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**Rural women and empowerment within the context of the new exploitative realities in Latin America**

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

**Abstract**

*This document presents a general overview of the main contemporary issues facing rural territories in Latin America and their particular effects on women and proposes that the interventions focused on empowering rural women need to be grounded in these realities in order to better address the challenges that exist in these areas.*

## ***Introduction***

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2013), 20% of the total population in Latin America and the Caribbean is considered rural.<sup>1</sup> Of these approximately 120 million people, a little more than half live in poverty. Within this context, the 58 million rural women in Latin America and the Caribbean face particular challenges: 38% do not have their own source of income, many rural women work more hours than their male peers and urban women, and women in rural territories face persistent wage gaps and low levels of access to land formalization and property rights (ECLAC, n.d.). Although some well-being indices have increased in recent years, such as the number of women that have received schooling and the participation of women in economic activities, rural women continue to face many challenges.

These indicators provide clues regarding the characteristics of the lives of rural women in Latin America. In order to understand the issues facing these women more in depth, it is necessary to analyze the link between rural women's living conditions and the changes that are impacting the territories they live in and that have begun to erase their traditional contexts.

## ***The transformation of rural territories and rural women***

In order to understand the changes facing rural women, it is necessary to understand the history of rural Latin America.

National development projects implemented in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by a bias towards industrialization that limited the growth of the agricultural sector, despite the fact that food production was fundamental to the development of urban areas. These policies began the wave of migration from rural territories to the cities.

Subsequently, the structural adjustment programs and economic liberalization policies of the 1980s and 1990s significantly impacted the economic, productive, and social structures of rural territories (FAO, 2013), manifesting in a shift away from rural production and populations. Whereas rural production and populations had held a central role in previous eras, now they were simply supplementary for agricultural production (Espinosa, 2011). During this period, countries in Latin America shifted away from prioritizing subsistence farming to privileging agribusiness that focused on specialized markets, such as fruits, vegetables, and flowers, and whose comparative advantages lay in cheap and flexible labor, primarily women (Lara, 1995).

The exacerbation of rural poverty, which manifested itself in increased costs of living in rural territories coupled with changing consumption patterns, increased the pressure on women to join the labor markets. This generated various negative and positive consequences, ranging from increased exploitation and subordination to increased income that provided women with additional leverage in personal, family, and community spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> There is an important, ongoing discussion regarding the definition of "rural." Official documents and statistics define the term as applying to areas with fewer than 2,000 to 2,500 inhabitants. However, rural ways of life can be taken to larger towns and can even exist in urban settings.

These new paradigms regarding the productive function of rural territories led to significant changes on the local level that opened up opportunities for women's participation. This, in turn, led to changes in the traditional structure of rural families, including changes to the traditional gender roles that expected women to take charge of domestic tasks and have little involvement in productive activities.

Over the course of 50 years, rural life became increasingly precarious, resulting in a need to find outside, paid employment. This shifted the idealized version of rural women to a reality in which they became domestic or international migrants seeking paid employment as domestic workers, day workers, or within the agriculture industry. Rural communities were feminized, despite being traditionally associated with male workers, leading to a significant number of female heads of household and a shift away from women being expected to stay within the domestic sphere towards their increasing involvement in the productive sector. Although the phenomenon of the feminization of rural economies has been discussed, it has primarily occurred within the context of the crisis resulting from the changing way of life in rural territories and hasn't necessarily focused on substantial gains in terms of gender equality.<sup>2</sup>

Studies on rural women have shown how gender inequalities are woven into traditional ruralities as well as within new ruralities, emphasizing that production within rural territories is based on the sexual division of labor and unequal gender relations. In other words, gender inequality has been useful for sustaining the traditional models of rural production and exploitation.

Over the course of these recent changes, state interventions directed at rural women have shifted from ignoring them as producers to seeing them as strategic for poverty reduction, particularly through food subsidy programs, cash transfers, and productive projects. Now, these policies are frequently criticized because their design ignores the multiple roles women play within the various activities and income sources that rural populations cobble together in order to survive, the centrality they these policies give to the role of women as mothers, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and the increase in women's unpaid workload.

