



UN WOMEN

**IMPROVEMENT OF THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN RURAL
AREAS.**

BACKGROUND GUIDE

SAIMUN 2022

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the annual Sub Saharan Model United Nations, a conference created to benefit students in understanding international relations and country policies while improving eloquence, and public speaking abilities.

For this year's conference, our topic will be *Improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas*. UN-Women serves as the primary organ tasked to promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and women's rights as crosscutting issues related to development. UN-Women works to formulate new standards and norms within the United Nations (UN) and support Member States adapting to these standards. Further, UN-Women provides expert knowledge to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on political considerations and reports to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly on its operational activities.

This Background Guide serves as an introduction to the topic for this committee. However, it is not intended to replace individual research. We encourage you to explore your Member State's policies in depth and use the Annotated Bibliography and Bibliography to further your knowledge on this topic.

Presented to you by

Donato Kang'ethe

Siroun Thacker

Riya Sharma

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE

Formed in July 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality & The Empowerment of Women (usually shortened to UN Women) is a composite organisation that heralds and looks to uphold gender equality and dismantle social stigma and discrimination against women. It does this by supporting international political negotiations and works together with UN member nations to design and implement laws, policies, programmes and services in order to set global standards to achieve global equality. It recognises gender equality as a fundamental right that should be accorded to everyone, on a local and global scale.

“UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.” (From the UN Women website)

The organisation views empowering women as not just a basic human right, but as an action that has multiple socio-economic benefits. This is because it leads to substantial and tangible economic growth, as well as increased equity, opportunity and diversity.

UN Women came about as part of the UN reform agenda, and builds upon previous work, and combines the mandates of 4 previously distinct UN divisions. These entities were: Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), International Research & Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Its major mandates include:

- To support inter-governmental bodies, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, in their formulation of policies, global standards and norms.
- To help Member States to implement these standards, standing ready to provide suitable technical and financial support to those countries that request it, and to forge effective partnerships with civil society.
- To hold the UN system accountable for its own commitments on gender equality, including regular monitoring of system-wide progress.

The formation of UN Women represented a major step forward towards SDG 5, “Gender Equality”, as the major targets of the SDG align with the major priorities to which the organisation’s operations are centred. These priorities are:

- Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems
- Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy
- All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence
- Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action

UN Women is Headquartered in New York, United States, and has managed to achieve a number of milestones, strike up agreements and make significant progress towards the empowerment of women worldwide. The most prominent of these being the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action published in 2015, which is considered to be the most progressive blueprint ever to advancing women’s rights; and The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, a charter containing binding legal obligations that relate to the elimination of harmful practices against women and girls.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

“Women and girls living in rural areas still experience gender-based discrimination and violence; are the biggest victims of unpaid labour; and their access to education, equal economic opportunities, reproductive health amenities and sanitary products is greatly limited”

The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in Article 14 recognises the role women play in rural development and economic growth, and affirm that they reserve the right to participate in and benefit from social programmes. In its entirety, it states:

1. States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.

2. State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
 - a. To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels;
 - b. To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning;
 - c. To benefit directly from social security programmes;
 - d. To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency;
 - e. To organise self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self-employment;
 - f. To participate in all community activities;
 - g. To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes;
 - h. To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.

Unfortunately, this has far been the case globally. Statistics indicate that women in rural areas are yet to receive the emancipation agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination promised. For example, in North Africa and West Asia, women make up less than 5% of all agricultural landowners in the area, and less than 20% globally. The income inequality between women and men is also especially exasperated in rural areas, with the Centre of American Progress estimating that a woman earns only 64 cents for every dollar a man makes. In the realm of education, it is estimated that only 2% of impoverished girls in LICs living in rural areas will complete secondary education. There are multiple other dimensions in which these women face constraints and/or are being deprived of basic needs and rights, and they include, but are not limited to:

Education

Educating girls could be the key to transforming impoverished societies. Studies show that educated girls are more likely to earn more wages, lead a productive life and participate in developing communities. However, despite global progress towards achieving equal education between boys and girls, figures and statistics related to female education still remain concerning. Globally, 129 million girls are out of school, 32 million of primary-school-going age. Furthermore, only 49% of countries have achieved gender parity in terms of primary school enrolment, and only 42% in terms of secondary school enrolment. The disparity is even larger.

