

The impact of discriminatory social institutions on rural women's empowerment

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Gender equality for rural women remains an unfilled promise

There is a growing recognition of rural women's roles and contribution to agricultural production and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular ensuring food security, improved nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture (SDG 2). People's access to food relies largely on the dual work of rural women as producers and caregivers. Women represent on average 43% of the agricultural labour force and 65% of the unpaid family workers in developing countries; and are involved in a variety of agricultural operations such as crops, livestock and fish farming (FAO, 2011).

Securing women's human rights is a key strategy in assuring food security for all. In 2018, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) recognized the critical importance of securing women's land rights, guaranteeing equal economic opportunities and empowering rural women to achieve the 2030 Agenda (ECOSOC, 2018): providing women's equal access to productive resources could increase the production on female farms by 20% to 30% in developing countries. Yet, due to cultural and legal barriers, only 20% of landowners are women. Women represent 18% of all agricultural landholders in Latin America, while across the Middle East and North Africa women average 5% of agricultural landholders (FAO, 2011).

However, rural women still remain one of the most marginalized groups in society and face structural constraints. Throughout their lives, rural women face multiple barriers that limit their social and economic opportunities: a lack of infrastructure and basic services, restricted access to decent work and social protection and exclusion from decision-making processes and leadership positions.

- Rural women continue to bear the brunt of poor healthcare infrastructure and services.

Distance from health care facilities and qualified health professionals represent a major obstacle for rural women and girls to access quality essential health-care services and information compared to urban women. In the least developed countries, a rural woman is 38% less likely than an urban woman to give birth with the assistance of a skilled health professional (ECOSOC, 2018).

- Women make up almost half of the agricultural labour force in the developing world and the share continues to rise in several countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa because a growing number of men migrate to urban areas and overseas. The proportion of women employed in the agricultural sector increased from about 30% to 43% in North Africa between 1980 and 2010 (FAO, 2011). Nevertheless, women's jobs in agriculture tend to be more precarious; women are overrepresented in seasonal, part-time and low-wage work and the informal sector constitutes the primary source of employment for rural women (FAO, 2012; ECOSOC, 2018).
- Rural women are underrepresented in global, national and local institutions and governance mechanisms in the rural sector and tend to have less autonomy, voice, agency and decision-making power in households. Women have less chances of being elected as representatives in most rural councils than men. In Asia, this ranges between 1.6% in Sri Lanka and 31% in Pakistan (UN, 2010).
- Furthermore, although significant progress has been made, rural girls still lag behind their urban counterparts and rural boys in levels of educational attainment: rural girls are twice as likely as urban girls to be out of school. In addition, only 39% of rural girls attend secondary school compared to 45% of rural boys and 59% of girls living in urban areas (UN, 2010).

The impact of discriminatory social institutions on rural women's empowerment

Persistent discriminatory social institutions hinder rural women's empowerment.

This includes discriminatory practices, which undermine women's rights to own, control or use land and non-land assets; discriminatory practices that restrict women's access to financial services; and social norms imposing that women's assets be mediated only by men. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) demonstrated that discriminatory social institutions play a critical role in explaining gender disparities in the agricultural sector (Jütting, and Morrisson, 2009). Insecure or weak rights to land, non-land assets and financial services reduce income-generating opportunities for women, lower decision-making power for women within the household, increase food insecurity for women and their families, and make women and families more vulnerable to poverty.

What are discriminatory social institutions?

Social institutions influence decisions, choices and behaviours of groups, communities and individuals. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct) and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights) (North, 1990).

Discriminatory social institutions are formal and informal laws, social norms and practices that restrict women's and girls' rights, access to empowerment opportunities and resources (OECD, 2014).

What is the SIGI?

The *Social Institutions and Gender Index* (SIGI) is a cross-country measure of gender-based discrimination in formal and informal laws, social norms and practices.

It is comprised of three main components: *Country profiles* containing comprehensive qualitative information on legal, cultural, and traditional laws and practices that discriminate against women and girls; the Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GID-DB) comprising indicators on gender discrimination in social institutions; and the *Index* classifying countries according to their level of discrimination in social institutions.

