

Forum: Third General Assembly

Issue: Improving the situation of women in rural areas

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Introduction

With the current global consensus of creating and upholding a gender- unbiased society, unfortunately some women to this day are still left at a disadvantage to other women who live in a more metropolitan and a more economically-developed environment. These women situated in rural areas face many problems such as poverty, hunger and disease. All of which relinquish their ability to grow and function as an integral part of society. Even with the world's population growing more aware of women's empowerment and the increase in the tackling of discrimination against women, there still is a small train of thought that women are unequal to men especially those in rural areas. In our modern world, these ideologies are what undermine the rights of women. This should not be tolerated by society. These problems are seen predominantly in rural areas that usually have limited access to information, or where religion and culture are the main driving force behind the unethical and unfair treatment of women.

When NGOs, the government and other organizations are able to collaborate in fostering opportunities that allow them to stand shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts - rural women become potential contributors to economic prosperity. They will be able to raise agricultural productivity by at least 4% in 34 countries, according to FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization), as women lead the labour force in this sector of LEDCs. Even women living in extreme levels of poverty have power to escape it and become part of the solution. But progress is hindered by global economic fluctuations; climate change and marginalisation embedded into rural cultural heritage - which restricts women to domestic responsibilities. The obligation and nature of household and community work registers them as inactive players in the economy; and limits their chances of obtaining the education and training that could widen the range of income generating activities that could lead to higher living standards in a changing rural environment.

Definition of Key Terms

MEDCs

Stands for more economically developed countries, which are relatively wealthier and have a higher standard of living. They dominate world trade as they have been long industrialised - manufacturing goods and selling them to other parts of the world.

LEDCs

Stands for less economically developed countries. These are usually countries in the southern hemisphere where they have a lower GDP and lower standards of living, subsequently equating to lower scores on development indicators like health, education and life expectancy.

Poverty

When people are unable to acquire adequate resources to enjoy the certain minimum standard of living. It is not just lacking finance or being poor - it is the cost that comes with it through being unable to afford medication, recreational activities and sufficient education due to barely having enough or having none for necessities like shelter and food.

Empowerment

Giving or sharing information, power or authority to someone to encourage them to become more confident in taking initiative (to ensure that their rights are being met - for example).

Rural

An area outside the limits of urban towns and cities - where it is characteristically known for having lower population and agricultural facilities; lacking commercial centres and industrialisation.

Background Information

The empowering initiatives offered in the joint programme launched by the UN Women and its partners have helped poor rural women achieve daily victories - some going beyond reaching self-sustainability and into expanding their world, helping and bettering the lives of other sisters in need. Their successes are not only limited to securing jobs and earning income, but also tackling ongoing violence and shedding light upon human rights issues in their respective nations.

Aty Cuna

Brazil has one of the highest femicide statistics - reaching 4.8% of the women population. These killings usually originate from normalized domestic violence and nationwide failure to allow women to access justice and protection. Only a quarter of the victims have courage to file domestic abuse complaints, but even so they are turned away to 'women's police stations', which are heavily overburdened - having to serve 210,000 women each. The issue worsens tenfold in areas away from major cities in which these institutions are concentrated.

In 2010, the UN Women created Project Cuna for indigenous women along the Brazil-Paraguay border. The programme offered training that improved education and awareness of the women of the community - which allowed them to collate data on violations, and understand and identify the rampant rights violations that had been accepted as the norm in their communities. Project Cuna empowered these women to even intervene in local cases and carry out investigations themselves - due to the inadequacy of the justice system - these included sexual violence against children and youth and human trafficking, resulting in 140 cases found in the span of two years.

In addition, the UN Women has helped provide transport and accommodation for the women of rural and impoverished villages to attend the Aty Guasu Cuna - an alternative body for women to attend indigenous assemblies that are usually dominated by men. The meeting allowed for discussion of neglected subjects like sexism and a productive exchange of ideas in bettering the society and environment they lived in. These women indicated their desire to be part of the political force: they wanted to be involved in decision making and implementation of laws concerning their communities, the preservation of their traditions and their security. Though these ambitious strategies will take time - a braver attitude will reform the mindsets of rural women.

India: changing the system

Rooted patriarchy in the Indian society plays a major part behind its prevalent gender inequality - as men are entitled to privileges as authoritarian figures, promoting the submission and dependence of women, which can result in their exploitation. Especially in the countryside where customs and traditions are the least diluted and families are most impoverished; the preference of sons cause parents to invest minimally in their daughters as when she is married off - they essentially lose everything they have invested in her to her husband's family. And although the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act has changed the perceptions of the modern population, there is still influence that cause people to perceive women as burdens - limiting their power within daily life to make decisions or be independent.