To this situation, poverty acts as a cause and consequence. In poorer regions, families simply cannot afford to keep all their children in school. This is to the detriment to female children, in some communities due to misogynistic beliefs that favour the boy child, and in others due to the fact that girls can be married off for profit through dowry. Then, as women are unable to create a sustainable livelihood for themselves, perpetuating the poverty cycle.

Generally though, it has been found that female enrolment is not the big issue, but female dropout rates. This is because they may be enrolled, but throughout the year, may be pulled out to help with family responsibilities. Taking India as an example, a study performed by the World Bank in 1997 found that 45% of females drop out from grades 1 – 5. And since the education level of girls has been proved to be inversely proportional to aspects such as infant mortality, fertility and family ill-being, the lack of education of girls has and may continue to have multiple spill-over effects on rural communities.

Economic Opportunity

The rural economy is heavily dependent on the contributions of women. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that rural women make up 41% of the agricultural workforce globally, and 49% in LICs. They act as farmers, wage earners, and are the stewards of the wellbeing of their families, as well as play a key role in the nutrition of children. By consequence of the typical jobs they do such as fetching water and wood, as well as a mixture of their unequal access to education, social norms and gender-based discrimination, unpaid women's labour is rife and women do not have the same opportunities to engage in economic activity.

The situation is similar for employed rural women, as they are: on average paid 25% less than men; are more likely to be victims of modern slavery, representing 71% (28.7 million) of the

victims; and are disproportionately less likely to engage in wage employment. Despite these constraints, they still produce more than one half of the world's food, and projections from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimate that if rural female farmers had equal access to resources, agricultural output in 34 developing countries would rise by an average of approximately 4%.

Menstrual & Reproductive Health

The issue of menstrual and reproductive health is driven by three factors: the lack of information on menstrual and reproductive cycles, the lack of access to proper sanitary products, and the negative beliefs surrounding it. In rural areas, general education about menstruation and reproductive health, for both men and women alike, is alarmingly low. This is exacerbated by cultural and religious taboos that frown upon it, and make women and girls feel ashamed of their bodies. And due to the low income in these areas, and the poor access to information, sanitary products required for the upkeep of the female reproductive system are simply unavailable or too pricey to afford. The consequences of this could be dire and potentially even fatal for girls, ranging from anaemia, to toxic shock syndrome, and reproductive tract infections.

Interesting case studies on this can be found in certain Indian communities. Aggravated by cultural and religious beliefs, many limitations on the activities girls could participate in are in place, such as being prohibited from cooking, working, bathing, worshipping, and eating certain foods. The reason for this lies in the perception in these communities that menstruation is considered dirty and polluting. It is also believed that menstrual fluids can be used for dark magic practices, which forces women to clean menstrual cloths in secluded locations away from the view of others.

But even in areas where such stigma is not as common, period poverty exists widely. Period Poverty refers to the inability to afford menstrual products, and it is estimated to affect 500 million women and girls worldwide. This is because when a group of people are impoverished and can barely afford basic needs, female hygiene products become an afterthought.

Domestic & Sexual Abuse and FGM (Gender-Based Violence)

Of all the issues listed, few disproportionately affect women in rural areas than domestic & sexual abuse. It has already been found that 1 in 3 women have experienced gender-based in their lifetime, but this number is almost definitely higher in rural areas because:

- Women living in rural, isolated areas have poor access to Intimate Partner Violence Programs, with 25% of rural women in the USA being farther than 40 miles away from the nearest helpline.
- The 1 in 3 figure does not account for unreported cases of domestic violence, which are especially stigmatised in rural areas
- Rural areas tend to have poorer law enforcement and lower police densities, meaning that women who do experience gender-based violence are unlikely to receive justice, and their cases are shrugged off.

This issue is majorly caused by the economic dependence of women on men in rural areas, because as detailed previously, women's economic activity is greatly limited in these areas. This leaves them at the mercy of their partners, which creates an unhealthy power imbalance at the expense of the women. These practices are also normalised due to misogynistic norms in these societies, meaning that those who notice them happen are inclined to ignore it.

