



Changing the lives of rural women and girls for the better

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A teal circle containing the text 'Key messages' in white.

Key messages

- Agricultural development is a pre-condition to accelerated national growth and a major driver of the rural non-farm economy.
- For rural women and girls in the global South, however, economic prospects are often better in the rural non-farm economy and through migration to cities than they are in farming.
- Rural women can only take up better economic opportunities if they are healthy, literate and numerate. Hence public investments in rural education, health, and clean water and sanitation make a real difference.
- Family planning can empower rural women, allowing them to have the children they want. In the medium term it can lead to slower growth of the labour supply and consequently higher rural wages.
- Gender norms count, especially those concerning women's ability to leave the home in search of decent work.
- Women who farm are often disadvantaged. Much remains to be done to establish their rights to land, livestock and water, and to improve their access to inputs (feedstuffs, fertilizers, etc.), finance and technical knowledge.

Introduction

Across the global South, most rural women and girls are disadvantaged compared to men and boys. Most receive less formal education, have fewer opportunities to work outside the household, and when they do, they are often paid less and treated worse than men. Most rural women live with norms that define them primarily as wives and mothers, confined to the domestic sphere, where men do less than their fair share of household chores. Women are typically expected to be subservient to men, while some are emotionally and physically abused by men.

Not only is this unjust, but also it means the full potential of rural women and girls – as people, workers, citizens, leaders – is not realised. This is to the detriment of their households and families, their rural communities and indeed their nations. Moreover, when rural mothers lack the basics of life such as adequate food, income, health care and education, their children are at risk. Gender inequality thus threatens future generations.

ODI's research

In 2016, ODI researchers were asked by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to consider what an inclusive agricultural transformation that empowers women and girls in the global South might look like.

To frame this question, agricultural development was set within the wider context of economic growth and transformation. Changes to the lives of rural women and girls take place at several levels: within processes of development and transformation at the national level; in rural areas and within agriculture; in households; and, finally, for women and girls as individuals. Changes to agriculture and rural areas over the longer run can be dramatic, as agriculture loses its relative importance when a country urbanises.

To see how such changes take place and what they imply for women and girls, three cases of long-term rural economic transformation since the 1960s were studied: those of Egypt, Peru and Thailand. All three countries have seen economic growth, urbanisation, and a marked shift in their economic structure as agriculture has declined relative to industry and services.

In addition, Ethiopia and Tanzania were examined to look at their experiences of growth and women's lives since the 1990s. Both low-income countries, still largely rural and agrarian, their economies have grown quite strongly since the early 1990s with urbanisation; prompting the question of just what has changed for rural women as consequence.

Findings

Change in the long run

Thailand has seen rapid economic growth from the early 1960s. By 2015, GDP per person was almost ten times higher in real terms than in 1961. Growth responded to policies and macroeconomic management that encouraged private investment; from public investments in roads, irrigation schemes, health and education; and, during the 1960s and 1970s, to aid from the United States that included funds to construct roads deep into rural areas.

In the 1960s and 1970s, agricultural growth was central to Thailand's development. Agriculture grew faster than population, thereby not only feeding a growing population, but also generating net exports. As farms produced more, the rest of the rural economy grew as businesses serviced agriculture as well as providing goods and services for farmers with more incomes to spend. At the same time, Thailand urbanised and industrialised.

For rural women, new economic opportunities opened up through work in rural businesses and jobs in the towns, especially in retailing, domestic service, and assembly plants. At the same time, public schooling and health programmes meant that women were more able to take up these options.

Of particular importance, from 1970 onwards, family planning was offered to rural women through local female paramedics who provided doorstep services. Fertility rates soon fell from an average of more than six births per woman in the 1960s to under two by 2015 (see Figure 1). Population growth slowed notably.

As population slowed, so too did the growth of the labour force. With rising demand for labour from economic growth, the labour market tightened, and rural wages rose: farm wages tripled in real terms between 1985 and 2003 (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 Thailand, contraception and fertility, 1970 to 2013