Slowly but surely, social and gender norms are reforming. The Dalit Women's Livelihoods Accountability Initiative is helping women fight against all the odds of the marginalization of the caste system. Programmes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) provides a guaranteed 100 days of wage employment for every adult member of a rural household. The programme mandates that a third of its beneficiaries are women, and assures that there be equal pay. It focusses on unskilled labour - land development, construction of rural infrastructure and agriculture works, paying a minimum wage of USD 2.00 a day. MGNREGA also includes an adult literacy programme - to allow the population enrichment opportunities. These rural women are now able to stand in positions of leadership in both work and life. There is a gain of self-assertion seen through the fivefold increase of Scheduled Caste Women not only accessing work, but also demanding worksite entitlements and wages when the delay goes beyond the 15-day minimum that the National Rural Employment Act of 2005 states. 9000 more women in some of India's poorest parts were able to access credit and open banks - controlling their wages and ensuring that their rights aren't neglected.

Unfolding the issues of MGNREGA

Despite its impact on the decline of migration for work and rising labour wages; there are still flaws that prevent the programme from realizing its objectives at a national scale. Only 19% of some 850,000 applicants were employed in the scheme; implying the greatly unmet demand for work. It has to be understood that the population - women especially - give up other income generating activities like farming and spend time away from their children when committing to the job they are given. In order to close the gap between the actual progress and its potential impact its nature needs to be truly demand based. There is also the question of corruption in the uneven implementation of the programme and the constant delay of wages - which results in lower participation rates. Moreover, the lack of public awareness and mobilisation on taking advantage of MGNREGA.

The most paramount issue that stands is the idea of unskilled labour just for the sake of employment and generating income. Though the work creates assets and builds a better rural environment - is being subjected to labour really beneficial in the long run? From a holistic view, it is ideal for education and training to be spread over both industrial and service sectors, adapting to modern activities.

Modernisation and technology in autonomous regions

Women are increasingly becoming the driving force of maintaining the heritage and traditions and improving the living quality in the countryside. This has been true for places like the Ningxia Hui region, where many men have abandoned the rural areas and left their families behind in search for employment in factories of the big cities. Thus, agricultural responsibilities now lie in the hands of rural women, in

addition to their primary role as a mother and member of the village - which means tripling workload as they have to think about their children, elderly relatives as well as generating income.

Productivity of the crops rely on the water supply of the Yellow River - which is slowly reaching scarcity as a repercussion of climate change. In response, UN Women collaborated with AusAID to fund and train rural women in order to ensure the sustainable and effective use of irrigation technology and infrastructure. Surveys and studies have shown that women are now more willing to contribute and voice their thoughts in village affairs - as their participation in water management and new skills has meant that they are now a functioning part of society, which has boosted their confidence in their own social standing. Even so, because they challenge gender norms - their perspectives and opinions are neglected in decision making processes.

In the same region, the UN has also spent USD 200 million in collaboration with the e-commerce Alibaba in order to increase and improve e-commerce infrastructure in rural areas of China. It will widen the scope of income generating activities outside the agricultural sector, promoting entrepreneurship, education and the use of technology by giving the Chinese women left behind an opportunity to start their own business and sell products and possibly services online. Like every other part of the modern world, technology dominates China's big cities, reasoning why online activities play a major role in boosting economic progress, thus stands as a great potential for eliminating poverty and slowly modernising and raising living standards in the poorest areas of China. Of course - the problems of convenience, transport costs and the inefficient and inadequate infrastructure in these rural areas may prevent the impacts of this idea to reach its maximum capacity.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

The UNIFEM was established in December 1976 to give financial assistance to programs working to raise awareness about women's health rights, encourage political participation of women, and ensure economic security of women. It was established following the World Conference on Women in 1975 and has since closely adhered to the World Plan for Action adopted by the Conference.

United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW)

The UN-INSTRAW works to research and develop programs for women's empowerment and achieving gender equality in the United Nations following its establishment in 1979 following the World Conference on Women in 1975. Being a subsidiary organization to the United Nations General

Assembly, it developed frameworks and methodologies to measure works of governments to improve women's lives. Using this UN organization or the standards it developed to measure success of various programs delegates suggest could ensure the feasibility and accountability of those solutions.

The United States

Women living in rural areas in the United States are struggling—they tend to marry earlier, have limited access to quality healthcare, and face higher rates of domestic violence. According to a 2013 Brigham Young University study, the less educated a person is, the more likely that person is to marry young. Compared to women in urban areas, women in rural areas are almost 10 percent less likely to have gotten a bachelor's degree or higher. Now, poverty associated with many rural families exasperates the problems women in rural areas face, "which is directly related to the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs with benefits, increase in employers using temp and seasonal labor, and the costs of reliable transportation and health care," according to Gail Bundy of the Cortland County Community Action Program that works to help low-income people in Upstate New York. There also are fewer healthcare providers in rural areas, a situation that limits women to plan families, and get prenatal care or cancer screenings. In fact, a 2005 study from East Tennessee State University School of Nursing shows that low-income Appalachian women make appointments for screenings and treatments for breast cancer less often because they have to miss a day of work or spend exorbitant amount of money to travel to the nearest healthcare provider. Finally, a 2011 University of Iowa study found that 22 percent of rural women experienced domestic violence compared to 15 percent of urban women. The Bureau of Justice Statistics report that, from 2005 to 2010, women 34 or younger living in low-income rural areas experienced highest rates of domestic violence.

