



International
Labour
Office

Empowering Women in the Rural Economy

**DECENT WORK IN THE RURAL ECONOMY
POLICY GUIDANCE NOTES**

Women play important roles in the rural economy as farmers, wage earners and entrepreneurs. They also take responsibility for the well-being of the members of their families, including food provision and care for children and the elderly. Rural women's unpaid work, particularly in poor households, often includes collecting wood and water. Women from indigenous and grassroots communities are often also custodians of traditional knowledge, which is key for their communities' livelihoods, resilience and culture. Yet, women in rural areas face constraints in engaging in economic activities because of gender-based discrimination and social norms, disproportionate involvement in unpaid work, and unequal access to education, healthcare, property, and financial and other services. They are also disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of environmental disasters and climate change. Promoting and ensuring gender equality, and empowering rural women through decent work and productive employment, not only contributes to inclusive and sustainable economic growth, but also enhances the effectiveness of poverty reduction and food security initiatives, as well as climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Decent Work Agenda offers an integrated framework for rural women's empowerment, underpinned by international labour standards, social dialogue and the recognition that rural women play a key role in climate action.



1. Rationale and justification

The ILO estimates that rural women comprise one-quarter of the world's population. Women also make up 41 per cent of the world's agricultural labour force, a ratio that rises to 49 per cent for low-income countries. In many South-East Asian and sub-Saharan African countries, more than 60 per cent of working women are engaged in the agricultural sector.¹ Significant numbers of women in the rural economy work as subsistence farmers, small-scale producers, own-account workers, and in plantations and agro-industries, but women in rural economy are also employed in other sectors, such as education, tourism and domestic work.

In some countries, for instance in Latin America, women are increasingly engaged in non-agricultural sectors or occupations, with positive effects on their income.² Yet, in others, there is a trend towards an increasing role of women in agriculture,³ which has been explained by a higher propensity of men to migrate out of rural areas and to shift to off-farm activities.⁴ Men are moving out of agriculture to a larger extent than women, to be replaced by women joining the agricultural labour force beyond subsistence and smallholder settings.

Despite their crucial roles in the rural economy, women face inequalities and challenges that hinder their access to decent work opportunities and improvements to their productivity. About 68 per cent of working women in extreme poverty operate in the agricultural sector,⁵ the other sectors being fisheries, forestry, handicrafts and livestock raising. Women tend to be involved in more than one economic activity simultaneously, and take up informal and unprotected work in the absence of alternative means of generating income. Rural women spend more time than urban counterparts, and than men, on reproductive and household work, including time spent collecting water and fuel, husking, processing food and caring for children and the sick.

Other challenges that women face in the rural economy include lack of information on job availability, as well as opportunities for training and education, limited access to property, land⁶ and financial and non-financial services. Much of this is linked

to gender-based inequality and discrimination. Social norms on the role of women in the family and preconceived ideas of what is "appropriate" work for women are among factors perpetuating sectoral and occupational segregation between women and men and further reinforcing inequality.

Rural women workers are less likely to engage in wage employment compared to men and to women in urban areas, and when they do, they tend to earn less than their male counterparts.⁷ Rural women, on average, are paid 25 per cent less than men, and they typically work longer hours.⁸ They are also often engaged in labour-intensive work in difficult conditions, which lack occupational safety and health measures, and social protection.⁹ Women agricultural workers are particularly vulnerable to sexual or other violence and harassment.¹⁰ Women's presence in workers' and employers' organizations remains low, leading to a lack of voice and representation in policy-making and programme development.

Modern slavery also disproportionately affects women and girls, who account for 28.7 million or 71 per cent of all victims.¹¹ This includes forced labour in sectors such as agriculture, domestic work and the sex industry, where most forced labour is found. Particularly in agriculture, forestry and fishing, figures on sex distribution of victims of forced labour highlight that nearly 32 per cent of the victims are female. At the same time, the persistence of a serious deficit in decent work opportunities in the rural economy for women, contributes towards the push factors that force some women to migrate and many to rely on the informal economy in search of income generation opportunities. These often tend to be in areas and sectors where women are at a high risk of being discriminated against and exploited.

Women in rural areas are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as drought, floods and deforestation because of cultural norms and the inequitable distribution of roles, resources and power. Women make up the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent than men on natural resources for their livelihoods and survival. In the context of climate change, traditional food sources become more unpredictable and scarce. Women face loss of income as well as harvests – often their sole source of food and income.

¹ ILO: ILOSTAT, 2015.

² ILO: *Working in the rural areas in the 21st century: Reality and prospects of rural employment in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (Geneva, Thematic Labour Overview No. 3, 2017), p. 38.

³ See for example WB: *Feminization of agriculture in the context of rural transformations: What is the evidence?* (Washington, DC, 2016), including the report's extensive bibliography.

⁴ ILO: *Decent work for food security and resilient rural livelihoods*, Portfolio of policy guidance notes on the promotion of decent work in the rural economy, Sectoral Policies Department (Geneva, 2016).

⁵ ILO: *World Employment Social Outlook 2016: Transforming jobs to end poverty* (Geneva, 2016).

⁶ The average rate of female agricultural land ownership is less than 20 per cent in developing countries (Rome, FAO, 2010).

⁷ FAO: *The state of food and agriculture 2010-2011 – I: Women in agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development* (Rome, 2011).

⁸ FAO, IFAD and ILO: *Gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty - Status, trends and gaps* (Rome, 2010).