GBV also manifests itself in the form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In many cultures, it is considered a sacred rites of passage, and without it, girls cannot be considered women. This practice however offers no health benefits, and may lead to excessive bleeding, problems urinating, cysts, infections and other harmful and potentially fatal effects. Despite multiple attempts and great progress towards its eradication, it still exists in multiple indigenous communities, especially in rural societies as they tend to have a stronger connection to such practices. More than 200 million women living in agricultural societies have already been subjected to this, and it is predicted that 3 million more will suffer unless a significant intervention is made.

The continual violence against women girls makes it such that they are unable to feel safe in public spaces, using public transport and their homes alike. Therefore, eradicating this issue will be key to lifting the situation of women and girls.

Child Marriage/Teenage Pregnancy

Child Marriage & Teenage Pregnancy is a cause, consequence, is worsened by and worsens many of the problems previously discussed. Their existence and devastating effects can be traced majorly to poverty, as the major victims of child marriage and teenage pregnancies are usually those from less fortunate socio-economic backgrounds, and are far more likely to be from rural areas as compared to urban areas. This was exemplified by a study conducted by the CDC, which found that the teenage birth rate in 2015 in urban areas was 24.3 per 1000, as compared to the 30.9 of rural areas.

Beginning with child marriage, in many communities (though rapid improvement has been made in recent years), it is simply a social norm for girls to be married off young. This may be for a variety of reasons, including: the perception that girls are inferior to boys, and so their education is as well; the financial benefits that come with marrying off daughters, such as bride price/dowry; conflict leading families to believe the daughter would be safer if married; the fear that girls will be sexually active before marriage, so they are married early to prevent this possibility, etc.

As for teenage pregnancy, as is the case with reproductive and menstrual health, limited information and amenities are available about sexual intercourse, sexuality and pregnancy prevention. A direct correlation has also been established between poverty rates and teenage pregnancy prevalence. Taking South Africa as an example, a survey by the Demographic & Health Survey (DHS) in the country found that the areas with the highest poverty rates also had the highest rates of teenage pregnancies.

The reason the rates are much higher in rural/impoverished areas can also be put down to the lack of education of girls. Girls in rural areas tend to have poorer access to education as explained above, and this means that they are more likely to engage in sexual activities.

Child marriage & teenage pregnancy brings about a number of risks in the long and short-term for the girls. Women married before 18/teenage mothers are more prone to miscarriages, infant mortality (their children), contracting AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as being victims of domestic abuse. Alternatively, their ability to contribute to the economy is greatly hampered, and their education is cut short, demonstrating how child marriage plays a role in perpetuating the aforementioned issues.

Past UN resolutions

1. The Assembly refers to its Recommendation 1296 (1996) on a European Charter for Rural Areas and to Recommendation 1269 (1995) on achieving real progress in women's rights as from 1995, as well as to the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 9-13 March 1995) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 4-15 September 1995).

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND HYPERLINKS

<https://www.devex.com/organizations/un-women-45914#:~:text=UN%20Women%20acts%20on%20two,providing%20expertise%20and%20financial%20support.>

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women>

<https://www.unaids.org/en/aboutunaids/unaidscosponsors/unwomen#:~:text=Created%20in%20July%202010%2C%20the,social%2C%20economic%20and%20cultural%20development.>

<https://www.technoserve.org/our-work/womens-economic-empowerment/#:~:text=And%20on%20a%20wider%20scale,%2C%20opportunity%2C%20and%20social%20progress.>

<https://www.devex.com/organizations/un-women-45914#:~:text=In%20July%202010%2C%20the%20United,and%20the%20empowerment%20of%20women.>

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>

<https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2013/07/un-women-the-united-nations-entity-for-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women/>

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw59/feature-stories>

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>

<https://www.data4sdgs.org/partner/un-women-united-nations-entity-gender-equality-and-empowerment-women>

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/commission-on-the-status-of-women-2012/facts-and-figures#:~:text=Less%20than%2020%20percent%20of,hours%20a%20year%20collecting%20water.>

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/gender-wage-gap-among-rural-workers/#:~:text=While%20the%20wage%20gap%20for,every%20dollar%20earned%20by%20men>

<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/importance-educating-girls-and-women-fight-against-poverty-african-rural-communities>

<https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2013#:~:text=Rural%20women%20are%20key%20agents,the%20many%20challenges%20they%20face.>

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_601071.pdf

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>

<https://www.icrw.org/files/images/Causes-Consequences-and%20Solutions-to-Forced-Child-Marriage-Anju-Malhotra-7-15-2010.pdf>