India

Rural women in India face great harsh realities. In a 2014 study by the Pravin Gandhi College of Law, only 3% of women in rural areas replied affirmative when asked if they could get the education they desired. In fact, only 5% of rural women in India were able to get any high school education. The average age of marriage was 14.1 with 69% of women believing that women should be married by the age of 16.

Timeline of Events

June 19-July 2, 1975 **World Conference on Women, 1975**

This conference was the first UN-held international conference solely dedicated to discuss women's issues. The conference adopted the World Plan for Action and the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace, which set various targets that countries must meet and adopted principles on which countries must follow in promulgating their laws, centered around education, employment, family planning, health, and housing. This conference was instrumental in the establishment of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, and United Nations Development Fund for Women.

July 14-30, 1980 **World Conference on Women, 1980**

This conference took place in Copenhagen, Denmark to evaluate the progress made and the limitations faced in implementing the provisions of World Plan of Action adopted by the World Conference on Women, 1975. It passed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, mandating countries to eliminate discrimination in various aspects of the society.

July 15-26, 1985 **World Conference on Women, 1985**

This conference took place in Nairobi, Kenya to evaluate the progress made and the limitations faced in implementing the provisions of World Plan of Action adopted by the preceding two World Conference on Women. The conference, in particular, addressed the vulnerability of women in rural areas to violence. At the end of the conference, the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women was adopted. It laid out the obstacles women face in society and proposed strategies to alleviate such hardships. While women in rural areas are not specifically addressed as those of special concern, there are many categories of concern listed in Section 4 of the document that addresses similar problems that women in rural areas face such as destitute.

September 15, 1995 **Adoption of the Beijing Declaration**

The Beijing Declaration adopted reaffirmed “the equal rights and inherent human dignity of women and men” and called for the need for greater female engagement in all areas of society. It advocated the eradication of poverty, recognized women’s rights to “control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility,” and called for action from various parties to work together to enact much needed change. As such, it adopted the Beijing Platform for Action to further female empowerment. Specifically, to the agenda of this committee, the Declaration showed the determination of nations involved to promote the economic independence of women in rural areas by addressing the structural causes of poverty.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Geneva Declaration for Rural Women, **(A/RES/47/174)**
- Improvement of the situation of women in rural areas, **(A/RES/50/165)**
- Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace, **(E/CONF.66/34)**
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- Resolutions on Implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, **(A/RES/48/108)** & **(A/RES/49/1610)**
- Report of the Secretary-General on Implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000, **(A/49/349)**

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The MGNREGA was one of the few ways that helped women who suffered discrimination and were prevented from working in rural areas in India. It gave women a chance to support their families and be a role model to others. The MGNREA is an act that allows women to survive by being given 100 days of wages in one financial year. However, there have been a few drawbacks pertaining to this situation. One of them being that in some cases, middlemen are taking large proportions of the wages that are supposed to be going to the women for their hard labour. Since the Indian government was withdrawing lots of money, middlemen usually the ones that would transport the money between the MGNREA workers and governmental offices would take an additional fee from the MGNREA workers’

wages, leaving the workers with little to nothing of the money they were promised with. This would demoralize the workers and make them opt out of the program. Another reason why the MGNREA suffered is due to corruption which led to a large percentage of workers not getting the money. Even though the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government ordered a reassessment of the system, many people lost money and could not survive.

Possible Solutions

The situation of rural women needs to improve immediately. Things such as improving women participation in decision making could greatly improve the view on women by certain members of society who view women as inferior to men. Decision making in governmental position would be boost confidence levels in women and in cases could lead to massive development of a nation. In order to help these women, they would need help in ways such as teaching them personal skills and workshops on leadership, public-speaking, decision-making, and self-assertion.

Another factor that plays into the poor treatment of women is the negative reaction of some society with women taking initiative. These society are usually found in rural areas that base their views based on religions or culture. As a society, we would need to come together and educate these people to why women are equal to men and how they deserve to work and live their lives how they want. To aid with this, small groups of people who would be willing to reach these remote areas and talk with locals about women. They could hold small workshops in which the main topic of discussion could be the helpfulness of women to society. These sorts of workshops would potentially make these societies understand the value of women and how they deserve more respect than they get sometimes.

Being in remote areas often means that data collected by government officials may not be reliable, therefore improvements in data collection would be a key factor that would let the world find out about the women who sometimes go unnoticed by the world. This could be looking at different ways this data could be collected such as sending teams into these areas and evaluating the situation of women in these areas.

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