Although the industrialization of the countryside has resulted in both upsides and challenges for rural populations, particularly women, these challenges are currently exacerbated by more aggressive development projects related to the exploitation of minerals and hydrocarbons, the construction of mega-projects to facilitate the execution of said extraction projects, and other business projects that affect not only the rights of rural populations, but also their ways of life.

### ***Rural territories, resource exploitation, and new issues facing women***

The current stage of rural transformation can be characterized by an increased business interest in soil and mineral resources, many of which are found in areas with low population density that are populated by rural and indigenous peoples.

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<sup>2</sup> This feminization refers to the increasing participation of women in the agricultural labor force, either as independent producers, unpaid family workers, or as wage earners (RIMISP, 2008).

The primary projects of this nature are related to the extractive mineral, oil, and gas industries, as well as projects related to the exploitation of water, wind, and forests and the growing presence of both legal and illegal activities such as tourism and drug trafficking. Although these projects vary between regions and countries, some project trends can be identified across different areas. According to Rita Segato (2015) these include: mega-projects (hydroelectric, road construction), mineral and hydrocarbon extraction, agribusiness expansion and tourism expansion in protected areas, as well as militarized drug trafficking areas that displace communities and force them to relocate.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

A variety of different tensions arise when these projects are implemented in rural territories. In terms of environmental impact, the expansion of large infrastructure and extractive projects has a significant impact on pollution and access to natural resources, affecting local resource management and the health of the population and disrupting communities' rights to health and food.

Using an example from the mining industry, the open-pit mining technique leads to erosion, biodiversity loss, and the contamination and depletion of water sources.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the toxic waste generated by the mining process negatively impacts the health of the population.

The tactics used by these types of projects to exert pressure on these territories prior to and during the implementation of these projects have been called out by organizations such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.<sup>8,9</sup> These projects and their implementation constantly violate the collective rights of local communities, particularly the right to territory and the right to consultation of indigenous communities.

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<sup>3</sup> In Latin America, 51% of electricity is generated through the use of hydropower... this model is based on the privatization of rivers, which has both an environmental impact as well as impact on the way of living of the communities that live by the rivers (Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Latin America and the Caribbean holds the second largest oil reserves in the world, and both oil and gas extraction continues to increase, particularly using the method known as *fracking*, which requires an intensive use of water and chemicals (Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Agribusiness refers to the large-scale production of a single crop that requires the use of significant amounts of energy, water, and labor. Many of the crops produced this way (including soy, corn, sugarcane, and African oil palm) are used to produce ethanol and biodiesel and are not for human consumption (Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> "The militarization of the territories where extractive projects are located is a governmental policy in several of the countries in the region... in all cases [this militarization] involves serious violations of human rights, particularly against women." (Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Mining is an important activity for the region, with 30% of gold mining projects, 40% of silver mining projects, and 50% of copper mining projects worldwide located in the region, with the majority located in Chile and Peru (ECLAC, 2015). These projects have a significant territorial footprint; in Honduras alone it is estimated that 35% of the territory is leased to mining and hydroelectric projects (Urgent Action Fund Latin America and the Caribbean, 2016), while in Mexico the figure is estimated to be at least 18.8% of the national territory (CECCAM, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See *Second Report On The Situation Of Human Rights Defenders In The Americas*. Available at: <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/defenders/docs/pdf/defenders2011.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> In the case of Mexico, see the *End of mission statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst on his visit to Mexico from 16 to 24 January 2017*.

As with the changes that have occurred in rural territories in previous decades, these reconfigurations impact gender relations and increase women's vulnerability in new ways, including increased violence, poverty, workloads, and risk exposure.

Women are disproportionately impacted by the damage from extractive operations, and they are often the first to suffer the damage from contaminated water and land that impacts local food supply and community health (AWID, 2017). In regions where disease is on the rise due to exposure to toxic substances, women increase the amount of time and money they dedicate to caring for affected people while also being exposed to reproductive health problems such as premature births and miscarriages.

Segato (2015) focuses on the significant imbalances in rural gender relations that are the result of rural men's exposure to other models of masculinity - and colonialism - that come with the expansion strategy of extractive projects. Segato observes that these projects lead to an increase in the objectifying gaze on women's bodies, making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment and increasing the cruelty of gender-based violence (intra and extra familial). She also mentions that alcoholism, drug use, and sex work among women increases in these contexts.

