

Talking Points

Priorities for Women's Empowerment: Where do we go after the CSW?

I am a lawyer from Ethiopia and will be speaking from my own experiences as an Ethiopian woman and woman's rights advocate from an African country.

1. What should be some of the priorities for the empowerment of rural women?

Rural women in Africa, just like in any other continent, face various problems in their everyday lives. However, what makes them peculiar from other women is usually their locations where they are don't have access to basic forms of services such as education, health care services and other economic opportunities when compared to those in urban centers. That is, rural women don't often go to school because they have to take care of their families, they have to travel long distance to get water, they have to walk long distances to get access to health care centers, they are isolated from counseling services etc... Thus, rural women are affected differently due to the different infrastructural and cultural conditions that exist in rural areas.

The priorities of rural women can also be seen through:

- **Macro-economic policies:** Unfair economic trade and finance policies have led to privatization of the public sector giving rise to a shift from small to large-scale agriculture which in turn affects rural women. These policies often fail to understand the social and cultural context of rural women's needs but are rather designed to incorporate all women's needs. For example, agricultural policies do not often consider the wide variety of rural women's needs in accordance with their ethnicity, religion, age, marital status, educational level or levels of disability.
- **Climate Change:** An intensification of climate change due to fossil fuel consumption is leading to dramatic rural dislocation due to floods, drought, hurricanes, tornadoes and other extreme weather, undermining rural economies. Women and girls who stay in rural communities must travel further for necessities such as water, putting them at greater risk of violence and increasing their work. This also results in migration of rural women increasing their susceptibility to violence.
- **War:** Conflict, including those over resources such as agricultural lands, water and fossil fuels, has caused massive dislocation for women in rural communities often resulting in abuse and violence against women. War is often not fought in urban areas but rather in the outskirts of towns thus resulting in the displacement of rural communities. It is rural women who often come face to face with the aftermaths of ethnic conflicts, civil wars and other forms of aggressions.

- **Invisible Labor:** Women and girls' production is often for consumption in the home undermining the role of women for overall economic development. In most rural areas, the socialization process binds females into the role of subservient mothers and wives whose sole purpose in life is to take care of their households. They are assigned household tasks such as preparing food, looking after children, and fetching water and firewood which are not often categorized as even 'work'. This lack of recognition makes the situation self-perpetuating in the sense that women are often disadvantaged in terms of their access to land and credit. They don't hold authority over their resources and income.
- **Harmful traditional practices and violence against women** such as property grabbing, wife inheritance, sexual violence, and domestic violence undermine women's economic development and security. And in addition, due to a lack of infrastructure, rural women may have even less access to mechanisms of safety and justice. That is, even though there might be laws issued to protect women, their applicability and enforcement is often lacking in rural areas where traditional norms often prevail. For example, in my country, abduction, the act of kidnapping girls for marriage purposes, is an act punishable by law. But in the rural areas, this act is still going on and perpetrators of this act are often set free under the guise of culture and the girls left with no means of redress.

2. What needs to be done?

- Nation states have the obligation to protect women equally through international human rights law. Thus, they must ensure that their laws and policies fully integrate the issues and needs of rural women.
- Governments need to formulate clearer policies that benefit rural women by incorporating their special needs.
- Laws should not remain on paper only but indeed enforced and implemented equally both in rural and urban areas.
- Economic and agricultural policies should be designed in a format that rural women can use and understand.
- Educate! Educate! Educate! The main problems of rural women stems from their lack of education as they are unable to have control over resources and are mostly engaged in household activities.
- Lastly, it's not enough to have perfect gender-budgeting indicators, policies, and laws if they are not interlinked to the principles of equality, development and peace with a special emphasis on the needs of women especially rural women.

Thank you for listening!