



Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Topic B. Efforts to promote the empowerment of rural women to improve food security worldwide

Introduction:

Rural women are pivotal in ensuring food security and sustainable development worldwide. Representing a significant portion of the agricultural labor force, they are essential contributors to food production, processing and distribution. Despite their critical role, rural women often face systemic barriers that limit their empowerment, including gender inequality, lack of access to resources and exclusion from decision-making processes. These challenges not only hinder their potential but also impede global efforts to achieve food security and sustainable development.

Furthermore, the empowerment of rural women is directly linked to improving agricultural productivity, enhanced household nutrition and stronger rural economies. When women have equal access to resources such as land, credit, education and technology, agricultural yields increase significantly, directly addressing hunger and poverty. Moreover, rural women often play a central role in ensuring the nutritional needs of their families, making their empowerment critical to combating malnutrition and achieving food security.

However, structural and cultural barriers persist. Discriminatory laws and practices restrict women's ownership of land and access to financial services. Furthermore, rural women are disproportionately affected by climate change, conflict, and economic instability, which exacerbate their vulnerabilities. In this regard, addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that combines policy reforms, capacity-building initiatives and targeted investments in rural women's empowerment.





Concepts and definitions:

- **Agricultural productivity:** measure of output produced per unit of agricultural input, meaning labor, land, and technology.¹
- **Empowerment:** improving access to resources to transform choices made by individuals into desired outcomes.
- **Food security:** condition in which all people always have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life.²
- **Gender inequality:** systemic disparity in opportunities, rights and access to resources between men and women, particularly pronounced in rural/agricultural contexts.³
- **Global hunger:** lack of access to adequate food, leading to health issues. It is widespread and severe, often caused by inequality, poverty and climate change.⁴
- **Rural women:** women residing in rural areas who are often engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural activities. They play a critical role in food production, resource management, and community development. They also face unique challenges due to systemic gender inequalities.⁵
- **Structural barriers:** institutionalized practices or policies that limit access to different opportunities, rights and resources.

¹ FAO. *Indicators Definitions*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: <https://www.fao.org/in-action/countrystat/news-and-events/events/training-material/indicators-definitions/en/>. (18/11/2024).

² World Bank Group. *What Is Food Security?* World Bank Group, Washington D.C. “No update date”. In: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update/what-is-food-security#:~:text=Based%20on%20the%201996%20World,an%20active%20and%20healthy%20life>. (18/11/2024).

³ Save the Children. *How Gender Discrimination Impacts Boys and Girls*. Save the Children, United States. “No update date”. In: <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/how-gender-discrimination-impacts-boys-and-girls#:~:text=Gender%20inequality%20is%20discrimination%20on,privileged%20or%20prioritized%20over%20another>. (18/11/2024).

⁴ WHO. *Global Hunger Index (GHI)*. United Nations, New York. “No update date”. In: [https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/global-hunger-index-\(ghi\)#:~:text=How%20is%20it%20defined%3F,extent%2C%20attributable%20to%20undernutrition](https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/global-hunger-index-(ghi)#:~:text=How%20is%20it%20defined%3F,extent%2C%20attributable%20to%20undernutrition). (18/11/2024).

⁵ Science Direct. *Rural Women*. Science Direct. “No update date”. In: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/rural-women>. (18/11/2024).





- **Sustainable development:** approach to meet the current needs, focusing on social inclusion, economic growth and environmental protection, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Current issue:

Women play an extremely essential role in maintaining food security and resolving ecological problems on a global scale. They are responsible for many tasks, such as farming, processing food and distributing it. This means that women fulfill a rather large part of the agricultural labor. Yet, despite their significance, rural women face persistent structural barriers.

Actually, one of the biggest challenges they face is related to their access to essential resources, such as land, credit and agricultural inputs. In this regard, women own less than 2% of the land. Besides, a large portion of rural women face a lack of education and training opportunities, which limits their ability to adopt advanced agricultural techniques. This subsequently affects their economic potential. Moreover, women are also underrepresented, thus having limited participation and influence over agricultural policies.⁶

In Africa, women constitute between 50% and 60% of the agricultural labor force, contributing 70% to food production. Even though their participation is large, they own less than 15% of the land they work in.⁷ Meanwhile, in Asia, rural women represent 43% of the agricultural labor force, being mostly involved in small-scale farming. In this case, women ownership rates are as low as 10%.⁸ Simultaneously, in Latin America and the Caribbean, women account for 20-30% of the agricultural labor force. They work mostly on smaller plots, having a rather limited access to agricultural services and their respective credits.⁹

⁶ Murugani, et al. *The Role of Property Rights on Rural Women's Land Use Security and Household Food Security for Improved Livelihood in Limpopo Province*. Journal of Human Ecology, 2014. (18/11/2024).

