



**UNITED NATIONS ENTITY FOR GENDER EQUALITY  
AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN  
(UN WOMEN)**

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**Description of the Committee**

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women. The United Nations merged four previous groups that focused on gender equality which include the Division for the Advancement of Women, International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, and United Nations Development Fund for Women. The committee consists of forty-five members elected by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for four-year terms.



The committee follows three main rules. First, it assists the Commission of the Status of Women and other inter-governmental bodies to create global policies and standards. Second, it aids UN member states implement the above standards, provide financial support, and form effective partnerships. Lastly, the body holds the UN system accountable for its own commitments to gender equality and women’s rights.<sup>1</sup>

**TOPIC: EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN**

**Introduction**

Women living in rural areas both in developing and developed areas play a critical role in the economies of these areas. Among some of rural women’s responsibilities, especially in developing nations include, “crop production and livestock care, provide food, water and fuel for their families, and engage in off-farm activities to diversify their families’ livelihoods.”<sup>2</sup>



“The world is wasting a precious resource today. Tens of thousands of talented women stand ready to use their professional expertise in public life; at the same time, they are dramatically underrepresented in positions of leadership around the world.”

-Madeline Albright, Executive Director of UN Women

Source: [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)

The role of women in rural areas has always been minimal and only recently been a priority. Because of their day-to-day responsibilities they are critical to food security and production. As well, the key to eradicating rural poverty lies in their empowerment.

In most of the world, women are viewed in the role of caretaker and domestic work. Women are usually last to receive an education in their family and in many places there are minimal

opportunities for them to grow as leaders. These issues are amplified in rural areas. In most of the **Millennium Development Goals** rural women lag behind rural men and urban men and women for every key indicator with available data. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) form a blueprint to tackle some of the world’s biggest problems, especially related to health, poverty, and children.

Many organizations have formed to empower rural women. Most integral is the United Nations. The UN created International Day of Rural Women, which was first observed on 15 October 2008.<sup>3</sup> UN Women works with non-governmental organizations like “Rural Women Rock” in order to expand access to credit, healthcare, and education.<sup>4</sup> These three aspects are key not only in empowering rural women but women in other areas, as well.

## Background

Rural women have historically been left behind in development, specifically with regard to improving their economic status, have access to healthcare, and ability to get an education.

### *Improving Economic Status*

In order to empower rural women, they first must be lifted out of poverty, and second, once above the poverty line, further economic development in their communities. The former revolves around meeting or exceeding the MDG’s set for poverty, and the latter necessitates a need for investment in rural women and their endeavors.

“Rural women spend more time than urban women and men in reproductive and household work, including time spent obtaining water and fuel, caring for children and the sick, and processing food.”<sup>5</sup> Because of issues with infrastructure and cultural norms, these women are stuck performing these traditional tasks, and the tasks take longer due to problems with infrastructure. The amount of time women spend obtaining water and fuel for her family is **two to eight times more than men** spend performing these tasks.<sup>6</sup>

## CRITICAL THINKING

If rural women are behind in all Millennium Development Goals, what do rural men have access to that rural women do not? How can we bring city amenities and benefits to the rural populations at a low cost?

This leaves little time for employment. Most rural women, if they are employed at all, have jobs that are shorter-term, lesser paying, and less flexible (with respect to taking care of the family and other home obligations) than men's jobs in the same geographical areas. They are also just as or more than likely to be in the field of agriculture than men.

Depending on the region, 60 to 70 percent of employed women in rural areas work in agriculture. They comprise about 43 percent of the agricultural workers in general. With access to more productive resources, women could increase crop yields by 20 to 30 percent, which means more food to eat or sell for them woman and her family.<sup>7</sup>

### Access to Healthcare

This area was known for having rural women lagging behind in many respects, but now, urban and rural women are on par for many key indicators. More women than ever before are receiving assistance during delivery, and the statistics are close to urban women. In addition, the number of women receiving antenatal care increased from 55 to 66 percent in the last twenty year, while urban women's care increased from 84 to 89 percent over the same period.<sup>8</sup>

Young women, rural and urban, comprise about 64% of the young population with **HIV/AIDS**. AIDS is a disease caused by the HIV virus, which affects one's immune system. Unfortunately, only 20% of young women have an idea about how the disease spreads and prevention methods. Young rural women are even less likely to have this knowledge. Some progress has been made recently as the gap barely exists between rural in urban in the following countries, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, probably due to successful educational and prevention campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

### Education

Education is perhaps the key to solving any issue, but even more so the empowerment of rural women. Many differences between them and their urban counterparts occur due to a lack of resources in rural areas including lack of educational resources.