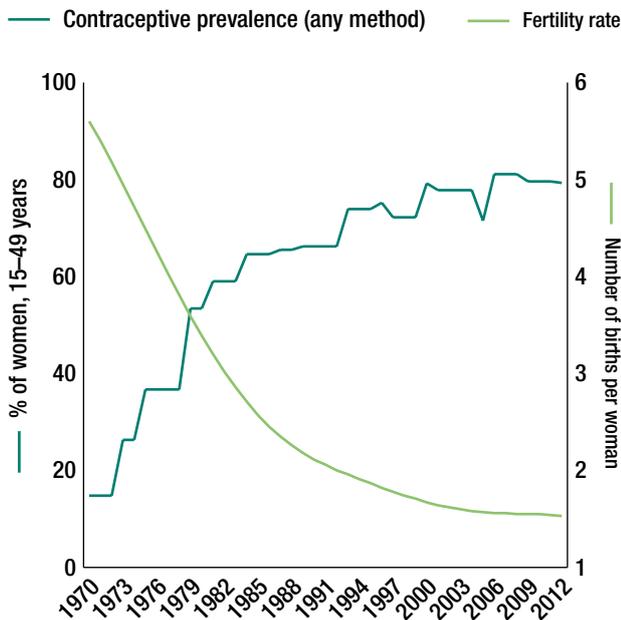
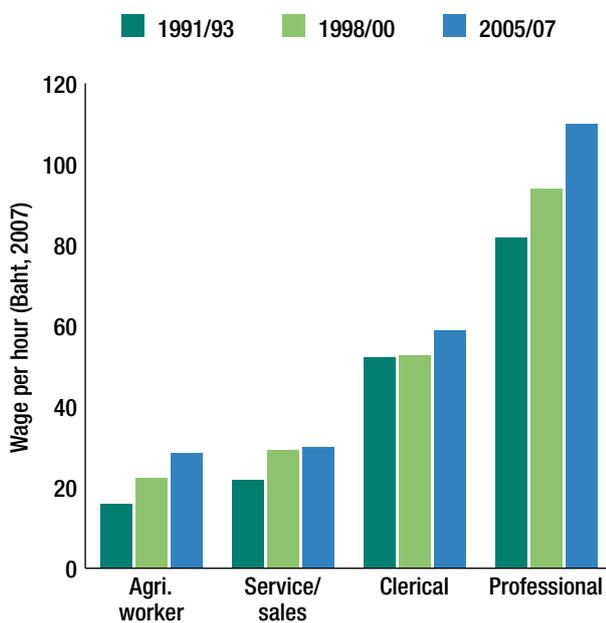


Figure 2 Thailand, women's wages, 1991/93 to 2005/07



Source: compiled from data on Labor Force Surveys, as reported in Adireksombat, K., Zheng, F. and Sakellariou, C. (2010) The Evolution of Gender Wage Differentials and Discrimination in Thailand: 1991-2007 — An Application of Unconditional Quantile Regression. Working Paper 2010/05. Singapore: Economic Growth Centre, Nanyang Technological University.

The lives of rural women and girls have been profoundly affected by these economic and demographic changes. Opportunities for paid work have increased, while unpaid work has been eased by reduced fertility and hence fewer children to care for. Electricity and running water in homes has also helped with this easing – even if women still do much more domestic work than men. Public investments in health and education mean that rural women and girls are healthier and better educated than their mothers and grandmothers were.

While women still face gender norms where men are expected to lead and take key decisions, those norms have not prevented women taking up employment and business opportunities. Importantly, young women have not been prevented from migrating.

Thailand shows how rural women can benefit from broad-based growth combined with spending on rural public services, alongside gender norms that, despite favouring men, do not block women's progress. It also shows how beneficial a rapid demographic transition can be for rural transformation and women's lives. Peru and Egypt shed further light on these processes.

Peru in the early 1960s was far more urbanised and economically developed than Egypt or Thailand, but much of that advantage was diminished by losing almost 25 years of economic growth between the late 1960s and early 1990s. This was due to incomplete and dysfunctional land reform, unwise macroeconomic policy and civil war in the southern Andean highlands.

Since the early 1990s, however, Peru's economy grew rapidly. This was initially on a narrow base of mining and medium-to-large-scale commercial farming along the coast. Too few jobs were created in the 1990s, and poverty and inequality rose. But in the 2000s a combination of slowing population growth and job creation, notably in export agriculture, raised employment and wages. This, plus public spending on roads, irrigation, health, education and cash transfers to low-income, predominantly rural households, led to major reductions in poverty and inequality from the early 2000s onwards.



For rural women in Thailand, new economic opportunities opened up through work in rural businesses and jobs in the towns.
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The material conditions of life for rural women have improved substantially: more economic opportunities, better health and better education. Indeed, recent life histories indicate a sea-change in the perspectives of rural parents for their daughters. Seeing new off-farm opportunities for women, they now recognise the advantages of secondary education for girls.

Egypt provides a further contrast. There has been considerable economic and agricultural growth, but inclusive growth has been hampered. This has had consequences for rural women, who have made less progress than in Thailand or Peru. There has not been enough jobs created to meet demand, particularly since the mid-1990s. Despite economic liberalisation that might have attracted foreign investors, Egypt has not seen the growth of assembly plants and light engineering in the ways that Asian emerging economies have. Moreover, many of the new jobs have been regarded as male jobs – even those in hotels – thus providing few opportunities for women.

Compounding matters, Egypt is going through a prolonged (and possibly even stalled) demographic transition. Fertility rates remain stubbornly high. As a result, the labour force has grown faster than employment in most years since the mid-1990s. Not only has this condemned youth to a difficult search for employment that is often informal and ill-paid, but it has also disproportionately affected women – especially rural women – who are less educated and less mobile than their urban counterparts.

