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Expert Group Meeting

‘Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls’

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Striving for gender transformative impacts in rural livelihoods

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

In March 2018 the spotlight will once again be turned on to addressing the challenges and opportunities facing rural women and girls at the 62nd Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). As part of the preparations for CSW, FAO - together with IFAD, UN Women and WFP – ran an [online discussion](#) from 17 July to 6 August 2017 to explore the critical gaps and highlight priority areas for action on how to accelerate gender transformative impacts for rural women and girls.

This paper draws on contributions during the online discussion focusing on the relevance of gender transformative approaches, the challenges encountered in addressing social norms and possible ways forward. A separate paper ([link](#)) summarises the contributions based on three principal questions: What are the main challenges rural women and girls are facing today? Are we using the right approaches and policies to close the gender gap? How can we best achieve gender transformative impacts?

Gender transformative approaches

To achieve the SDGs and “*leave no one behind*”, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for transformational change, in countries and at all levels. There is growing recognition that the standard approaches to addressing gender inequalities have often not been enough. Many gender mainstreaming initiatives have focused on empowering women economically – ensuring they have access to inputs, technical advice and markets, and have a voice in decision-making bodies and rural institutions – which contribute to short-term productivity gains. However, for benefits to be sustainable in the longer term, women want not only to be able to work productively, but they also need to be motivated by having a voice in how the income they generate is spent. They want the quality of their lives to be improved, to reduce the time they spend on unpaid domestic and care work, and to be free from gender-based violence.

Hence, more needs to be done – and in a different way - to achieve lasting benefits for improving the quality of life for rural women and their families. This involves moving beyond treating the symptoms of gender inequality, such as the unequal access to resources and benefits, to addressing the underlying causes which are deeply rooted in gender norms and behaviours, power relations and social institutions.

Relevance: Evidence of the need to do things differently

Three experiences shared during the online discussion demonstrate how potential opportunities for women’s economic empowerment are missed as a result of the constraints imposed by social norms.

Feminisation of agriculture: Male outmigration from rural areas in search of employment potentially creates space for women to become more involved in economic activities and redefine their role in the agriculture sector. This may take place in the short-term, as women step in to fill the gap left by their male counterparts – partly out of necessity but partly taking advantage of the opportunity. They become involved in new areas of business, engage with the market and broaden their networks and horizons. But in the longer term, their dreams and professional aspirations risk being reined in by persistent social norms. Their new behaviour may be considered to be unacceptable, challenging traditionally views that a woman’s place should be in the home and that she should not be making decisions independently, etc. Alternatively, women are not even able to step into the space created when men migrate. They are unable to take decisions about input use without permission of a male or struggle to access advisory services while the shortage of men results in land being left fallow. Either scenario results in lower productivity

and greater food insecurity than would occur if women were empowered to act independently. Whilst development initiatives tend to focus on ensuring safe migration and the productive use of remittances, attention should also be paid to how best to support women in their new role.

Demographic transition: Opportunities for women's empowerment as a result of the significant declines in fertility that societies experience when modernizing can also be missed. On the one hand, fewer children and smaller families mean women spend less time on childcare, have more opportunities for education and employment continuity, and may exercise stronger intra-household bargaining power because of the income they bring into the home. On the other hand, unpaid care work continues to consume a significant amount of women's time in addition to employment outside the household, and women may lose social status associated with motherhood whilst there is a lag in acknowledgement of their occupational and income-earning roles.

Expanding and shrinking pies: Food and agricultural systems are changing rapidly in response to growing global, regional and national markets. Even when women have access to the relevant inputs and services, their ability to take advantage of these new opportunities is compromised by their lack of mobility to access markets, limited information about prices and standards, and restrictions on their ability to interact with male market intermediaries. In addition, women's specific niches or value chains are often appropriated by men once they become commercialised. In contrast, in certain settings, the pie is shrinking as a result of the impacts of climate change, crises, conflicts and other shocks. Women's ability to respond effectively is compromised by having fewer endowments and entitlements to help them absorb shocks and, as a consequence, may adopt risky strategies as survival mechanisms. Moreover, interventions often fail to accurately understand the role of women and girls and therefore do not fully integrate them into resilience and peace-building processes.

Persistent nature of social norms

If the need to tackle social norms and gender inequalities is so evident in order to improve productivity, strengthen resilience and sustainability – as well as the quality of life for all - why is it so difficult to do so? The online dialogue highlighted three main challenges: women's limited vision of how they might want to live their lives, their limited time and energy to do anything about it, and the weak legal and institutional framework.

Limited horizons: Many rural women are not aware of other realities. They have limited exposure to new ideas and ways of living. Their visions and aspirations for their future are often constrained by their basic level of education, low self-esteem, limited mobility and exposure to information and new opportunities, compounded by the burden of their daily workload and trapped by cultural norms. Both women and men are products of their social upbringing and consider many gender inequalities – such as women's lack of voice in the household or the fact they should eat last or be subject to domestic violence – to be the natural order of things. They have little understanding of what gender transformative impacts mean. Their freedom of actions is constrained by societal belief of what women should be and how they should be allowed to behave, and this is compounded by their lack of belief in their own abilities. These views are perpetuated between generations, with girls' opportunities to complete or follow-up primary education being curtailed by parental expectations that they will assist with household tasks - while their brothers study or relax - and marry early.

Poverty of time: Even if women are interested in participating in more activities outside the home – such as attending community meetings and training, joining producer organisations, engaging in market activities or paid employment – they have little time to do anything about it. They are caught up in the daily tasks of running their household, fetching water and fuelwood, caring for children elderly and sick, growing and preparing food, and undertaking casual work. The competing claims on their time compromises their productivity, the quality of care (including the nutritional intake of children) and their own well-being. The failure to adopt time and energy saving infrastructure and technologies which would lessen women’s time poverty, either at the household, farm or community level, is indicative of women’s lack of voice in decision-making.