The SIGI enables policy makers and development practitioners to better understand and eliminate structural barriers to gender equality. It assesses social institutions holistically by looking at the de jure (legal) and the de facto (actual) situation. It combines information on legal discrimination as well as discriminatory social norms (attitudinal data) and practices (prevalence rates).

The SIGI offers data for monitoring all gender-related Sustainable Development Goals and it is an official data source for SDG 5.1.1, measuring whether legal frameworks promote, monitor and enforce gender equality and women's empowerment.

Restricted rural women's access to land and productive resources exposes them to vulnerability.

Women and girls are especially vulnerable to food insecurity, partly because they are often denied fundamental human rights such as the right to own the land they cultivate and to have access to productive resources. The laws or customary practices of 102 countries still deny women the same rights to access land as men (OECD, 2014). Furthermore, anti-discriminatory legal frameworks have proven insufficient to fully protect women's rights to resources and assets due to discriminatory opinions and practices. In 2004, the Ugandan government adopted a Land Act to improve women's access to land and grant them the right to manage their property. Yet, despite this, discriminatory opinions and practices persist with

regards to women's land rights. In Uganda, women represent less than one-third of landowners (including both joint and sole ownership) (OECD, 2015).

Gender gaps in land and asset ownership compound women's difficulties to access financial resources. Unequal inheritance rights or their poor implementation can negatively affect women's socio-economic rights by increasing women's vulnerability to homelessness and restricting their access to productive resources including land (COHRE, 2004). Without land or assets, women have a reduced ability to obtain a bank loan from a formal financial institution due to the need for collateral (O'Sullivan et al; 2014; FAO, 2014). Results from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) confirm that "the top contributor to women's disempowerment is access to and decisions on credit" (Alkire et al, 2013). This has widespread implications for their economic empowerment, notably their ability to increase or improve farming plots, purchase new technology or start and scale-up a business (O'Sullivan et al; 2014; FAO, 2014).

Caring responsibilities and lack of basic infrastructures and public services exacerbate time constraints on rural women. Women's greater share of unpaid care work forces them to juggle their household responsibilities with work in the field, often to the detriment of their productivity (World Bank, 2017). Rural women spend more time in reproductive and household chores than urban women; including time spent fetching water and fuel, taking care of children, elderly and sick relatives and preparing food. In rural areas of Burkina Faso, for example, rural women spend more than twice as much time obtaining wood and water per week than their female counterparts in urban areas (OECD, 2018). This unequal division of labour is dictated by discriminatory social norms at the household level, where women are responsible for the majority of household tasks. On account of gendered social norms that view unpaid care work as a female prerogative, women across different regions, socio-economic classes and cultures spend on average between three and six hours on unpaid care activities, while men spend between half an hour and two hours (Ferrant, Pesando and Nowacka, 2014).

Legal barriers, cultural traditions and social structures that discriminate against rural women have domino effects. Equality in land and asset ownership and financial services are not only

important for women's economic rights and well-being, but also have wide-ranging positive impacts on family nutrition, education, food security and agricultural productivity (M. van den Bold et al, 2015; Jones et al, 2010). Low female ownership and/or decision-making power over land and assets has been linked with increased vulnerability of women and their families to poverty, lower female household bargaining power, and reduced income-generating opportunities for women (FAO 2011; OECD 2014). Indeed, low female ownership of land and assets fosters an "asset trap" as these are often required as collateral from financial institutions, preventing women from obtaining credit and loans.

The data challenge

Measuring social norms discriminated against rural women is challenging for three reasons: first, because of a widely held perception that social norms are unquantifiable; second, because data collection across countries is too patchy to be meaningful for a global average; third because most of the data provide national averages hiding disparities among women, notably between those living in rural and urban areas..