Rural girls thus face the prospect that their future lives will be restricted to the domestic domain where they will be expected to do much of the farm work, bear and care for children, and be responsible for domestic chores. Furthermore, they face doing so with few firm rights to property and the risk of violence from their husbands.

That said, poverty and deprivation are the still major determinants of life opportunities in Egypt, more so than gender. The search for gender equality goes hand in hand with poverty reduction.

Recent changes in eastern Africa

Both Ethiopia and Tanzania liberalised their economies in the early 1990s, leading to renewed economic growth with notable increases in agricultural output.

The lives of rural women and girls have generally improved since the 1990s. Economic growth and structural transformation, with increases in agricultural productivity – no matter how modest and patchy – have combined to push up returns to rural labour. A growing rural non-farm economy and improved connections from rural areas to towns and cities has expanded economic opportunities.

Public provision of education, health care and clean water means that rural people, especially women and girls, have not only experienced significant improvements in their welfare but are also better able to take up jobs created by growth.

Fertility has fallen in both countries, even if only slightly in Tanzania, reducing the amount of child care that rural women must provide. In some rural areas, improved water supplies have cut the time taken to draw water, a task that generally falls to women and girls.

Norms that see a woman's role primarily as a wife and mother, assign rights to property first and foremost to men, and tolerate worse treatment of women than men – including domestic violence – do not seem to have changed as much as material conditions have.

Progress for rural women, then, has been variable. Depending on which of the different dimensions of women's empowerment are examined, it is possible to see promising progress or to see stasis punctuated by occasional, but limited, improvements in material conditions.

Conclusions and discussion

Five main findings emerge from this study.

Broad-based development

Broad-based development can create additional jobs to meet the rapid expansion in the labour force required when countries undergo a demographic transition. Agricultural development is part and parcel of such growth and transformation. It is not just agriculture that counts, however: so too does the growth

of the rural non-farm economy – closely linked to agriculture and increased incomes of farm households. Public spending on rural infrastructure and services also creates rural jobs.

More rural jobs, with options to commute or migrate to urban areas, seem especially important for rural women. Within agriculture, women tend to face greater difficulty accessing inputs, technical innovations, capital and labour than male farmers do. They are thus likely to earn less per day worked than their male counterparts. Compared to farm work, jobs in rural, non-farm activities or in urban areas city can pay much more. Moreover, while working within the farm household, a woman may earn very little income in cash, or see her husband appropriate it. When working for wages or operating a small enterprise, a woman is much more likely to control her income. And with that control can often come greater status and self-esteem.

A simple proposition emerges from these cases: getting out of agriculture matters more for rural women than for rural men.

Public investment in rural services

Rural women can only take up better economic opportunities if they are healthy, literate and numerate. Hence public investments in rural education, health, and clean water and sanitation make a real difference. Primary health services, water and sanitation, have done much to reduce disease: the decline in under-five mortality in all five countries, a proxy for overall rural health, has been remarkable. In a generation, the pain of losing an infant has gone from being commonplace to a sad rarity.

Schooling in rural areas has increased notably in all five countries. For the middle-income countries, high rates of enrolment in secondary school are common, with little difference between girls and boys.

Family planning

One service in particular matters more than expected: family planning. When family planning is readily accessible to rural women – which usually means services in the village, preferably on the doorstep, and provided by people they trust, in an overall supportive cultural environment – contraception may be rapidly and

widely adopted. Not only does this put women in control of their fertility but also it leads to fewer births and, eventually, slower growth of the labour force. Once rural populations cease to grow rapidly, labour runs short, investment to raise labour productivity is encouraged, and wages for unskilled rural work rise.

Gender norms matter

Gender norms may not be set in stone, often being reinterpreted when the economic advantage is obvious. This was the case in rural Thailand when it became clear in the 1970s that young rural women could earn valuable incomes if they migrated. Yet nevertheless norms can either facilitate or block improvements in the lives of rural women. Mobility stands out: rural women have far more options when it is acceptable for them to travel independently, to visit market centres, to commute for jobs, or to

migrate to the city. This is not to say that women who travel in societies where women's rights are not firmly established in practice do not face risks to their personal safety and poor treatment at work: they do. The point, however, is to reduce those risks, rather than prevent movement.

Rural women's rights need strengthening

Finally, even if some of the strongest drivers of change for rural women and girls are not specifically agricultural, this does not mean that the considerable interest in women in agriculture that has been awakened in the last ten or so years has been in vain. Far from it. Women farmers are disadvantaged, and much can be done to remedy this.

Rural women's rights – to land and property, to public services, to fair and decent treatment at work, to protection from violence – need strengthening. All these rights support women both within rural areas and when they choose to leave them.

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