

# Women and Rural Employment

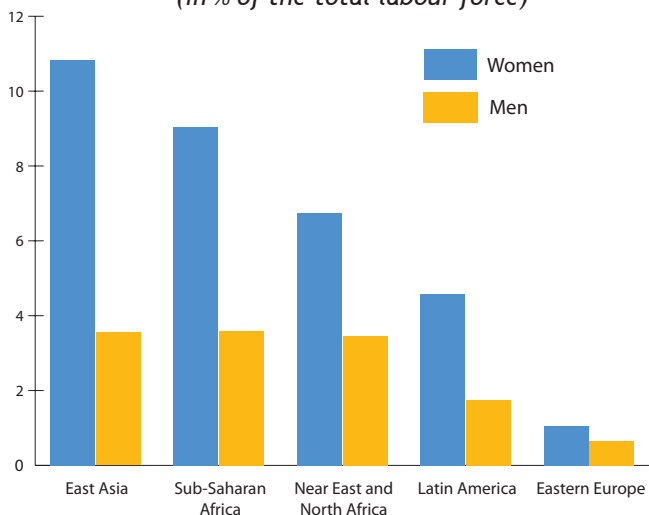
## Fighting Poverty by Redefining Gender Roles

About three quarters of the world's poor live in rural areas. Among those, women constitute a particularly vulnerable, yet crucially important group for social and economic development. Investing in rural women is thus not only a moral imperative; it can also be a promising strategy to effectively fight poverty and hunger.

### More work for less pay

Rural economies are characterised by distinct gender roles. While women mostly produce basic food stuffs for consumption within the household, men also engage in commercial farming targeted at international markets. Women tend to manage smaller plots than men and generally work in more precarious situations with only seasonal contracts. What is more, a large share of women participates in economic activities as contributing family workers with no pay or control over productive assets (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Contributing family workers**  
(in % of the total labour force)



Source: Laborsta (2008); regional averages are unweighted using most recent available country data (years 1996-2007).

However, merely looking at productive employment fails to grasp the true importance of women for rural economies. Being restricted to growing food crops and rearing poultry and small livestock, women are

- In many countries, women are the main producers of food and crucial for the well-being of rural populations
- Their confinement to home-based work frequently prevents them from engaging in paid employment
- Expanding women's employment opportunities promises a pathway out of poverty

responsible for some 60 to 80 percent of food production in developing countries. They are important for fuel and water provision, raise children and offer care to the sick and the elderly. By engaging in community activities, women are furthermore crucial for the well-being of their families and society at large.

Considering these additional activities, international comparisons reveal that women in many rural areas spend considerably more time working than their male counterparts. In Tanzania, estimates go as high as 14 hours additional work per week. In Benin the difference is reported to be an incredible 17 hours.

### Obstacles to Women's Employment

Apart from domestic responsibilities, a range of other factors prevents women from engaging in paid employment. Following a livelihood framework, these can be grouped into insufficient access to five major assets.

Specifically, women in rural economies often do not have access or control over *natural assets* such as land and water, reducing their prospects of retaining income generated from these assets. While data are limited, available information suggests that less than one quarter of land holdings in developing countries are operated by women. Low rates of female land ownership significantly obstruct access to *financial assets*, including credit and saving.

Women also lack access to *social assets* such as networks and associations, which weakens their influence in political decision-making processes and collective representation. Insufficient access to *physical assets* such as energy, technology and transport further decreases women's productivity and opportunities to engage in paid employment.

More importantly, rural women face serious inequalities in accessing *human assets* such as education and health services. Despite some progress in recent years, only 63 percent of women in least developed countries can



read and write, compared to 73 percent of men and 99 percent of women in developed regions. Maternal mortality, a key indicator of women's health status and one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, is still 100 times higher in Sub-Saharan Africa than in developed regions. Poor health, low levels of education and insufficient technical skills drastically reduce women's chances in the labour market.

### Quick wins and long-term returns

Women's confinement to home-based and reproductive work reduces family incomes and overall economic growth. Tapping into this reserve promises important development effects for rural economies. In order to achieve sustainable results, policy makers need to find a good balance between measures for instant improvements and attempts to gradually promote more fundamental changes.

Public work programmes can be an effective tool to immediately integrate women into the labour market. Such programmes can also enhance women's future employability if they reduce the obstacles that prevent women from joining the labour force, including insufficient skills and professional training. For the same reason, women must be granted access to key resources such as land, water, credit, information, and technology.

### Redefining Gender Roles

More importantly, strategies need to gradually change gender roles and especially inform men of the benefits of women's empowerment. Gender equality must not be perceived as a threat but an opportunity. So far, rural societies are heavily influenced by traditional norms that pre-determine women's lives as mothers and care-takers, prevent them from pursuing a professional career, and limit their access to important productive assets.

Promoting rural development by increasing gender equality thus calls for a redistribution of responsibilities. As women enter into paid employment, other resources need to be activated to perform women's numerous tasks, including stronger participation of men. Additionally, governments could improve child care facilities, or provide social protection and public pensions in order to create opportunities for women to participate more actively and productively in rural economies.

Quota systems for women's representation in employer organizations, farmers' organizations, and trade unions are another important element in such strategy. These will increase women's bargaining power and voice to remind policy makers that empowering women is a sensible strategy to fight poverty and improve the livelihoods of rural populations.

### Further information

- Gender and Rural Employment - Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty. <http://www.fao-ilo.org/more/workshop>
- FAO. 2007. A Gender Perspective on Land Rights - Equal Footing. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/007/y3495e/y3495e00.pdf>

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