⁷ Doss, et al. *Gender inequalities in ownership and control of land in Africa: myth and reality*. (18/11/2024).

⁸ Rola-Rubzen, et al. *Improving Gender Participation in Agricultural Technology Adoption in Asia: From Rhetoric to Practical Action*. Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy, 05/02/2020. (28/11/2024).

⁹ Bando, et al. *Progress and Challenges for an Evidence-Based Gender Equality Policy: a Focus in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy, 28/08/2019. (28/11/2024).



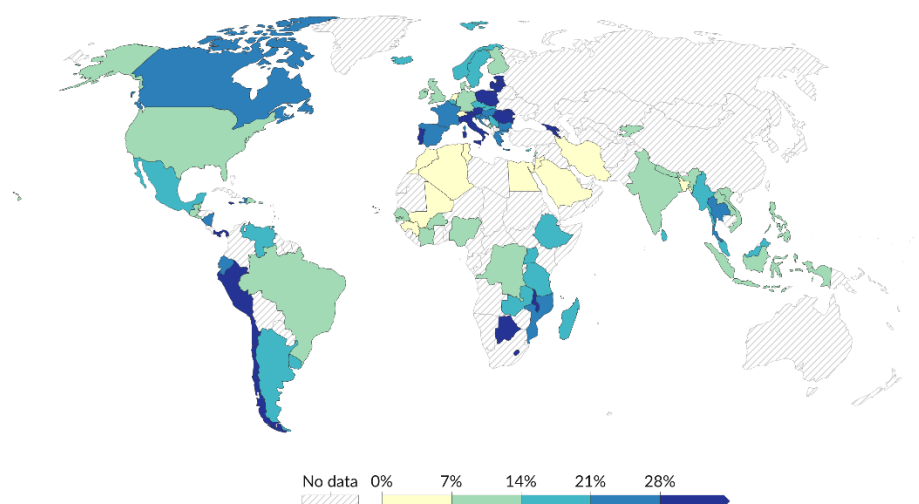


Additionally, in North America, women make up 30% of the agricultural workforce, facing challenges as well, such as having restricted access to land.¹⁰ In Europe, women represent 35% of the agricultural labor force and 29% of farms are managed by women.¹¹ Either way, gender gaps are a big challenge when it comes to leadership roles and financial independence. And in Oceania, women constitute 30-40% of the agricultural workforce, often leading subsistence farming and ensuring household food security. The biggest challenge they face is their lack of decision-making power which directly affects their contributions to commercial agriculture.¹²

Share of agricultural landowners who are female

Our World in Data

Landowners¹ are defined as those that own land solely or jointly with someone inside or outside the household.



Data source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations - Gender and Land Rights Database

Note: Due to poor data availability, the year of measurement varies between countries.

OurWorldinData.org/employment-in-agriculture | CC BY

1. Landowner: A person is considered a landowner if they are the only owner of a plot of land or own it jointly with someone in their own household, or outside of the household. This means that a plot of land – and a household – can have multiple owners. And households can have multiple plots of land, but with different people identified as the owner of each. In many countries, land ownership is assigned based on legal documentation and title deeds. But in some countries without official documentation and titles, this data is calculated based on household surveys. In these surveys, households are asked about the ownership of plots of land.

Figure 1. Share of agricultural landowners who are female.¹³

¹⁰ Horst and Marion. *Racial, ethnic and gender inequities in farmland ownership and farming in the U.S.* Agriculture and Human Values, 28/10/ 2018. (28/11/2024).

¹¹ Gasson. *Farm Women in Europe: Their Need For Off Farm Employment.* Sociologia Ruralis, 1984. (28/11/2024).

¹² Liepins. *Women in agriculture: advocates for a gendered sustainable agriculture.* Australian Geographer, 24/02/2007. (28/11/2024).

