

Wikigender Online Discussion

13-22 February 2012

Equal rights to resources: the key to empowering rural women.

But what's stopping it?

Summary Report

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Land is a crucial agricultural asset for women. Owning land can open access to markets and improve social status. It can be also used as collateral to access other resources, such as bank loans or resources required for food production. Access to land can empower women by increasing their bargaining power and ensuring that greater investments are made in children's nutrition and education. Through access to land women could become leading actors in poverty reduction and economic development. The centrality of land in rural women's lives is clear and should be reflected in the policies. So what is stopping rural women from getting equal rights to resources?

In the lead up to a side event organised by the OECD Development Centre, the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Government of Kenya during the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Wikigender organised an [online discussion](#) asking the following questions:

1. How does discrimination in access to, and control over, resources such as land and property influence rural women and girls' social and economic outcomes? How does discrimination against rural women and girls relate to broader policy challenges such as food insecurity, climate change and poverty?
2. What are examples of successful approaches for ensuring women and girls' rights to resources (land, credit, other), both in the law and practice on the ground?
3. What actions should governments, donors, UN bodies and civil society take to address discrimination against rural women and girls?

The discussion allowed a rich exchange of views surrounding rural women's issues in terms of access to resources and identified some good practices that could be applied to empower rural women.

Participants included civil society, NGOs, international organisations and researchers and contributed from very different regions of the world. These regions include: Europe (France, The Netherlands, Bulgaria, Russia), Asia (India, Thailand), the Pacific (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, New Zealand), Africa (Nigeria, Kenya) and North America (United States).



This summary report only highlights the key emerging themes from the discussion. You can access the full transcript of the online discussion from the [discussion page](#) or directly [here](#).

Key obstacles faced by rural women and implications for food security, climate change and poverty

This section outlines the key obstacles identified by the participants in the discussion. There was a general consensus that one big obstacle lies in the pervasive social and cultural norms and practices and in the difficulty in changing them. Participants also mentioned the discrepancy between laws and their implementation, and a few participants pointed out the lack of quality of the data, especially in rural areas.

Social and cultural norms and practices

Discriminatory social institutions such as laws and practices that restrict women's access to resources or practices such as early marriage play an important role in shaping women's economic and social outcomes. These are often more entrenched in rural areas and policies to address dimensions of gender inequality such as access to resources commonly fail to reach rural populations. Participants recognised the role of social cultural norms in reinforcing women's lower status, citing examples from Africa, Asia and the Pacific regions. For example, a participant from Africa commented that women are often viewed as the property of men. Another participant from Asia highlighted that both women and men expect women to have limited rights over resources. The participant from Asia also noted that the change of such attitudes needs to start from childhood, as women need to understand that it is about the due rights, not the equal rights. One participant shared the following figures from the FAO: women still represent less than 5% of landowners in North Africa and West Asia and 15% in sub-Saharan Africa. This low percentage is due, amongst other reasons, to discriminatory social and legal practices such as inheritance law. It is important, however, to acknowledge that inheritance issues are not just legal, they are also socio-cultural: a change in law about who inherits property is not going to change social norms, as discriminatory practices of giving the property to sons rather than daughters may prevail. A participant from the Pacific region mentioned that women, especially in Papua New Guinea, undertake the majority of food production and are the principal caregivers. Culture continues to limit the agency of women and affects their protection from abuse and violence. In rural areas, customs and culture are often invoked to justify discrimination against women and girls, as they are modified to suit the needs of men (for example, some fathers have used the traditional practice of bride price as a justification for trading their daughters for cash or goods with transient logging and mine workers). Such discrimination may in turn affect those women's children, as it can lead to cases of maternal mortality, low birth weight and malnutrition. Finally, several participants pointed out to the fact that one of the obstacles that rural women face is their lack of decision-making power and their voices not being heard.

Laws and implementation

Participants highlighted the gap between the legislation and the reality in practice. For example, in Thailand, although there are laws in place, in practice rural women still lack access to resources and

services, especially financial services. In India, there are many laws aiming at improving women's status but they fail to deliver due to discriminatory views on the status of women in the household and in the society: for example, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments reserving one third of seats in local village councils for women has not succeeded in empowering women. The perception of one of the participants was that women sometimes have stood in these elections as proxies for men. Even where specific strategies are put in place such as electoral quotas or targeted credit programmes, unequal power relations and discriminatory practices remain.

Data issues

Some participants commented that there are data collection issues such as a lack of quality or gender-disaggregated data, especially in rural areas. This is also an obstacle to finding adequate solutions to empower rural women. In Nigeria for example, there is a lack of data and it often varies from one region to another: the data on the determinants of women's control over resources can be socio-cultural, but also socio-political, socio-economic, socio-religious or socio-educational. This makes it harder to decide on what actions need to be taken. These determinants need to be identified. There is a need for a bottom-up consultation process in choosing indicators of progress. The use of new technologies can help, but problems of illiteracy, infrastructure and electricity access need to be tackled in parallel.

Successful approaches and actions that the different stakeholders should take to address discrimination against women and girls

This section of the report will highlight the many positive examples or good practices put forward by the participants. It should be noted that issues affecting the lives of rural women have an impact on the lives of urban women and men also, both in developing and in developed countries, especially in a context of food insecurity, climate change and poverty. The "solutions" outlined below can only work if all stakeholders act together to enable positive change. These can include legal reform, social protection schemes such as Conditional Cash Transfers programmes (CCTs), banning child labour, ensuring universal access to employment and primary healthcare, implementing projects like "contract farming" in rural areas through Corporate Social Responsibility and making sure that where possible, a successful action is replicated elsewhere.

