

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Introduction:

For the empowerment of rural women of all ages and girls to be realised through sustainable development, there must be more than a superficial commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. Instead, there must be a concerted action across all countries and communities. Approaching gender equality as a crosscutting issue requires gender to be included at all stages of policy development, implementation, monitoring and accountability. Rural women and girls are crucial contributors, implementors and beneficiaries of sustainable development. Their empowerment is fundamental to the achievement of the full 2030 Agenda.

In the introduction for the Soroptimist International written statement for Commission on the Status of Women 56, we hopefully declared that we truly are on the precipice of a global paradigm shift to empower rural women. However, an agreement was not reached during this meeting. The challenges and opportunities identified for rural women and girls to achieve gender equality and empowerment remain to be addressed in the 2030 Agenda. This is particularly brutal for elderly widows.

Rural women, especially indigenous women's traditional knowledge of environmental management must be utilised. They play a vital role in agricultural development and the achievement of food security, to ensure the health and well-being of families and communities. Let's not forget the women in rural areas who are not farmers, live in developed countries and are confronted with numerous cuts to infrastructure and facilities. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development as defined in Principle 20 of the 1992 Rio Declaration and subsequent reviews. With increased feminization of agriculture, 43% of the world's agricultural labour force and more than 60% in developing countries are women, therefore contributing to an important engine of growth and poverty reduction in the rural economy.

Rural women play a vital role in agricultural production, a critical component of food security; however, they are unable to reach their full potential due to discriminatory norms, policies and laws. Women are less likely to own their own land; property laws discriminate against women inheriting family property, widows are discarded in their rights to inherit from their deceased husband, and custom and patriarchal social norms often favour male relatives. These barriers threaten rural women's food security, forcing them to migrate to urban areas searching for other livelihoods. Discriminatory laws and policies which prevent women throughout the life-course from controlling their productive resources, lock them in a cycle of poverty and prevent them from being economically empowered. Investing in small-scale farming, with the particular inclusion of women, is a vital step towards meeting the challenges of food production in the future. Women are lifelong agents of change in their families, typically investing 90% of their earnings into their families and communities compared to 35% by men, thus more likely to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty. Governments are not living up to their international commitment to protect women from discrimination, as the gap between de jure and de facto discrimination persists.

Rural women still find it more difficult to access basic education and vocational (secondary) education provision; as girls are expected to assist with family routines such as fetching and carrying fuel and water. According to the UNESCO 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report, some 63% of women, predominantly living in rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States and in South and West Asia,

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have not attained even minimal literacy skills. Education provides a major key to lifting women and girls out of poverty and enabling them to achieve their true potential.

Women and Girls as Agents of Change toward Women's Empowerment:

Women and girls in rural areas comprise the majority of people living in poverty, and experience multidimensional inequalities. Persistent and chronic under-investment in gender equality and women's empowerment has exacerbated development limitations. These mistakes must not be repeated. Therefore, sustainable development initiatives must reinforce the consideration that rural women and girls are at a higher risk of being left behind. The voices and perspectives of rural women and girls must be included in policy development, implementation and monitoring on all issues – reaching Goal 5, as well as cross-cutting all Sustainable Development Goals. This approach would promote the inclusion of women and girls as leaders and decision makers.

How resources are mobilised and how programmes are implemented, have clear implications for women's empowerment and the achievement of gender equality. Gender budgeting can be a very useful tool to achieve better choices on where direct funding should be allocated. Extension of access to facilities such as education, water and sanitation, maternal and other health care; and the technologies which support them, will enable women and girls to contribute more fully to the development of local economies.

To mainstream the involvement of women and girls in rural sustainable development demands a change in attitude and behaviour towards women and girls of all ages. For women and girls to be agents of change, they must be considered valuable contributors to sustainable development and their input considered equal; they should not merely be thought of as 'beneficiaries' or 'vulnerable'. Rural women and girls can increase community capacity at the grassroots level, by leading effective community-based sustainable development actions that contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. These actions reveal grassroots expertise that women and girls possess to better their lives whether it be through agriculture, environment, water and sanitation or health.