⁹ R. Gopalakrishnan and A. Sukthankar: *Freedom of association for women rural workers: A manual* (Geneva, ILO, 2012).

¹⁰ ILO: *Meeting of Experts on Violence against Women and Men in the World of Work*, Geneva, 2016.

¹¹ ILO, Walk Free Foundation and IOM: *Global estimates of modern slavery* (Geneva, 2017).

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Related increases in food prices make food less accessible to poor people, in particular to women and girls, whose health has been found to decline more than male health in times of food shortages. Furthermore, women are often excluded from decision-making on access to, and the use of, land and resources critical to their livelihoods.¹² This can increase the burden of unpaid agricultural and household work on girls and women, leaving them with less time for education and training, and reducing their opportunities to access paid work. In Africa, climate change is now threatening the viability of subsistence farming and the survival of millions of rural dwellers, 75 per cent of whom are women.¹³ A 2017 Lancet study has also observed that global labour capacity in rural populations exposed to temperature change is estimated to have decreased by 5.3 per cent between 2000 and 2016. The study emphasizes that higher temperatures pose “profound threats” to occupational health and labour productivity, particularly for people undertaking manual, outdoor labour in hot areas. More specifically, the study observes that such losses of labour capacity have important implications for the livelihoods of individuals, families, and communities, especially those relying on subsistence farming.¹⁴ At the same time, exclusionary response and recovery efforts to natural disasters can also have disproportionate effects on women, and can increase or reinforce existing inequalities.¹⁵ The situation is even more challenging for women attempting to recover from environmental disasters¹⁶ because of their limited access to technology, knowledge and productive inputs.¹⁷ For instance, technologies for agricultural adaptation that may not be gender-friendly can increase the risks for social and economic maladaptation.¹⁸

As workers, entrepreneurs and custodians of traditional knowledge, the contributions of rural women are unique, especially in the context of natural resource management, agriculture and forestry, all sectors that are critical to climate mitigation and adaptation. Traditional knowledge also drives innovation in enhancing resilience and generating green job

opportunities in the rural economy. A fair transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all¹⁹ (particularly in these sectors), opens up significant opportunities to strengthen the participation of women in decision-making at all levels, secure sustainable livelihoods, improve working conditions, and advance the traditional and local knowledge necessary for strong climate action.²⁰

Rural women produce more than one-half of the world’s food despite their lower productivity due to various disadvantages explained earlier.²¹ They are the primary caregivers to the families in many societies and key to ensuring food and nutrition security at the household level. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) figures indicate that women provide up to 90 per cent of rice cultivation in South-East Asia and produce as much as 80 per cent of basic foodstuffs for household consumption and for sale in sub-Saharan Africa.²² Overall, women provide up to 90 per cent of the rural poor’s food intake. Other research shows that if women farmers had the same access to resources as men, the number of hungry people in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million.²³ Considering the fact that nearly 800 million people are facing chronic hunger²⁴, it is crucial to remove burdens that rural women face and improve their productivity and working conditions, thereby improving food security.

Child labour in the agricultural sector, which relates primarily to subsistence and commercial farming and livestock herding, accounts for 71 per cent of all child labour (or 108 million children in absolute terms), according to the ILO’s 2017 child labour estimates.²⁵ Unlike in other sectors, where the share of boys in child labour is higher than that of girls, the share of boys and girls in agricultural child labour is very similar: 70.3 per cent of girls in child labour are found in agriculture, compared to 71.5 per cent of boys. Girls more often perform household chores within their own family, which is not covered by the above-mentioned estimates. Evidence across countries and sectors also suggests that a significant number of girls look after their younger siblings while their mothers work.

¹² FAO: Women and Food Security, FAO Programme <http://www.fao.org/gender/gender-home/gender-programme/gender-food/en/> [accessed 7 Nov. 2017].

¹³ G. S. Hemmings-Gapihan: “Climate change, subsistence farming, food security, and poverty: The consequences of agricultural policies on women and men farmers in Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire”, in *Africa Policy Journal* (2008, Aug.).

¹⁴ See: *The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: From 25 years of inaction to a global transformation for public health*, The Lancet, 2017, [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(2817\)2932464-9/fulltext#ccsec70](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(2817)2932464-9/fulltext#ccsec70) [accessed 1 Oct. 2017].

¹⁵ See: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/274081468183862921/Gender-and-climate-change-three-things-you-should-know> [accessed 7 Nov. 2017].

¹⁶ OECD: *Gender and sustainable development: Maximizing the economic, social and environmental role of women* (Paris, 2008), pp. 73–74. For example, when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August 2005, the hardest hit were women, mostly African-American; see: ILO: *Gender equality at the heart of decent work*, Report VI, International Labour Conference, 98th Session, Geneva, 2009.

¹⁷ FAO, IFAD and ILO: *Gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty – Status, trends and gaps* (Rome, 2010).

¹⁸ See UNDP: *Gender and climate change: Gender, adaptation and disaster risk reduction* (New York, 2016).

¹⁹ See ILO: *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (Geneva, 2015).

²⁰ ILO: *Gender, labour and a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (Geneva, forthcoming).

²¹ ILO: *Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction*, Report IV, International Labour Conference, 97th Session, Geneva, 2008.

²² FAO, ILO and IUF: *Agriculture workers and their contribution to sustainable agriculture and rural development* (Geneva, 2005).

²³ See: *Women hold the key to building a world free from hunger and poverty*, FAO, 2016, <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/460267/icode/> [accessed 7 Nov. 2017].