¹³ Our World in Data. *Share of agricultural landowners who are female.* Our World in Data. 29/05/2017. In: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-agricultural-landowners-who-are-female>. (28/11/2024).





At a global scale, in developing countries, women are estimated to produce 60-80% of food, and they represent 43% of the global agricultural labor force.¹⁴ Because of this, closing the gender gap in agricultural productivity could reduce global hunger by 12-17%.¹⁵ Therefore, it is extremely relevant to take on initiatives that focus on empowering rural women, leading to a maximization of their potential while ensuring global food security.

Furthermore, climate change exacerbates the challenges faced by rural women, as they are often disproportionately affected by its impacts. Women are primarily responsible for securing food, water and energy in their households, making them more vulnerable to climate-related events such as droughts, floods and soil degradation. Despite their critical role in managing natural resources, they often lack access to climate-resilient tools, sustainable farming techniques and financial resources necessary to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Addressing these challenges requires integrating rural women into climate adaptation strategies and providing them with training and technology to build up their resilience.¹⁶

Moreover, another significant issue is the lack of financial inclusion among rural women. Limited access to credit, savings and insurance restricts their ability to invest in agricultural tools, seed or technologies that could help their productivity. Microfinance initiatives that promote women's access to financial services have proven effective in empowering them economically. Scaling these efforts requires policy reforms and collaboration between governments, financial institutions and civil society to ensure that rural women are not left behind in the pursuit of global food security.¹⁷

¹⁴ Quisumbing, et al. *Women: The Key to Food Security*. Food and Nutrition Bulletin, 1996. (28/11/2024).

¹⁵ Doss. *Women and agricultural productivity: Reframing the Issues*. Development Policy Review, 20/02/ 2017. (28/11/2024)

¹⁶ Jost, et al. *Understanding gender dimensions of agriculture and climate change in smallholder farming communities*. Climate and Development, 03/07/2015. (28/11/2024).

¹⁷ Rola-Rubzen, et al. *Improving Gender Participation in Agricultural Technology Adoption in Asia: From Rhetoric to Practical Action*. (28/11/2024).





In sum, it is indispensable to encompass the main issues rural women face worldwide, most of which hold three problematics as the root. Firstly, women have limited access to resources, frequently related to cultural and traditional norms. These also include, but are not limited to, restricted access to land, credit and agricultural inputs. Secondly, women face cultural barriers, which immediately puts them in a vulnerable position and at big disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Thirdly, there is a clear and relevant underrepresentation in decision-making, as they are underrepresented in local institutions and governance mechanisms.¹⁸

Initiatives taken by the international community:

United Nations-Led Efforts:

- **UNWOMEN initiatives:** through programs such as *Empowering Women in Rural and Marginalized Communities*, it focuses on providing training, access to markets, and advocacy for land rights. The agency also works to integrate a gender perspective approach into national agricultural policies.¹⁹ Additionally, global campaigns like HeForShe engage in addressing gender inequality, particularly in rural areas.²⁰
- **The Dimitra Clubs:** the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations fosters community-led groups to empower rural women and men to share knowledge, explore agricultural practices and address gender inequalities. This initiative has generated positive results, such as increased agricultural yields and improved decision-making.²¹

¹⁸ Abakah. *Participation without a voice? Rural women's experiences and participation in local governance activities in the Abura–Asebu–Kwamankese district of Ghana*. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 26/11/2018. (28/11/2024).

¹⁹ De Pinto, et al. *Women's empowerment and farmland allocations in Bangladesh: evidence of a possible pathway to crop diversification*. *Climatic Change*, 20/11/2020. (28/11/2024).

²⁰ Psaki, et al. *Policies and interventions to remove gender-related barriers to girls' school participation and learning in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review of the evidence*. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 19/01/2022. (28/11/2024).

²¹ Raghunathan, et al. *Can women's self-help groups improve access to information, decision-making, and agricultural practices? The Indian case*. *Agricultural Economics*, 02/08/2019. (28/11/2024).





