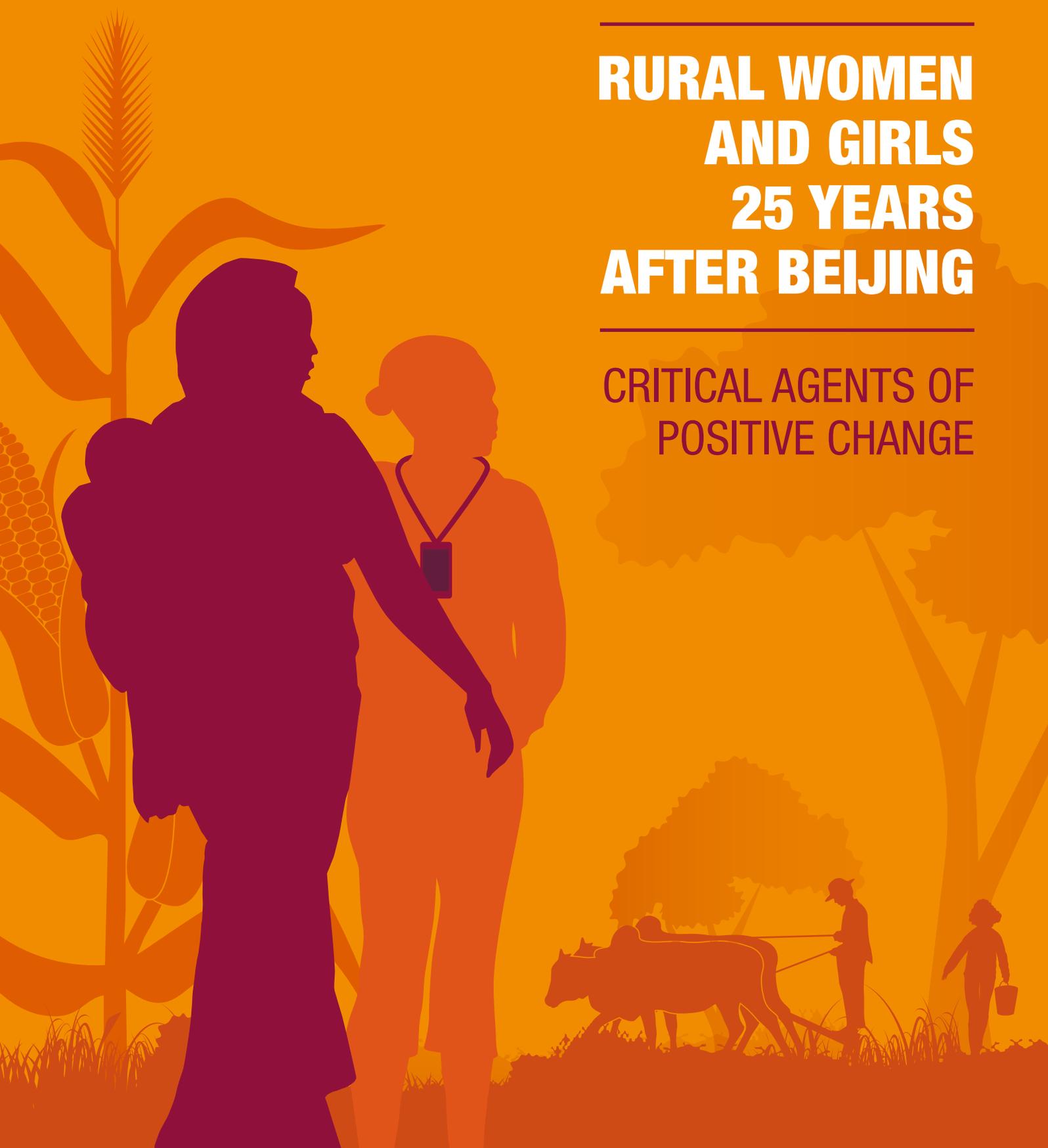




RURAL WOMEN AND GIRLS 25 YEARS AFTER BEIJING

CRITICAL AGENTS OF POSITIVE CHANGE



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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), also known as “Beijing + 25”, provides an excellent opportunity for governments, civil society, the United Nations (UN) system and all development actors to take stock of progress made toward gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The BPfA is an ambitious framework for change that calls for a world in which every woman and girl can realize her rights, have equal livelihood opportunities, live free from violence and participate in decision-making that affects her life.

The year 2020 also marks the twentieth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women, and the fifth anniversary of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It is in this context that members of the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE)¹ seek to raise awareness about and promote opportunities for some of those left furthest behind: rural and indigenous women and girls.