The SIGI has shown that social norms can be measured, and that tracking progress on efforts to tackle the drivers of inequality is feasible across all regions, irrespective of levels of development. The innovation brought by the SIGI is the use of attitudinal and prevalence data, to capture socially transformative changes and estimate the level of gender-based discrimination in social norms. Since the launch of the SIGI in 2009, data sources on discriminatory social institutions have been gradually improving. For example, more attitudinal data are available, such as in the area of attitudes regarding domestic violence (see Demographic Health Surveys). In addition, comparability and reliability have been improved, courtesy of international guidelines and standardization of data collection methodologies. Thus, data on rural women's access to land allows a better understanding on barriers they face.

SIGI country studies offer policy-makers and development practitioners evidence-based analysis and policy recommendations to eradicate barriers rural women face throughout their lives. This allows policies to be formulated to tackle discriminatory social institutions and promote rural women's rights and empowerment opportunities. These studies are also aimed

at strengthening national statistical capacities and transferring expertise on how to measure discriminatory social norms. Through data collection activities, SIGI country studies also improve their availability and comparability across countries.

Policies matter: improving the situation of women in rural areas

1 Legal reforms and gender-sensitive policies are the first step to protect rural women's rights and promote gender equality as called by Sustainable Development Goal 5.1.1 Indicator ("Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex):

- Harmonising customary laws with national laws in line international human rights' commitments (e.g. CEDAW) would significantly improve women's land rights. Contrasts between customary laws and legal framework weaken women's rights. Even where women's land rights are legally guaranteed, discriminatory customs and practices restrict their ability to own, control, inherit, manage and make decisions over land. Discriminatory practices in customary law prevent women from enjoying secure access to land by either blocking their right to inherit or own land in their own name. For example, customary laws often restrict widows' rights to inheritance, limiting their access and control over land assets. To overcome the negative influence of discriminatory social norms, legal reforms need to be accompanied by long-term interventions such as awareness-raising campaigns and community dialogues to ensure complete acceptance of harmonisation between customary law and statutory law.
- Close legal gaps in women's land rights to ensure women's and men's equal access, ownership, use and decision-making power, accompanied by legal literacy programmes to help women, families and communities understand their legal rights to property. Effective legal tools to protect their land rights include joint titling, providing equal inheritance rights, recognising female heads of households, improving women's ability to access technology and access other agricultural inputs, and increasing women's legal literacy. In Ghana, spousal transfer agreement templates were piloted to reduce

intra-family conflicts regarding land transfers after the death of a husband. This has helped to clarify women's inheritance rights and establish community dialogues around land tenure and spousal rights (IIED, 2014)..

2 Challenging discriminatory social norms and practices is the second step to ensure implementation of legal reforms promoting rural women's rights and reducing ongoing discrimination

- Develop and carry out programmes to address women's unpaid care work in line with SDG 5.4 through the provision of infrastructure, public services, social protection programmes and campaigns to support the equal redistribution of responsibilities within the household. In Sub-Saharan Africa, a large proportion of women's work is unpaid and spent on child care, fetching water, collecting firewood or washing clothes. In Mali, the provision of solar cooking appliances by the Association of Women Engineers has been important in reducing the drudgery of collecting firewood for women, directly decreasing their time spent on domestic tasks in addition to generating employment opportunities for them (UN-Habitat, 2013)..

3 Greater investments are needed to bridge the data gaps and ensuring monitoring of progress:

- Ongoing international and national efforts to fill data gaps and harmonise statistical standards are promising. Mainstreaming sex-disaggregated statistics across all areas, incorporating gender dimensions into socio-economic surveys and carrying out better-targeted surveys are fundamental for tracking change and designing appropriate policies for rural women and female farmers and producers.
- The focus should go beyond sex-disaggregated data and gender gaps in outcomes to measure the underlying drivers of gender inequality. SIGI country studies provide policy-makers and development practitioners with key data on discriminatory social institutions across the country. Measuring discriminatory laws (formal and informal) and attitudes, and recording and quantifying norms and practices across the different regions of a given country puts the spotlight on the effects of discrimination on gender inequalities, poverty and the marginalisation of women.

This shows how discrimination against women interacts with a variety of factors, such as rural/urban differences or education levels, to shape women's development pathways

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