- **The United Nations Decade of Family Farming:** from 2019 to 2028, it focuses on promoting family farming as a strategy for sustainable development and food security. It recognizes rural women as central figures in family farming and advocates for policies that enhance their roles and rights.²²
- **The Sustainable Development Goals:** the second goal aims for zero hunger whereas the fifth goal aims for gender equality. They emphasize the need to empower rural women as a strategy to achieve global food security, so United Nations-led frameworks encourage member States to adopt gender-sensitive agricultural policies to reach these goals.²³

Regional and National Programs:

- **Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment of the African Union:** includes specific measures to empower rural women, such as land redistribution and access to agricultural technology.²⁴
- **African Women in Agribusiness Network (AWAN):** supports rural women entrepreneurs in accessing markets and financial resources. It also aims to strengthen women's leadership in agribusiness across Africa.²⁵
- **India's Women Farmers Empowerment Scheme:** also known as Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana, this program was implemented to provide training and financial support to women in agriculture.²⁶
- **Brazil's Bolsa Verde:** incentivizes sustainable practices among rural women. This program links financial aid to environmental conservation efforts.²⁷

²² Savage, et al. *Cultivating success: personal, family and societal attributes affecting women in agritourism*. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 29/10/2020. (28/11/2024).

²³ Badstue, et al. *Making room for manoeuvre: addressing gender norms to strengthen the enabling environment for agricultural innovation*. Development in Practice, 15/05/2020. (28/11/2024).

²⁴ AU. *AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*. AU, Africa, 27/12/2024. In: <https://au.int/en/articles/au-strategy-gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment> (28/11/2024).

²⁵ AWAN Afrika. *African Women Agribusiness Networks*. AWAN Afrika, Africa. "No update date". In: <https://awanafrika.org/> (28/11/2024).

²⁶ UN. *Expanding access for women farmers on the agenda*. United Nations, New York, 21/06/2024. In: <https://india.un.org/en/272131-expanding-access-women-farmers-agenda> (26/12/2024).

²⁷ CEPAL. *Base de datos de programas de protección social no contributiva en América Latina y el Caribe*. United Nations, New York. "No update date". In: <https://dds.cepal.org/bpsnc/programa?id=60> (26/12/2024).





Civil Society Contributions:

- **Efforts made by non-governmental and advocacy groups:** organizations such as Action AID and CARE International focus on empowering rural women through training programs, microfinance initiatives and campaigns towards gender equality.²⁸
- **Research and Data Collection:** efforts made by groups such as the World Economic Forum and Oxfam International provide critical data on the role of rural women in agriculture, shaping effective interventions.²⁹

Public-Private Partnerships:

- **Agri-Tech Innovations:** companies like Syngenta and Bayer have partnered with non-governmental organizations to develop technologies tailored to the needs of rural women, including affordable irrigation systems and drought resistant crops.³⁰
- **Market Access Initiatives:** platforms like SheTrades connect rural women who are entrepreneurs with global markets, enabling them to sell their produce at competitive prices.³¹

Guiding questions:

1. In your delegation, what structural barriers currently limit rural women's access to resources such as land, education, and technology, and how can these be addressed effectively? And at a regional and/or global scale?
2. How can educational programs be tailored to address the unique needs of rural women and enhance their productivity in your delegation? And at a regional and/or global scale?

²⁸ Grown, et al. *Aid for Gender Equality and Development: Lessons and Challenges*. Journal of International Development, 14/03/2016. (28/11/2024).

²⁹ Doss. *Women and agricultural productivity: Reframing the Issues*. Development Policy Review, 20/02/2017. (28/11/2024).

³⁰ Jost, et al. *Understanding gender dimensions of agriculture and climate change in smallholder farming communities*. (28/11/2024).

³¹ Akter, et al. *Increasing smallholder farmers' market participation through technology adoption in rural Timor-Leste*. Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies, 31/07/2021. (28/11/2024).





3. How can initiatives targeting rural women's empowerment also address the challenges posed by climate change in your delegation? And at a regional and/or global scale?
4. How can technology and digital inclusion help bridge the gender gap in agriculture and enable rural women to access resources and opportunities in your delegation? And at a regional and/or global scale?
5. What are the best practices from regional successful programs that can be scaled up globally to promote food security through the empowerment of rural women?
6. What specific measures can be implemented to ensure rural women's voices are included in decision-making processes at local, national, regional, and international levels?
7. How can national governments, as well as regional and international organizations, promote gender-sensitive agricultural policies to empower rural women?
8. What are the critical gaps in current national, regional, and international frameworks for supporting rural women and how can these be addressed?

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