²⁴ IFAD, FAO and WHO: *The state of food insecurity in the world: Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets – Taking stock of even progress* (Rome, 2015).

²⁵ ILO: *Global estimates of child labour: Results and trends, 2012-2016* (Geneva, 2017).

2. Scope and definitions

Gender equality refers to the enjoyment of equal rights, opportunities and treatment by men and women and by boys and girls in all spheres of life, including in the world of work.²⁶

Women's economic empowerment and gender equality are critical because they relate to human rights and are enshrined in a normative framework of international labour standards, laws and norms. Reflecting this, promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment go hand in hand, and both are important in ensuring that women enjoy their human rights and can play a role in contributing to inclusive and sustainable development through a thriving rural economy.

Women's economic empowerment

Women's economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth. Women's economic empowerment increases women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information. Women's economic participation and empowerment are fundamental to strengthening their rights and enables them to have control over their lives and exert influence in society. (OECD (2011), Women's Economic Empowerment-Issues Paper)

Equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation: basic notions

The ILO's Conventions and Recommendations addressing equality and non-discrimination in the world of work, including the fundamental Conventions Nos. 100 and 111, which have close to universal ratification, cover women in the rural economy. These international standards call for equality of opportunity and treatment, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion, social origin and other grounds in a comprehensive manner, requiring governments to address discrimination in respect of access to training and education, recruitment, terms and conditions of employment, including wages, social protection as well as termination of employment.

Discrimination related to access to self-employment and waged employment needs to be addressed, while also keeping in mind that discrimination is one of the drivers confining women to the informal economy. Access to maternity protection and measures facilitating the balancing of work and family responsibilities (including child care facilities), are essential

to promoting gender equality as a means of ensuring decent work for women in the rural economy. Rural women workers' enjoyment of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining is also a critical enabling right for achieving gender equality in the world of work.

Discrimination involves situations where people or groups are treated differently and less favourably on grounds such as sex, religion, ethnicity, disability, social origin, health, age and sexual orientation, and this treatment is unrelated to the inherent requirements of the work or job concerned. Discrimination also includes situations in which neutral measures, actions or interventions seemingly treat everyone in the same way, but have a disproportionately adverse effect on certain groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, indigenous communities or ethnic minorities and persons living with HIV, among others. It is termed "indirect discrimination".

Women in the rural economy are subject to discrimination on multiple grounds. In addition to being discriminated against based on their gender, they may also be disadvantaged because of their ethnic or social origin and religion.²⁷ In many countries, socially disadvantaged communities, such as indigenous or tribal peoples, live and work in geographically remote rural areas, often facing severe decent work deficits.

Inequality and discrimination experienced by rural women is often also associated with harassment and violence, which involve behaviour and practices that undermine human dignity and cause physical, psychological or sexual harm. Gender-based violence stems from unequal power relations between men and women, or is perpetrated against people because they do not conform to socially accepted gender roles.²⁸

Target groups

Promoting gender equality and empowerment of rural women requires a focus on enhancing decent work and economic opportunities for **young women**. Almost 85 per cent of young women and men live in rural areas in developing countries, and they constitute 23.5 per cent of the total working poor.²⁹ In rural economies, the ILO estimates that 93 per cent of the jobs available to young men and women aged between 15 and 24 are in the informal sector.³⁰ This is particularly the case in agriculture, where they are exposed to low wages, difficult working conditions and lacking social protection. Poor basic

²⁷ See for example ILO: *The labour situation of indigenous women in Peru: A study* (Geneva, 2016).

²⁸ WHO: *Promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women* (Geneva, Violence Prevention, 2009), p. 3; D. van der Veur et al.: *Gender matters: A manual on addressing gender-based violence with young people* (Budapest, Council of Europe, 2007), p. 43.

²⁹ ILO: *Global Employment Trends 2012: Preventing a deeper job crisis* (Geneva, 2012).

³⁰ ILO: *Investing in youth for rural transformation* (Geneva, 2012).

²⁶ ILO: *ABC of women workers' rights and gender equality* (Geneva, 2007).

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infrastructure, lack of targeted initiatives in favour of rural youths and a lack of representation at local and national levels hinder rural youth (particularly young women) from accessing productive skills development. Gender norms and discrimination continue to hamper and discourage young women's economic initiatives, access to land and financial services, paid and formal employment, and participation in decision-making. In response to the lack of economic opportunities, rural youth are increasingly migrating to urban areas.

Empowering rural women through decent work also implies a focus on **smallholder farmers**, who dominate the agricultural sector in developing countries.³¹ There are more than 500 million small farms of less than 2 hectares globally. A focus on smallholders, particularly women, contributes directly to poverty alleviation and food security, while supporting resilience and empowerment of communities that are facing multiple vulnerabilities, including those stemming from the impacts of climate change and conflict. Too often, however, women's work as smallholder farmers remains invisible and insufficiently supported. A study of informal workers in the global horticulture commodities value chain shows that in the smallholder sector, women are more likely than men to contribute to family work while men are more likely to be in the value chain (Chan, 2013). Supporting women smallholders includes ensuring access to land and financial services and providing assistance to help them become entrepreneurs, including through cooperatives.

Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on ending hunger includes a specific indicator (2.3), which highlights the role of small-scale food producers, particularly women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers in increasing agricultural productivity and incomes.

