

Forum:	Human Rights Council I
Issue:	Improving the role of women in rural Asia
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Introduction

Jawaharlal Nehru, former and first prime minister of India once said, “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”. The persistence of hunger and destituteness in Asia is due in largely to the subjugation, marginalization and disempowerment of women. More women suffer from hunger and poverty than men, and the suffering is severer in women than in men. At the same time, women are the ones made responsible for actions needed to end hunger: education, nutrition, health and family income. In both developed and developing countries, rural economies depend heavily on women. Their participation in crop production and livestock care, provision of food, water and fuel for their families, and engagement in off-farm activities to diversify the family income are some of the key roles that they play in the rural economies. In addition, they carry out vital functions like caring for children, elderly and the sick. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 428 million women work in the agricultural sector around the world, compared to 608 million men. In some parts of the world, agriculture is the most important sector of employment for women. For instance in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia, there are respectively 68 per cent and 61 per cent of working women involved agriculture.

Definition of Key Terms

Rural

Pertaining to the area outside larger and moderate-sized cities and surrounding population concentrations, generally characterized by farms, ranches, small towns, and unpopulated regions.

Role of Women

Typically evaluated through the kinds of jobs and roles that women embody in a society. It also includes women’s activism in political and social affairs as well as the basic rights that they are entitled to.

Economic independence from men as well as equal opportunities given to both women and men are representative of the modern role of women.

General Overview

The Importance of Women in Rural Economies

In rural communities worldwide, women play a key role in agricultural production and income generation. In sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, women produce up to 80 percent of basic food, and in Southeast Asia, women account for up to 90 percent of the labor that goes into rice cultivation. Many toil without receiving any recognition or support for their efforts. These women are less likely to gain access to land, equipments and education than their male counterparts. These things are essential for improving their food security and their overall standard of living.

Rural Women and Land Laws

Lots of countries lack adequate legislation and provision for women to hold land rights independently of their husbands or male relatives. Statutory laws often do not ensure independent land rights for women. In traditional practices, women may not be allowed to directly own the land, yet often have greater management rights over the male owners. Land ownership in rural areas determines the asset for production as well as access to credit and agricultural support services and the social power to negotiate for resources and membership in decision-making agencies. Hence, rural women must be empowered through legal and institutional measures to secure land and other productive resources to improve their quality of living.

Role of Rural Women in South East Asia

More than two-thirds of the South-East Asian population is rural and the majority will remain rural for decades to come. A significant portion of the rural population in this region include women who are engaged in various types of agricultural work such as those mentioned previously. Female farmers comprise a significant proportion of the total agricultural labor force in most countries, ranging from 30% in the Philippines to 60% in Thailand. Their roles in agriculture are vital to the well-being of families and society. But they carry a triple burden: they must be wives or mothers, agricultural producers, and community workers. Daughters are responsible for caring for the elderly. When these daughters become wives and mothers, they are expected to take care of their husbands and raise children. While being wives/mothers at night, these women are also expected to be agricultural and community workers during the day. As agricultural workers, they must sow and plant, among other things. As community workers, they often must “volunteer” in health and livelihood programs.

Problems encountered by South East Asian women

Women are still regarded as the inferior sex in many rural regions of Asia. Some wives are expected to continue having more children until they produce the desired number of sons. Sometimes they are incapable of getting financial credit because they are unable to get loans from banks. Their inability to obtain loans is because they do not own land, cattle or other types of collateral. In order to obtain the loan, they need husband's consent. Another impact is that due of their narrow economic opportunities, these women have low self-esteem. In return this bolsters the notion that women can only be successful by producing the desired amount of sons. Finally in some Asian countries, women are paid less than men for the same quality and kind of work.

Despite many of the constitutions of the Asian nations outlining the basic rights of women and complying with the legislative standards on right of women outlined by international law, discrimination is still severe in Asia. The basic problem is that laws governing the rights of women are usually not enforced.

Problems caused by discrimination of women in Asia

Women are excluded from making decisions that directly affect their lives and the life of their families. Among those decisions, the most important are on income management and childbearing. Studies have shown that if women were able to take a more active part in making decisions, the quality of family life would improve. A larger portion of the family's total income would be spent on basic needs of food, health and education, since the same studies have also shown that women prioritize these basic needs of the family and of the children over items like clothing and household appliances. The lack of female input during the decision making processes of childbearing is a significant factor contributing to the rapid increase in population. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) 1990 Report stated that, "If women who wanted no more children had the choice there would be a 38% reduction in the births and a 29% drop in maternal deaths worldwide." The swift growth of rural population has in turn caused a worsening of living conditions for entire communities. The obtaining of resources such as fuel and water has been made scarce. Increase in population also means less land distributed to each member of society, hence reducing economic activity and increasing poverty.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1946	Commission on the Status of Women is established
20 December 1952	Convention on the Political Rights of Women
7 November 1962	Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages

3 September 1981	The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) comes into force
15-26 July 1985	3rd World Conference on Women, Nairobi (Kenya)
September 1995	4 th World Conference on Women, Beijing (China)
July 16 to 18, 1997	Asia/African Forum on the Economic Empowerment of Women, Bangkok (Thailand)
25-26 Feb. 1992	Geneva Declaration for Rural Women
1996	First Global Women Entrepreneurs' Trade Fair and Investment Forum (Ghana)
5-9 June 2000	Review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing + 5) (General Assembly, UN Headquarters New York)

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is an international convention adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly and came into force on 3 September 1981. The United States of America is the only developed nation that has not ratified the CEDAW. The CEDAW It also establishes an agenda of action for putting an end to sex-based discrimination. Moreover, the Convention oversight is the task of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. This committee is made up of 23 experts on women's issues from different UN member states.

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