Raising awareness

To ensure rural women's empowerment, one participant highlighted that the focus should be on eliminating discriminatory social norms first rather than on trying to ensure equal access to resources. It is the discriminatory social norms that constrain women's agency, limit their control over resources and affect their confidence in using these resources for personal and household well-being. Such discriminatory attitudes can be changed through educating girls, community outreach programs and awareness-raising campaigns at all levels. One participant mentioned that there are some programmes in developed countries, like Girl Scouts, that train girls to become adults with more confidence and life skills. Another example, in the United States, is the 4-H programme that trains children in traditionally male and female pursuits (from wood working to cooking and sewing),



as well as in gender neutral activities. Another participant commented that change must come from within, since women have the knowledge of their situation with respect to access to resources, the issue being that they are unable to speak out. So it is important that grassroots initiatives start by building awareness amongst women and then start to look for resources. One participant wrote that it is important to address both external conditions (discriminatory social institutions) and internal conditions (i.e., poor rural women often do not have their voices heard and are therefore less able to negotiate in the household and in the community) to fully empower women: in a rural setting, both external and internal conditions reinforce each other, so grassroots initiatives addressing both, such as the Self Employed Women's Association in India, are very important.

Capacity building

Several participants stressed that women in the rural regions need to be listened to and that they need to build their capacity with other rural women from other communities to advocate for their rights and create arenas for them to be heard by governments. If women are better able to claim their rights, it is more likely that they are involved in decision-making processes (at local, state and national levels). For this, it is important to realize girls' education at village level and to identify emerging women leaders. One participant mentioned that in Bulgaria for example, rural girls grow up thinking that their obligations (as a wife, mother and grand-mother) are more important than their rights. A solution mentioned is capacity building for women in seeking information, knowing and claiming their rights and participating in decision-making processes. Providing women with the same education as men will help to ensure that they claim jobs that are in their competencies. An article was also shared by one of the participants on how rural women could be empowered through ICTs, as they have more access to information and therefore to employment opportunities. The role of civil society and the community in achieving women's rights is crucial, as exemplified in the case of Thailand: one participant mentioned the key role of local communities and village cooperatives in promoting education and training to increase women's knowledge of rights and lifelong skills, so that they can, too, solve issues in their villages. Ensuring sufficient financial resources from the government and ensuring transparent budget allocation is crucial to do this successfully. NGOs also play a key role in advising and helping local communities to solve their issues. One example of a success story in Thailand is the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) project, where villagers thought about what they could make from raw material using the traditional indigenous local knowledge: the committee of the village then helped them to manage, budget, package and sell their products, which have then been successfully sold in other provinces and abroad, lifting women and men from poverty.

Capitalising on lessons from the ground

One participant commented that it is essential to focus on the good practices and apply them globally: <http://reso-femmes.org/> is a network of women leaders in the south, showing how women can emerge successful from difficult situations. These examples can then be used in national, regional and international policies (therefore using a bottom-up approach). It is important to take into account contributions coming from the governments and civil society but also from specialists and experts in the field –and include strategies coming from rural women themselves.



Engaging men

Several participants highlighted that men need to be engaged to achieve gender equality. For example, patriarchy is very strong throughout the Pacific region, therefore it is important to encourage and support men and women in changing attitudes towards discrimination. For example, a participant mentioned the "Men As Partners" programme by EngenderHealth, where both women and men share the responsibility for maintaining strong reproductive health (See: <http://bit.ly/kzJhBF>). If applied to access to resources, this would work very well in addition to the legal enforcement. Men need to realise, in the context of food insecurity, what is at stake if women do not have equal rights to resources such as land or credit. They need to be convinced that equality of access is in their own interest too. It is important to raise men's awareness in supporting equal opportunities to natural resources. Men must also allow women to increase their literacy level and participate in economic empowerment activities, and therefore to share their decision-making power. This "woman-man partnership" would help achieve greater results.

Data analysis

On the data side, numerous measurement issues surrounding this topic were brought to the conversation. It was mentioned that indicators need to be both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative indicators can include ratios of males to females in key areas of responsibility, ratios of males to females as grants recipients, ratios of males to females with regards to access to resources, ratios of males to females in access to health and literacy and number of institutions/sectors that have policies targeting women. The question of accountability was brought to the fore and whether these numbers really enable effective policy change. An example of a qualitative indicator was women's perceptions of the role and status in their family/community or their perceptions on areas for change. The challenge in qualitative measures is that such perceptions may be shaped by the culture, i.e the respondents don't see that they have a choice to change and their responses may reflect this, therefore skewing the results. Other issues raised were availability of data, practicality of data collection methods, data sources and bias. Some questions that came up were: who decides what is critical to measure and how can we use the findings for effective policy change. Good data is very important to advocate for women's needs and therefore needs to be as precise and representative as possible. Measurement should be conducted at local/state/institutional level, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators that show causal links where possible – this would reflect systemic and cultural gender variances.

Outstanding question

Finally, a question was asked: what measures are being taken to provide financial support for rural women interested in running for public office, at the national and international level? Wikigender users are invited to provide an answer to this question by [creating a new article](#) on Wikigender.