Increased access to wage employment in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, such as in the tourism or services sector, has the potential to enhance women's economic opportunities and income. Yet, rural women's engagement as **wage workers** in conditions of vulnerability – particularly in unskilled or low skill work, and in informal settings – are widespread in rural areas. Women's unequal access to skills and training along with discrimination within their communities and society at large, as well as absence of alternative income generation opportunities are key challenges. For example, in the agricultural export industry,³² work is physically demanding and involves

occupational safety and health hazards. Workers are often recruited through contractors as seasonal or casual labourers, with little or no interaction with their employers. These work settings tend to entail low job security and inadequate social protection and opportunities for social dialogue, along with weak remedies in case of labour rights violations. Agriculture is also a sector where occupational job-segregation based on gender – both horizontal and vertical – remains prevalent. This is a key reason why there is unequal pay for work of equal value, along with weak minimum wage compliance and enforcement, particularly in rural areas. Women working on plantations may be entitled to maternity protection (including leave and benefits), but in practice may be unable to enjoy these benefits due to their casual or seasonal status.

Rural women belonging to **indigenous and tribal peoples**,³³ face additional layers of disadvantage.³⁴ This is linked to the fact that, on the one hand, the incidence of poverty among indigenous and tribal peoples tends to be disproportionately high (this is particularly so for communities in rural areas where most indigenous and tribal peoples live). On the other hand, indigenous and tribal women face discrimination from both within, and outside, their communities, which makes them particularly vulnerable to social and economic exclusion, marginalization, exploitation and gender-based violence.³⁵

Indigenous women, involved in traditional occupations and subsistence activities in agriculture, livestock, hunting and forestry, play key roles within their communities as custodians and transmitters of traditional knowledge, which is vital for the existence and integrity of their peoples, and indispensable to their livelihoods and resilience. With increasing livelihood insecurity, which may be due to reduced access to land and natural resources or the impacts of climate change, indigenous women increasingly seek employment in the informal economy. Climate change threatens to increase indigenous women's vulnerability to socio-economic exclusion, as indigenous and tribal communities are disproportionately affected by climate change.³⁶ Yet, as noted in the Paris Agreement,³⁷ traditional knowledge is critical for strong climate action, and particularly in this regard, indigenous women have a very important role to play in furthering a low-carbon economy more broadly and enhancing resilience in the rural economy specifically.

³¹ FAO defines smallholders as “small-scale farmers, pastoralists, forest keepers, fishers who manage areas varying from less than one hectare to 10 hectares. Smallholders are characterized by family-focused motives such as favouring the stability of the farm household system, using mainly family labour for production and using part of the produce for family consumption”; see: *Smallholders and family farmers*, FAO, 2012, www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/sustainability_pathways/docs/Factsheet_SMALLHOLDERS.pdf [accessed 2 Oct. 2017].

³² F. Ahmed and Md. I. Hossain: *A study on working condition of tea plantation workers in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka, ILO, 2016); ILO: *Decent work in agriculture*, Background paper for International Workers' Symposium on Decent Work in Agriculture, Geneva, 15-18 Sep. 2003; T. Korovkin: “Cut-flower exports, female labor, and community participation in highland Ecuador”, in *Latin American Perspectives* (2003, Vol. 30, No. 4, July), pp. 18–42; C.S. Dolan: “On farm and packhouse: Employment at the bottom of a global value chain”, in *Rural Sociology* (2004, Vol. 69, No. 1, Mar.), pp. 99–126.

³³ ILO: *Decent work for indigenous and tribal peoples in the rural economy*, Portfolio of policy guidance notes on the promotion of decent work in the rural economy, Sectoral Policies Department (Geneva, 2017).

³⁴ See for example ILO: *The labour situation of indigenous women in Peru: A study* (Geneva, 2016).

³⁵ ILO, UNWOMEN, UNFPA and UNICEF: *Breaking the silence on violence against indigenous girls, adolescents and young women: A call to action based on an overview of existing evidence from Africa, Asia Pacific and Latin America* (New York, 2013).

³⁶ ILO: *Indigenous peoples and climate change: From victims to change agents through decent work* (Geneva, 2017).

³⁷ See: *The Paris agreement*, UN, 2015, http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9485.php [accessed 4 Oct. 2017].

3. The ILO's approach

The ILO's approach to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the rural economy is based on its four inter-related strategic objectives: employment promotion, respect for fundamental principles and rights at work and international labour standards, labour and social protection, and social dialogue. Within this framework the ILO supports job creation and access to productive employment for rural women, including young women; seeks to enhance protection of women from unacceptable forms of work; supports member States in the provision of social protection floors, including maternity protection; and seeks to strengthen social dialogue and tripartism through increased organization and participation of women. Facilitating transitions from the informal to formal economy is an important entry point for empowering women in the rural economy. The ILO also supports the strengthening of national capacities to collect, analyze and use statistical data on the rural economy needed for policy design and assessments, which is disaggregated by gender, disability, ethnicity and HIV status or other relevant characteristics.

The ILO's mandate on gender equality is based on a number of International Labour Conventions including, as previously mentioned, the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), as well as the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 [No. 156]; and the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). In addition, it is guided by the 2004 Resolution on Gender Equality, Pay Equity and Maternity Protection as well as the Resolution concerning Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work, adopted in June 2009.

The ILO provides technical support to its constituents and partners in the application of these standards, including through knowledge development and support for policy-making and legal reform. The ILO engages in advocacy, developing tools, capacity building, and providing policy advice and technical cooperation.