Accountability and Monitoring:

Global initiatives designed to benefit the daily lives of people everywhere risk not being implemented appropriately, if at all, unless they are regularly monitored and accounted for. To measure whether rural women and girls benefit from sustainable development efforts, it is critical to have accurate and reliable information through qualitative and quantitative indicators, including citizen generated and private sector data. For knowledge about the status of rural women and girls to be accurate, it is important that gender and age differentiated statistics and indicators are collected nationally, regionally and globally to measure gender gaps at each life stage and adjust development programmes to rectify inequalities. At a minimum, data should be disaggregated based on age, sex, marital status, geography, income, disability, race and ethnicity and other factors relevant to monitoring inequalities (including multiple inequalities experienced by women and girls) as stated in Sustainable Development Goal 17.18.

Although some indicators are measured by household (not by individual), it remains important that the data collected for those indicators is disaggregated. It is essential to know how the household is comprised, for example if a woman is alone raising her children or an older widow, this can often prematurely allow poverty and abuse to prevail. Without this information it will be difficult to properly

and fully identify the gaps and challenges facing women and girls' empowerment as part of sustainable development.

Without mandated and obligatory follow-up and review processes, there is a risk that the voices of women and girls will go unheard, systematically and in all sectors. The voluntary nature of reporting on progress provides countries with the option not to follow-up or review the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at all, or to be selective in their review. Actions undertaken by the private sector contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals must also be accountable, as often their own interests do not prioritise the needs of vulnerable and marginalised people.

Empowering Women through NGOs and Civil Society:

Recent encroachment upon civil society space, and the limitations being placed on NGOs, only further disempower rural women and girls. Without the support of NGOs and civil society organisations many rural women and girls will not be able to access essential services that protect their rights and empower them, including legal representation, education and healthcare. If women and girls are to be empowered through the effective implementation of sustainable development principles, then NGOs, including women's organisations must be included in the process. Through NGOs, women and girls will be listened to as equal partners and not merely co-opted into a development agenda that does not reflect their needs.

Conclusion:

Soroptimist International urges governments, civil society, the private sector and other relevant partners to support the recommendations contained in the Secretary General's report, Improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas (A/72/207 July 2017). Soroptimist International believes that the following require priority measures for action to enable rural women and girls to achieve gender equality and empowerment:

- Policies and programmes to take a life-course approach to education and employment for rural women and girls, recognising and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages, and that women and girls living in rural areas have different needs at different times in their lives;
- Work with local partners to improve facilities to afford women and girls living in rural areas education that is accessible, of the highest standards and include gender appropriate and sensitive sanitation facilities and safe environments;
- Develop:
 - o Policies and programmes which involve rural women in the management and provision of accessible, safe and effective water and sanitation resources;
 - o Policies and programmes which provide quality, affordable, universally accessible health care and education, including sexual and reproductive health and rights;
 - o Policies and programmes which lead to the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination, ensuring that the implementation of all requirements of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women are achieved;
 - o Policies and programmes which reduce the unpaid work burden by providing improved access to infrastructure facilities including time and labour-saving technologies;

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- o Policies and programmes which provide rural women and girls with financial, employment, and land security, as well as securing a place in decision-making forums, encouraging more female leadership in organisations pertaining to food and agriculture through mentoring opportunities and training;
- o All those policies and programmes need a clear gendered budget to realise those goals with transparent and ethical monitoring;
- o Policies and programmes to ensure access to affordable, appropriate technologies and vocational training for its usage;
- Improve and prioritise appropriately disaggregated and internationally comparable data collection, encompassing process and outcome indicators.

The practical grassroots activities with women and girls of rural communities by Soroptimist International members, underpin and contribute to this statement. The vision of Soroptimist International is that ‘women and girls will achieve their individual and collective potential’ – we believe that further progress can be made to achieving this by 2030 through utilising the opportunities available to all.