Additionally, women are less likely than men to go to school in rural areas. The gap between girls and boys in those out of school does not exist in urban areas (on average), but there is a five percent gap between girls and boys not attending school in rural areas. And while only about fifteen percent of both girls and boys are out of school in urban areas, ten to fifteen percent more girls and boys are out of school in rural areas.<sup>10</sup>

**Average hours per week spent fetching wood and water in rural areas of selected Sub-Saharan African countries**

	Guinea (2002-03)	Madagascar (2001)	Malawi (2004)	Sierra Leone (2003-04)
women	5.7	4.7	9.1	7.3
men	2.3	4.1	1.1	4.5
girls	4.1	5.1	4.3	7.7
boys	4.0	4.7	1.4	7.1

This chart shows how much longer women spend fetching water and wood than men

Source: [Women Watch](#)

#### EXPLORING EDUCATION

Why are women less likely to receive education, especially in urban areas?

Factors include:

- Poverty
- Cultural and social norms
- Distance
- Responsibilities at home
- Government policies

Source: [un.org/womenwatch](http://un.org/womenwatch)

Factors that contribute to this issue include distance and cost. If the distance between a girl and her school increased by a half a kilometer, enrollment is likely to drop by about 20 percent. As well, with significant tuition fees, a family is more likely to neglect schooling for their daughter and send their son instead. If a family's pocketbook only lets one child go to school, archaic cultural norms will win, and the girl will not attend school.

## **Current Situation**

The background included many pertinent statistics as to what rural women's situation looks like today. This section will focus on new facets of the issue today, as opposed to twenty or thirty years ago, like micro financing of rural women and global climate change.

### *Financing Rural Women*

Most investment in general and in respect to **micro financing** is heavily and overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas. Micro financing is a type of loan that is usually small, maybe \$50 to \$100, typically given in developing countries to aid in their development. Women are less likely than men to receive loans, as well. This is interesting considering women are more likely to save money, repay loans on-time, and form effective groups to collect savings and decrease the delivery costs of many small loans.<sup>11</sup>

Financing women affects the “‘virtuous spirals’ of economic empowerment, increased well-being and social and political empowerment for women themselves, thereby addressing goals of gender equality and empowerment.”<sup>12</sup> This means that with women economically empowered, they and their children are more likely to be well.

Investing in women is key to solving this issue, but the still prevalent distribution of loans to urban dwellers over rural areas and limited access to credit and financial institutions puts a damper on current success.

### *Global Climate Change*

Rural women are affected more than their urban counterparts when it comes to the degradation of natural resources. They rely on these resources for their livelihood. These problems “reduce their capacities to cope with shocks and climate change, affect where they live and provoke conflict, which in turn undermine rural health, education and livelihoods.”<sup>13</sup>

Safe drinking water is also a source of inequality. 141 million people living in urban areas and 743 million people living in rural areas used **unimproved drinking water** in 2008. Unimproved drinking water refers to water that lacks proper sanitation and filtration. Rural men and women are twice as likely to use this water as those in urban areas.<sup>14</sup>

With dissipating resources, women, especially in rural areas, are more likely to be concerned about the environment. The more women a part of local government or organizations related to the environment, the more likely sustainable policies will be put in place.

## International Action

Although international action has been taken by the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGO), most actions are limited to national governments. These governments will create policy based on international action like treaties, but because of sovereignty, it is all of their own accord. Below we will look at relevant treaties and international action and NGO work, as both these categories transcend governmental policies.

“Women have not only often proved to be better repayers of loans, but also better savers than men”

- International Fund for Agricultural Development Report, “Gender and Rural Micro Finance: Reaching and Empowering Women”

Source: [www.ifad.org](http://www.ifad.org)

### *International Action*

Besides the International Day on Rural Women, there is no treaty that specifically discusses rural women. However, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, also known as the International Bill of Rights for Women, was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly. The convention defines discrimination against women and outlines a plan of national action for each nation to eradicate it.