Gender mainstreaming is central to the ILO's strategy for achieving gender equality in the world of work. It ensures that the concerns and experiences of women and men are an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programmes in political, economic and societal spheres, so that everyone benefits equally and inequality is not perpetuated.³⁸ The ILO's approach includes paying specific attention to women from indigenous and tribal communities and other socially disadvantaged groups, such as persons with disabilities.

Gender equality, the rural economy and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

ILO interventions to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment in rural areas contribute to several SDGs:

- SDG 1 on poverty reduction
- SDG 2 on food security
- SDG 5 to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"
- SDG 8 "to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all"
- SDG 13 on taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- SDG 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- SDG 15 to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Although achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is a stand-alone goal (SDG 5), it is also part of all the other goals, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution.

Creating jobs and care solutions in the formal rural economy: leveraging rural women's initiatives

Employment promotion, job creation through employment policies and skills, and enterprise development are central to the Decent Work Agenda. The ILO strives to ensure gender equality and prevent the perpetuation of cycles of gender discrimination, where poor and uneducated women remain in lower paid, less skilled and more insecure work. This includes ensuring rural women's access (including women from disadvantaged communities) to training and skills, self-employment start-up grants and financial services, support for the creation of cooperatives, and decent work opportunities in employment intensive infrastructure development projects. At the same time, ensuring access to technical and vocational training in non-traditional fields contributes to increasing women's access to rural labour markets and avoiding segmentation by gender.

³⁸ ILO: *Resource guide on gender issues in employment and labour market policies: Working towards women's economic empowerment and gender equality* (Geneva, 2014).

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As large numbers of rural women are working as own account workers and face challenges in enhancing productivity, the ILO's Women's Entrepreneurship Development (ILO-WED) programme and the Small Enterprise Programme's Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) offer specific approaches for supporting women entrepreneurs in starting and growing their businesses. Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE) is an ILO community-based training programme implemented in Asia and Africa. It promotes income generation and employment opportunities for disadvantaged women and men by providing them with skills and knowledge that they can use in their communities.

Investment in care – recognizing, reducing, and redistributing and representing care work – is essential for women's economic empowerment and for supporting women's equal opportunities in the world of work. Strengthening access to childcare, particularly in rural areas and in agriculture, contributes to families' social and economic security and enhances women's access to economic opportunities and jobs, thereby reducing vulnerability to risks. This is particularly important for poor rural communities in which women shoulder a higher burden of unpaid care work, and where social value evolves at a different pace than in urban areas. Devising effective and tailored child care solutions and creating quality jobs in the care economy, which have positive effects on poor families, women's empowerment and enterprises, is a strategic approach for stimulating rural labour markets.³⁹

Together with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the ILO has launched a Working for Health Initiative in follow-up to the High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth.⁴⁰ The initiative seeks to expand and transform the health and care workforce at the country level through robust labour market data, national workforce strategies, social dialogue, skills development and enhanced domestic and international investments. An expanded and high-quality health workforce has the potential of not only improving health outcomes, but also serving as the basis for economic growth, job promotion and gender equality. A key strategy of the Working for Health Initiative is to invest in rural health service workers and to address the specific professional and labour challenges they face, with the aim of ensuring universal health coverage for all.

The ILO seeks to support rural women in taking up leading positions in producers' organizations. Cooperatives can enhance women's economic opportunities through collective

action, while also providing a platform for involvement in policy debates and decision-making. Promoting cooperatives is a concrete response to the need to invest in agriculture and other sectors in the real economy, while paying special attention to landless women farmers and women from socially disadvantaged communities, such as indigenous and tribal communities, whose traditional knowledge plays an important role in generating green jobs and enterprises.⁴¹

Protecting rural women from unacceptable forms of work

Women's economic empowerment in the rural economy is inseparably linked to strengthening laws, policies, governance and institutions, which reduce the risks of exposure to, and enhance protection from, unacceptable forms of work. The ILO defines unacceptable forms of work as work that denies fundamental principles and rights at work, or that put at risk the lives, health, freedom, human dignity or security of workers, or subjects their households to conditions of poverty.⁴²

The ILO is pursuing an integrated approach that seeks to address vulnerability through a combination of context-specific measures and interventions. This includes tackling violations of fundamental principles and rights at work (particularly discrimination, restrictions of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining), as well as child labour and forced labour, with a specific focus on rural areas. The ILO supports the enhancement of protection from occupational safety and health hazards, including the risks of exposure to violence and harassment in the workplace, and effective minimum wage coverage and enforcement. It focuses on at-risk sectors and occupations, including agriculture, construction and domestic work, in many of which women are represented.

Setting and enforcing minimum wages that contribute to overcoming poverty and reducing inequality is particularly relevant in the context of empowerment of rural women. The ILO supports efforts to extend minimum wage coverage to sectors in which women are concentrated, such as domestic work, agriculture or the services sector. In rural areas, where minimum wage compliance is generally lower than in urban areas, women and workers from socially disadvantaged ethnic or minority groups are particularly affected by remuneration

³⁹ See, for example, Laura Addati: "France" in C. Hein and N. Cassirer (eds.): *Workplace solutions for child care* (Geneva, ILO, 2010), p. 303.

⁴⁰ WHO: *Working for health and growth: Investing in the health workforce*, Report of the High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth (Geneva, 2016).