Although the number of human rights violations has increased, there has also been an increase in the number of rural, indigenous, and Afro-descendant women who, facing profound threats to their communities' ways of life, are organizing around their rights to land, territory, natural resources, and resource management. Women stand out as leaders in these movements. AWID (2017) documented the increase of violence against women human rights defenders that challenge the extractive industries and documented the gender-specific risks to which these activists are exposed, including barriers to participation in decision-making processes regarding land, territory, and natural resources; criminalization; stigmatization; and the marginalization of their groups or communities.

The current context is one of rural crisis, accompanied by profound changes in the methods of rural production and exploitation, as well as the presence of people and dynamics that violate the rights of rural communities, particularly the rights of rural women who resist these changes.

This complex context presents important questions and challenges in terms of how to approach the empowerment of rural women.

### ***The challenges facing the empowerment of rural women in these contexts***

Various United Nations agencies have issued recommendations and suggestions on ways to empower rural women.<sup>10,11</sup> A brief overview of these recommendations and suggestions shows a variety of suggested courses of action for rural empowerment activities. One of the courses of action suggested is the improvement of national policies, such as the adaptation of regulatory frameworks, implementation of social policies, investment in services, and diversification of the rural economy.

Another course of action includes addressing the productive environment, emphasizing the promotion of women's access to productive resources such as land, water, credit, and technical

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<sup>10</sup> See CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34

<sup>11</sup> In Latin America, these include agencies such as FAO and ECLAC.

support and assistance, as well as encouraging the creation of women's groups to add value to primary production and increase access to local markets (FAO, n.d.).

An additional course of action is focused on recognizing, valuing, and reducing women's unpaid work and increasing their participation in decision-making processes and the design of policies that affect them.

Although all these recommendations and proposals are fundamental for the advancement of equality and the empowerment of rural women, it is crucial to consider the critical context of the rural territories where these programs are being implemented, with the understanding that empowerment is not independent from the problems that the communities experience and the new risks that women face.

As a result, it is necessary to identify how specific initiatives focused on empowering rural women can be strengthened and supported by programs and initiatives with a broader focus. Taking this into consideration, it is important to note that policies that might influence women's empowerment do not necessarily have to be gender specific, but rather may be directed towards the rural population as a whole (ECLAC, 2016) or linked to multiple issues that impact rural territories, such as environmental issues, human rights, and topics that impact indigenous or Afro-descendant populations.

Additionally, it is also important for the recommendations for the empowerment of rural women to be linked to other recommendations issued by various United Nations agencies, such as those calling for the respect and protection of land rights and the environment and those calling for the respect of the rights of indigenous peoples and human rights defenders.

For the particular case of Latin America, ECLAC suggests emphasizing these strategies from an intercultural and intersectional approach, recognizing the diversity of Latin American and Caribbean women. One of the recommendations presented by ECLAC in the Lima and Santo Domingo Consensuses is to “orient State policies so as to redress inequalities and guarantee the protection of the human rights of women and girls, -devoting special attention to rural and indigenous, black, disabled, displaced, migrant and refugee women-, focusing action on the elimination of the existing gap between *de facto* and *de jure* equality and taking into account the pluricultural, multiethnic and multilingual nature of the countries of the region.” (ECLAC, 2016: 22)

Empowering women has proven to be fundamental to strengthening other rights and countering the different types of violence that they face. However, the current context requires us to refine the way we address the interdependence of women's rights with the rest of the human rights framework.

As presented and developed throughout this text, rural territories are under pressure from constant changes that affect the rural population in multiple ways, with these changes posing new risks for women in particular. Today, 58 million rural women in Latin America face not only poverty, but also a lack of access to basic natural resources for subsistence, increases in their workloads and in the gender-based violence they experience, and even persecution for defending their collective rights.

We have learned a lot from studies of rural women in the region that linked the exploitation of women to the production activities in rural territories. At this point, it is important to think about

how inequalities and gender-based violence operate within the context of the new ways of exploiting rural territories and how we can build and strengthen alternatives to empower rural women and advance gender equality.

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