The only countries that have not ratified the convention include Iran, Palau, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tonga, and the United States. The Convention is controversial among the previous nations and others whom have previously ratified. Issues include conflict over abortion and other female reproductive disputes.

The Convention also does not discuss maternity leave and benefits as a special protection.<sup>15</sup> This convention is the legal protection behind more equality for women in school, government, and the economy. Non-governmental Organizations, on the other hand, promulgate these laws and carry out the services those laws stipulate.

### *The Work of NGOs*

Most organizations if they are a women’s organization will service all women urban and rural, or if it is focusing on rural development, will aid both men and women. There are a few organization focused primarily on rural women or many times it is implied. Many micro financing organizations exist, like Kiva, which provide micro loans of about \$25 to men and women.<sup>16</sup> Because many rural women head households or are the main providers, they will be more likely to receive these loans.

The Women’s Micro financing Initiative establishes “village-level loan hubs, administered by local women, to provide capital, training and support to rural women in the lowest income brackets in East Africa so that they can engage in income producing activities.”<sup>17</sup> Although this is specifically in East Africa, the regional approach can sometimes better aid in providing the proper finances to meet the communities’ needs.

## Recommendations for Creating a Resolution

It is important to recognize that each country is at a different level of progress. This makes it difficult to take international action towards the issue because some countries have more policies to aid women's development and others do not. There is a delicate balance between finding a solution that can work for all countries or even most countries. A government's sovereignty is crucially important in this topic and member states could find some aspects intrusive.

"For what is done or learned by one class of women becomes, by virtue of their common womanhood, the property of all women."

- Elizabeth Blackwell, first woman to become a physician

Source: [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)

As this topic is an international humanitarian issue, it is always important to look at these issues by **world region or sub-topic**. As well, the focus of resolutions should address:

- Women affected by climate change
- Increasing access to education, healthcare, and credit
- Rural issues. No solutions should be infeasible in a rural area.
- Sovereignty
- Funding

### Questions to Consider:

1. What percentage of your country lives in rural areas?
2. What percentage of rural women in your country attend school, have proper access to healthcare, etc.?
3. Are there women involved in local or national government that have furthered stricter environmental policies? If so, how many and what policies?
4. How easily can men and women receive credit in your country?
5. What initiative and projects has your country created to empower rural women? If not, are they attempting to disenfranchise women?



## Research Aid

The United Nations Women's website that provides information and news about initiatives the UN is doing to advancement of women

- **UN Women**, <http://www.unwomen.org>

It is an initiative by UN Women that promotes projects that the body works on and assists in promoting these projects to the public.

- **UN Women Watch**, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/>

The World Fact Book provides specific information and statistics about a country's economic, political and social issues.

- **World Fact Book**, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

IFAD has specific information on rural policies and projects.

- **International Fund for Agricultural Development**, [www.ifad.org](http://www.ifad.org)

### Terms and Concepts

**Non-Governmental Organization:** is usually a non-profit organization that operates independently of a government on the local, national or international level.

**Gender Equality:** the treating of men and women equally.

**Millennium Development Goals (MDG's):** form a blueprint to tackle some of the world's biggest problems, especially related to health, poverty, and children.

**AIDS:** is a disease caused by the HIV virus, which affects one's immune system.

**Micro financing:** is a type of loan that is usually small, maybe \$50 to \$100, typically given in developing countries to aid in their development.

**Unimproved drinking water:** refers to water that lacks proper sanitation and filtration.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> About UN Women," United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, <http://www.unwomen.org/about-us/about-un-women/>.
- <sup>2</sup> United Nations, "International Day of Rural Women." <https://www.un.org/en/events/ruralwomenday/>
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> UN Women, "Rural Women." <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/rural-women>.
- <sup>5</sup> Women Watch, "Facts & Figures: Rural Women and the Millennium Development Goals." <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/facts-figures.htm>.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> International Fund for Agricultural Development, "Gender and Rural Microfinance: Reaching and Empowering Women." [http://www.ifad.org/gender/pub/gender\\_finance.pdf](http://www.ifad.org/gender/pub/gender_finance.pdf).
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Women Watch, "Facts & Figures: Rural Women and the Millennium Development Goals." <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/facts-figures.html>
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>
- <sup>16</sup> Kiva, "Microfinancing." <http://www.kiva.org/>
- <sup>17</sup> Women's Microfinance Initiative, "Program Features." <http://wmionline.org/>.