⁴¹ ILO: *Leveraging the cooperative advantage for women's empowerment and gender equality* (Geneva, ILO, Cooperatives and the World of Work No. 1, 2014). Also see, ILO: *A cooperative way for empowering indigenous peoples* (Geneva, ILO, Cooperatives and the World of Work Series No. 15, 2016); and ILO: *Securing rights, creating jobs and ensuring sustainability: A cooperative way for empowering indigenous peoples* (Geneva, ILO, Cooperatives and the World of Work Series No. 5, 2016).

⁴² ILO: *Programme and Budget proposals for 2016-17*, Governing Body, 323rd Session, Geneva, Mar. 2015, p.31.

below minimum wage level. In response, the ILO recommends comprehensive and tailored compliance strategies.⁴³

Strengthening labour inspection in rural areas, and particularly in these sectors and occupations, is another key focus, and action includes targeted promotion of ratification and implementation of ILO Convention No. 129 concerning labour inspection in agriculture. Ensuring access to formal jobs in rural areas is key for preventing women worker's vulnerability to labour rights violations and exploitation.

Child labour, and the way it affects boys and girls differently, perpetuates the cycle of poverty and inequality that rural women face. Girls may be involved in domestic work instead of being sent to school, which undermines their potential, leading to lower productivity and reducing their decent work opportunities. The ILO approach emphasizes the gender-dimension of child labour as critical for developing targeted responses to tackle child labour among girls in the rural economy. This includes ensuring parent's access to decent work, equal access of girls to education, and challenging stereotypical views and social norms that limit girl's equal rights and opportunities, while promoting a more equal sharing of household responsibilities between women and men.

Enhancing social protection for women in the rural economy

Gender-based inequalities in the labour market, women's unequal share of unpaid care and household work, and bias in the way in which social protection systems are structured in the formal economy have resulted in unequal access, coverage and provision of social security for women. Moreover, gender inequalities and the lack of consideration given to women's specific social protection needs often put women at greater risk throughout their life.⁴⁴

The ILO promotes a gender responsive policy approach, particularly when designing strategies and measures to extend social protection in the rural economy. Women often face additional disadvantages, compared to men, in accessing social protection as a result of unequal access to education, the high proportion of women in informal and own-account work, and limited access to financial and non-financial services.⁴⁵ When involved in wage work, rural

women engaged as casual, temporary or seasonal workers may be ineligible for social benefits, including maternity benefits. Rural women spend more time in securing the wellbeing of their families, including food provision, while at the same time are less likely to access household funds to pay for medical treatment.⁴⁶

The ILO is supporting countries in their efforts to extend social protection by addressing the particularities of the rural economy, such as low contributory capacity and the low level of organization among independent workers or producers, and widespread informality. The ILO's approach is based on the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) and seeks to ensure that a gender dimension is incorporated into the design, implementation and evaluation of social protection systems. The ILO promotes enhanced maternity protection in line with Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183), which is contributing to improved women's participation in the labour market while at the same time preventing pregnancy-related mortality, which is high in rural areas.

Closing the representation gap: women's access to freedom of association, collective bargaining and social dialogue

Freedom of association is a core right for all workers and a prerequisite for social dialogue and collective bargaining. Most workers employed in the rural economy do not, however, enjoy this right, and the barriers for women workers to access this right are often higher than for male workers. Promoting freedom of association for women rural workers is therefore a crucial element of the ILO strategy in enhancing decent work in the rural economy. Recent initiatives include a gender-specific training manual for trade unions to specifically build the capacity of rural women workers.⁴⁷

The Rural Workers' Organizations Recommendation, 1975 (No. 149) specifically recognizes the challenges facing women and integrates the gender dimension into providing guidance on how to organize rural workers. It encourages the competent authorities to promote programmes focused on the roles that women can, and should, play in the rural community, and to integrate them into general programmes of education and training, to which women and men should have equal access. The Recommendation promotes workers' education and adult education programmes specially adapted to the social, economic and cultural needs of the various categories of rural workers, including women.

⁴³ U. Rani et al.: "Minimum wage coverage and compliance in developing countries", in *International Labour Review* (2013, Vol. 153, No. 3-4, Dec.), pp. 381-410; A. Marinakis (ed): *Incumplimiento con el salario mínimo en América Latina: El peso de los factores económicos e institucionales* (Santiago, OIT, FAO, 2014).

⁴⁴ Lou Tessier et al.: *Social protection floors and gender equality: A brief overview* (Geneva, ILO, ESS Working Paper No. 37, 2013).

⁴⁵ See also ILO: *Extending social protection to the rural economy*, Portfolio of policy guidance notes on the promotion of decent work in the rural economy, Sectoral Policies Department (Geneva, 2015).

⁴⁶ X. Scheil-Adlung and C. Kuhl: *Evidence on gender inequities in social health protection: The case of women living in rural areas* (Geneva, ILO, Extension of Social Security Paper No. 29, 2012).

⁴⁷ R. Gopalakrishnan and A. Sukthar: *Freedom of association for women rural workers: A manual* (Geneva, ILO, 2012).

4. The ILO's experience to date

The ILO's experience in promoting women's economic empowerment in the rural economy is an integral part of its longstanding work to promote gender equality in the world of work. Interventions targeting the rural economy have included projects along several work streams:

- Mainstreaming gender equality and non-discrimination into national policies and strategies for employment, rural development and into responses to conflicts and disasters;
- Training and skills development to promote women's entrepreneurship and productive employment, including through cooperatives and employment intensive investment programmes;
- Protection from unacceptable forms of work, strengthening social protection and workers' organizations.

