further enlarging their opportunities to achieve decent and productive work in ways that make societies more equal and just.

Women who are entrepreneurial in rural areas often benefit from family support, including financial resources to undertake proposed initiatives. They also benefit from arranged childcare that allows them to engage actively in entrepreneurial activities. Some of these women have had the positive experience of growing up with female role models who have themselves been entrepreneurial. The completion of basic education is a key factor in enabling women to go forward with entrepreneurial initiatives.

However, the education women receive must be relevant to their needs and choices in ways that, in the long term, contribute to their human development and well-being, as well as to that of their household and community. Education can contribute to women’s entrepreneurship, but, importantly, also to other kinds of empowerment such as having voice and participation in decision-making that brings change in their living conditions, as well as in asserting their rights, including decisions on their reproductive health.

It is not enough for girls and women simply to access education; that education must also be inclusive, equitable and of good quality. Importantly, curricular content and the pedagogical approaches used in formal and non-formal educational settings should not reproduce gender stereotypes (in roles, values and behaviours) that diminish women’s expectations for individual and social change. Education should enable women to have the knowledge and skills to strengthen their ability to choose their future autonomously.

Some women may have access to education, but may, occasionally, find that, once completed, it has not been relevant to giving them a sustainable livelihood, to helping them find a place in the labour market, or to their life choices. Sustainable livelihoods imply a set of capabilities and assets which represent a means to a living. There may be a mismatch between available educational opportunities (including, for example, those in technical and vocational education), and the knowledge and skills that are needed for women to achieve sustainable livelihoods or lives they have reason to value. This mismatch prompts the question: What do you need to learn to be entrepreneurial or to improve your livelihood and where and how do you learn this?

At UIL, we support lifelong learning that is rooted in the integration of learning and living. It covers learning activities for people of all ages, in all life-wide contexts (families, schools, communities, workplaces, etc.), delivered through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal, and informal) which together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands.

In rural areas, learning is taking place within families, in the community and across generations. There are cases in which the knowledge, experience and skills needed to run a small business are acquired by women within community self-help groups or families, or through self-directed learning. The government can play a key role, not only in ensuring that there is an employment structure responsive to or compatible with the educational and life choices of women, but also in recognizing and validating the knowledge and skills that women may already be developing outside formal schooling. It is important that women with such skills can move along flexible pathways into non-formal and formal educational opportunities that can lead into further employment and social development.

*Key Point*: Based on the principle of lifelong learning, the education sector, in collaboration with other sectors, should recognize, document, assess and validate any prior and ongoing learning undertaken by women which is relevant to their livelihoods, in ways that can lead to further education, work opportunities and life choices.

**How do women access information in rural areas and how does this empower them? How is their access to Information and Communication Technologies empowering?** (in relation to questions 1, 2 and 3 and the CSW62 [2018] review theme):

It is crucial for women to have free and ready access to key information that can further expand their opportunities for better work, education and health. In line with the right to education, the government should make sure that all girls and women have equal and free access not only to educational opportunities, but also to information on how to exercise this right.

Women in rural areas exchange information by word of mouth, and often by listening to the radio in their vernacular language. The radio is key in developing non-formal and informal learning. At the same time, radio content, as well as that disseminated by the media, can be influential in reproducing gender stereotypes, as well as in empowering women with information that can allow them to contest disempowering conditions. Radio programmes can disseminate information relevant to women’s rights and how to exercise them, while also helping women participate in long-distance education programmes. Overall, radio is a key technological tool that should not be underestimated in comparison to other more recent information and communication technologies, such as mobile phones. Though the use of mobile phones is increasing globally, according to marketing studies following mobile network subscriptions, rural areas often lack the necessary technological infrastructure to make the best use of these devices, including electricity and coverage from internet providers for whom extending a service to just a few subscribers does not make business sense. Private network providers and the state sector could consider partnering to provide such a service in rural areas. Overall, family households still struggle to afford a mobile phone device for each individual, not to mention mobile network subscription and related services. Furthermore, mobile phone devices in these communities often come with features in languages and scripts not relevant to the learner’s needs.

It was also noted that network subscription data alone cannot generate a picture nuanced enough to capture the reality of mobile use by women in rural areas. A device may be in the name of a woman’s husband, but she may the one overseeing its use in the household, leading to collective, peer-to-peer learning experiences with family members and the community. In general, however, women’s use of mobile phones can be restricted by low literacy levels (but not necessarily), lack of digital skills and prevailing socio-cultural norms and practices.

**Changing deeply rooted gender norms** (in relation to question 3)

The social and institutional transformation envisioned by policy and legal frameworks supportive of gender equality is difficult to achieve in practice. The desired change will take time, and needs to build on and/or take into consideration existing socio-cultural values and norms underlying gender practices and behaviours. Changing these might be the most difficult aspect. Yet, if all those with a stake in such change, including both women and men, are brought together by their traditional community leaders to discuss (in ways respectful of tradition) how all might benefit from the pursuit of a common good in relation to gender equality, there is a better chance that policy can be implemented in practice that has relevance to the well-being of people and their communities.