Failure of the legal and institutional framework: In many countries there is a significant gap between provisions for legal equality and customary laws and practices. Women’s ability to own and inherit assets is undermined by a lack of enforcement of legal equality, compounded by their lack of knowledge about their rights. Data from the OECD’s Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) confirm that, in many countries, cultural norms continue to override formal legal provisions. Staff engaging with rural communities – such as agricultural extension workers or finance officers - often fail to understand the full implications of gender inequality for productivity, sustainability, resilience to climate change and other crises.

Breaking through social norms

A major thread throughout the discussion was the recognition of the need to address the root causes of gender inequalities in order to achieve sustainable development. Gender transformative impacts can only be achieved if interventions trigger a process of change in behaviours and social norms that would otherwise continue to impede women progressing on an equal footing as men. First it is necessary to understand what is meant by empowerment and gender equality in the context of rural communities before identifying ways in which the ties of social norms may be loosened. Several approaches to stimulate gender transformative change are discussed in a separate paper ([link to paper once published](#)) including access to inputs and services – especially land; training in literacy and numeracy as well as financial and legal literacy and technical skills; women as role models, lead farmers and mentors; the role of organisations in empowering women through membership and leadership; enterprise development and the role of the private sector; women-friendly technologies and infrastructure (roads, water, energy, storage facilities, markets etc.); the role of the media and ICTs; and the policy environment.

Understanding empowerment from the perspective of rural women: Changes in norms, power relationships and social institutions are only achievable when people define the change process themselves. Rural women are a very heterogeneous group, differing by age, wealth, social status, marital status and system, stage in their life cycle, education, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, on- and off-farm livelihoods, and location. Progress towards gender equality for many rural women may start with very small steps, such as women and men eating together or calling each other by name. Empowerment is also about choice and the freedom to make decisions, such as the number of children to have or when to visit friends and relatives. It is about independence, the ability to own and sell assets, and exercise control over the use of income earned. Empowerment is characterised by self-confidence, self-esteem, and the capacity to recognise and address one’s own needs. Subtle signs of more equitable relationships include

greater communication, understanding, mutual respect and trust. These shifts in gender dynamics can act as a catalyst for more significant changes, such as the more equitable distribution of household tasks among family members.

The role of household and family: The online discussion emphasized the importance of engaging with all household members for behaviour change. Striving for gender transformative impact is not about pitting men against women but enabling them to work together for transformational change that benefits all. Cooperation and greater equality within the household – through joint decision-making and shared visions - enables households to become more viable and resilient. This process is more inclusive than solely strengthening women’s voice and agency within the household. Women are more successful as innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders when they secure the understanding and support of their extended family; many are able to manage intra-family bargaining processes while maintaining social norms. This can be more challenging for women-headed households without support networks. Changes at the household level need to be under-pinned by broader community dialogue on social norms and engaging the support of community and religious leaders and local authorities to create a safe context for departing from the social norms. Men will need to be supported to redefine masculinity with a positive attitude towards the rights of women.

Field examples of addressing social norms

Dimitra Clubs: Informal groups of women, men and youth – mixed and single sex – meet regularly to discuss the problems they face in their daily lives, express their needs, identify priorities and challenges. and strengthen the relations between women and men, exchange experiences with other clubs, make informed choices and take collective action to solve these problems using their own resources. As a result of the inclusiveness of this process, the benefits reaped by women are accompanied by strengthened social cohesion in the community. Dimitra Clubs are backstopped technically by FAO.

Gender Action Learning System: All male and female members of the household are equipped with tools to lead change through visualization of the various areas of inequalities (power relations, division of labour, decision-making processes, access and control over resources and assets) and negotiate the solutions they want. The methodology has now demonstrated tangible transformative impacts on women and men such as redistribution of power, balanced workloads, improved relations and communication to make decisions that contribute to gender equality and sustainable poverty reduction, and IFAD is to upscale.

Grameen Bank’s 16 decisions: When borrowing women agree to abide by Grameen’s “Sixteen Decisions” that include making dramatic lifestyle changes such as building a latrine, growing more vegetables, keeping their families small and sending their children to school. While these are impossible goals for many women to accomplish completely, they provide a vision of a better life and a pathway.

Social and behavior-change communication: Community volunteers work on behavior change communication in nutrition centres and home visits, as well as raise awareness with community leaders and local authorities supported by WFP.

Education: Although there is the need for lifelong learning for all ages and contexts relevant to livelihood choices, the role of primary education is paramount. Education about gender equality with the next generation (young girls and boys) will be the driving force for change. This will require an in-depth review of the curricula, teaching methods, language and images used in schools, in order to break away from stereotypes and overcome messages that inadvertently perpetuate inequality. For example, affirmative

action in the form of low pass marks for girls may be seen to imply that girls are less intelligent than boys. It will require working with parents to reorientate their attitudes towards supporting their daughters' education. By enabling girls to become self-confident and develop their self-esteem as valued members of their family and community, will they be able to broaden their horizons and step up to the challenge of becoming agents of change for future generations.

Spreading the 'islands of happiness'

What was very evident during the online discussion was the appetite to do some things differently. It was recognised that many initiatives are in place to support women's empowerment and there are some successes ('islands of happiness'). However, there is an urgent need to do more work on social norms and behaviours in order to gain traction in the quest for gender transformative impacts for rural women and girls. The challenges are threefold: how to systematically address the underlying social norms which perpetuate gender inequalities; how to replicate the positive experiences and take them to scale; and how to be nimble and flexible in order to respond to the ever-changing context in which rural women and girls live their lives.