Recent examples of ILO interventions:

In Zimbabwe, a programme on women's economic empowerment aims to improve rural women's employability and labour market integration by using ILO tools, such as the above-mentioned SYIB and TREE, and the ILO's participatory gender audit methodologies. The TREE methodology is also being used in Mozambique to enhance rural livelihoods through skills development and improved access to markets. In Bangladesh, TREE encouraged women to enter non-traditional trades such as repairing appliances and computers. This approach combined technical and business training with training in gender issues and gender sensitization sessions for trainees' families, communities and partner organizations.⁴⁸

The ILO Women's Entrepreneurship Development (ILO-WED) programme empowers women entrepreneurs in developing countries to start and grow their businesses. The Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GET Ahead), linked to WED, is a training package and resource kit for low-income women and men, which teaches entrepreneurial skills from a gender perspective. In United Republic of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, GET Ahead entrepreneurship training and mentoring to low-income women in rural and peri-rural areas resulted in improved business growth and sustainability⁴⁹. In Kenya, GET Ahead training increased the participation of women in the agricultural supply chain of the tourism sector by equipping them with skills in business management, financial literacy and improved agricultural practices.⁵⁰

In Sri Lanka, the ILO Local Empowerment through Economic Development (LEED) project is creating decent work and livelihood opportunities for the most vulnerable in post-conflict areas through the development of equitable and sustainable agro-food value chains. Interventions specifically targeting women are leading to increased women's participation in the value chains and enhanced opportunities for women in leadership roles in producer groups and cooperatives.

The ILO is supporting the Columbian Government in designing an integrated jobs for peace and resilience programme for rural development and decent work. Important areas of intervention include promoting transition to formality in the rural economy, extending social protection floors to rural areas, and strengthening rural workers' organizations' representation and voice.

⁴⁸ ILO: *Rural skills training: A generic manual on training for rural economic empowerment (TREE)*, Skills and Employability Department (Geneva, 2009).

⁴⁹ ILO: *Developing markets: How training female entrepreneurs can improve business practices and profits-Evidence from Kenya*, (Geneva, 2017).

⁵⁰ European Training Foundation: *The entrepreneurial continuum: From concept to action* (Turin, 2017), pp. 26-27.

In collaboration with the FAO, the ILO has developed a training programme for the apex bodies of savings and credit cooperatives, which are often the only financial service providers in rural areas. These materials are being piloted in Zambia. To examine the existing knowledge about the gender dimensions of rural employment and the gaps in data and research, the ILO produced an inter-agency report on the gender dimension of agricultural work with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the FAO.⁵¹

The ILO's Youth Employment Programme and the IFAD's Near East and North Africa Unit have implemented the Taqeeem (meaning "evaluation" in Arabic) initiative, whose objective is to strengthen gender monitoring, evaluation and mainstreaming in rural employment projects in the Middle East and North Africa. Through rigorous impact research, this capacity development and learning grant project aims to understand "what works" in the promotion of gender mainstreaming, with the ultimate goal of reaching gender equality in rural employment outcomes across the region. A series of impact reports is being produced; e.g. a 2017 report on empowering young women through business and vocational training assesses the employment impacts of a field intervention, which benefited 4500 young women in 30 villages in rural Upper Egypt.⁵²

The ILO Employment Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP) adapted its rural access planning and community contracting tools for public works infrastructure programmes in the water and sanitation sector in Panama, Nicaragua and Paraguay by integrating an inter-cultural and gender-based approach. The inclusion of women, rural and indigenous populations in the decision-making, planning and implementation of water supply and sanitation programs, ensure that these services are more accessible, equitable and sustainable.⁵³

In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the ILO has undertaken a survey into the living and working conditions of tea plantation workers, which produced new data on the conditions of women workers who belong to disadvantaged indigenous and tribal groups. As a follow-up, capacity building for the tea garden union also included specific interventions to strengthen women's participation in both unions and decision-making.

In Kenya, an ILO project is reducing vulnerability to climate risks and improving livelihoods as well as living standards among traditional pastoralist communities. The project is directly benefitting pastoralist women through the creation of green jobs in the building industry, while contributing to the reduction of poverty and strengthening the resilience of the community and country to climate change.

The ILO has recently also developed an IPEC+ Flagship Strategy (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour and Forced Labour).⁵⁴ It aims to work with the ILO's tripartite social partners from the village to the global levels – governments, employers' and workers' organizations – and with enterprises and small producers' organizations to promote the eradication of child labour and forced labour and the realization of all fundamental rights at work. A key focus area for IPEC+ is on the rural and informal economies. Its interventions cut across strengthening governance structures and capacities of real economy actors, enhancing engagement and cooperation between the ILO's constituents and other relevant stakeholders, and significantly expanding knowledge, information-sharing and evidence-based policy advice.

⁵¹ FAO, IFAD and ILO: *Gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty - Status, trends and gaps* (Rome, 2010).

⁵² See: A. Elsayed and R. Roushdy: *Empowering young women through business and vocational training: Evidence from a field intervention in rural Egypt* (Geneva, ILO, Impact Report Series, Issue 8, 2017).

⁵³ See: A. Amorim et al.: *South-south cooperation and decent work: Good practices* (Geneva, ILO, 2013), p.53; and E.E.S. Alvarez: *Conceptual guide for integrated rural access planning and community contracting in the water and sanitation sector: With an approach on gender and inter-culturality* (Geneva, ILO, Guides for integrated rural access planning and community contracting in the water and sanitation sector No. 1, 2015).

⁵⁴ See: ILO: *ILO IPEC+ flagship strategy: International programme on the elimination of child labour and forced labour*, Governance and Tripartism Department (Geneva, 2017).

5. Practical guidance and resources

ILO instruments

A large number of ILO Conventions and Recommendations set out guidance relevant for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in the rural economy, including the instruments listed below:

Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)

Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)

Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No. 129)

Rural Workers' Organizations Convention, 1975 (No. 141)

Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159)

Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)

Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183)

Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)

Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193)

Rural Workers' Organisations Recommendation, 1975 (No. 149)

Domestic Workers Recommendation, 2011 (No. 201)

Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)

Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204)

Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205)

Tools

ILO. 2007. *ILO Participatory gender audits* (Geneva).

ILO. 2007. *Mainstreaming Gender - An annotated bibliography of selected ILO tools for mainstreaming gender in the world of work* (Geneva).

ILO. 2009. *Rural skills training: A generic manual on training for rural economic empowerment (TREE)* (Geneva).

ILO. 2012. *ILO Resources on cooperatives and women's employment and entrepreneurship* (Geneva).

ILO. 2012. *Unleashing the potential for rural development through decent work*, (Geneva).

ILO. 2014. *Resource guide on gender issues in employment and labour market policies: Working towards women's economic empowerment and gender equality* (Geneva).

ILO. *Minimum wage policy guide*

ILO. 2015. *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (Geneva).

Reports and publications

De Luca, L.; Sahy, H.; Joshi, S.; Cortes, M. 2013. *Learning from catalysts of rural transformation* (Geneva, ILO).

FAO, IFAD, ILO. 2010. *Gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty - Status, trends and gaps* (Rome).

ILO. 2017. *Thematic Labour Overview: Working in rural areas in the 21st century – Reality and prospects of rural employment in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Lima, ILO Regional Office).

ILO, UNWOMEN, UNFPA and UNICEF. 2013. *Breaking the silence on violence against indigenous girls, adolescents and young women* (New York).

ILO. 2008. *Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction*, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_091721.pdf Report IV, International Labour Conference, 97th Session, Geneva, 2008 (Geneva).

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__. 2017. *Towards a better future for women and work: Voices of women and men* (Geneva).

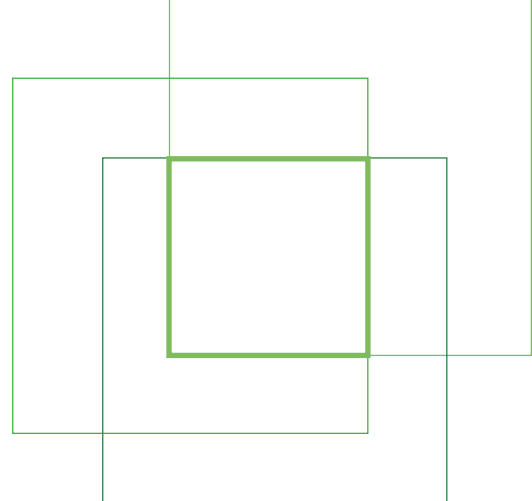
Loutfi M.F. (ed). 2008. "Women, gender and work: What is equality and how do we get there?" in *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol.15, No. 2, pp. 228.230.

Marinakakis A. (ed.). 2014. *Incumplimiento con el salario mínimo en América Latina* (Santiago, OIT, FAO)





Overview of Policy Guidance Notes on the Promotion of Decent Work in the Rural Economy



Supporting inclusive agricultural growth for improved livelihoods and food security

- Decent Work for Food Security and Resilient Rural Livelihoods
- Decent and Productive Work in Agriculture

Promoting economic diversification and triggering productive transformation for rural employment

- Economic Diversification of the Rural Economy
- Promoting Decent Work for Rural Workers at the Base of the Supply Chain
- The Role of Multinational Enterprises in the Promotion of Decent Work in Rural Areas
- Transitioning to Formality in the Rural Informal Economy
- Sustainable Tourism – A Catalyst for Inclusive Socio-economic Development and Poverty Reduction in Rural Areas

Promoting access to services, protection and employment-intensive investment

- Providing Access to Quality Services in the Rural Economy to Promote Growth and Social Development
- Extending Social Protection to the Rural Economy
- Developing the Rural Economy through Financial Inclusion: The Role of Access to Finance
- Employment-Intensive Investment in Rural Infrastructure for Economic Development, Social and Environmental Protection and Inclusive Growth

Ensuring sustainability and harnessing the benefits of natural resources

- A Just Transition towards a Resilient and Sustainable Rural Economy
- Decent Work in Forestry
- Harnessing the Potential of Extractive Industries
- Water for Improved Rural Livelihoods

Increasing the voice of rural people through organization and the promotion of rights, standards and social dialogue

- Rights at Work in the Rural Economy
- Promoting Social Dialogue in the Rural Economy
- Building Local Development in Rural Areas through Cooperatives and other Social and Solidarity Economy Enterprises and Organizations
- Decent Work for Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in the Rural Economy
- Empowering Women in the Rural Economy
- Decent Work for Rural Youth
- Promoting Fair and Effective Labour Migration Policies in Agriculture and Rural Areas

Improving the knowledge base on decent work in the rural economy

- Enhancing the Knowledge Base to Support the Promotion of Decent Work in Rural Areas

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