Globally, and with only a few exceptions, rural and indigenous women fare worse than rural men and urban women and men on every indicator for which data are available. Although they share challenges in the form of rural location and gender-based discrimination, rural women and girls are not a homogeneous group. The opportunities and constraints they face differ across their lifetimes, contexts and circumstances; they are influenced by location and socio-economic status and social identities associated with other forms of marginalization, such as indigenous origin and ethnicity, age, disability and migrant or refugee status. The complex experiences of rural and indigenous women and girls mean that they commonly face varied and deeply entrenched obstacles to empowerment. It is thus imperative to not only take stock of the broad experiences of rural and indigenous women and girls, but also to recognize and address the specific needs and distinct realities faced by those constituting these two groups.

This is vital from both a human rights and a social justice perspective and because we cannot afford to leave rural and indigenous women and girls behind: their social and economic empowerment is fundamental to achieving the SDGs and implementing the BPfA. Despite



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Malaysia, The Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility (IPAF) finds solutions to the challenges faced by indigenous women and girls. It supports indigenous peoples' communities and their organizations. In the photo: The Jakun ethnic group of Kampung village supported by the Foundation for Community Studies and Development funded by IPAF.

1. IANWGE is a network of UN entities, specialized agencies, funds and programmes. It works to ensure coordination and cooperation on the promotion of gender equality throughout the UN system. The IANWGE Working Group on Rural Women and Girls was created at the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women and is co-led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP). Its members include the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF); the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women); the International Training Centre of the International Labour Organization (ITCILO); the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights; the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS); the UN Population Fund (UNFPA); the Indigenous People's Branch of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs; and the World Health Organization (WHO).

the multiple constraints rural and indigenous women and girls encounter, they often have a great potential for the development of their own households and communities and for resilience-building because of their capacity, local knowledge and enterprise skills. They are active agents of agricultural and rural development; increasing food and nutrition security and eradicating poverty depend on empowering them and their achieving gender equality. There is evidence that when rural women have equal access to education, skills development, services, productive inputs and employment opportunities, they are more protected from discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV) and the yields on their farms increase, contributing significantly to economic growth, food security and nutrition. In an enabling environment, they are leaders in their communities and businesses, providing sustainable and innovative solutions to local as well as global challenges.

However, progress in empowering rural and indigenous women and girls has been slow and uneven across regions. Three-quarters of those living in poverty and facing chronic undernourishment reside in rural areas (FAO, 2017a); globally, there are 122 women aged 25–34 living in extreme poverty for every 100 men of the same age group (UN Women, 2018a), and it is estimated that more than 18 per cent of indigenous women live on less than US\$1.90 a day – the World Bank’s definition of extreme poverty (ILO, 2019). Rural women continue to have less access to and control over productive resources, technologies, services and opportunities than men. They also tend to lack self-esteem, confidence, negotiation and leadership skills (also referred to as agency), and often have lower education levels than their male counterparts. Many rural and indigenous girls and young women face massive barriers in agricultural labour markets and are restricted to low-status, poorly paid jobs, without legal or social protection or access to essential services and adequate health care. Many continue to face GBV in their homes, communities and workplaces. Gender-discriminatory behaviours and practices are commonly shaped by sociocultural norms regarding the roles played by women and girls, men and boys.

The role and status of indigenous women vary from one community to another, yet their concerns are often similar. In many indigenous communities, women and men have different roles and responsibilities, and thus different needs, aspirations and interests. Age is a key determinant of indigenous women’s roles and the types of challenges they encounter. Older indigenous women act as custodians of indigenous cultures, moral authorities, spiritual guides and healers; at the same time, however, they are among those who suffer most from cultural and territorial losses. Indigenous girls are exposed to specific types of discrimination because of their age and are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and trafficking (United Nations, 2015, paragraph 15).

These challenges and barriers must be overcome if young rural and indigenous women are to engage in and benefit from development. This requires transformative approaches that address the root causes of gender-based inequalities that impact their lives.

This document highlights some of the ways in which this can be achieved. This includes good practices from the members of the IANWGE network in the thematic areas of education; food security and nutrition; health; access to and control over land and other productive resources; leadership, decision-making and public life; social protection and services; care and domestic work; GBV; and resilience in the context of climate change and fragility.

This paper was developed before the COVID-19 outbreak, and therefore it does not discuss its gender-differentiated impacts on the lives, livelihoods and rights of rural and indigenous women and girls.

EDUCATION

Quick facts

- Globally, more girls than boys do not attend school: of the 59 million children of primary-school age who do not attend school, more than 32 million are girls (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, data for year ending 2018).
- The relative disadvantage of girls compared with boys increases with poverty and rural location, especially in countries with low completion rates of schooling (Schultz, 2018).
- More than half of all poor rural women in developing countries lack basic literacy skills (UN Women, 2018b).
- Only 53 per cent of schools globally have access to handwashing facilities with soap and water, which are essential for menstrual hygiene management (UNESCO, 2019). Schools in rural areas may be particularly disadvantaged: in Nicaragua, for example, 64 per cent of urban schools had improved basic sanitation services, compared with only 32 per cent of rural schools (UNICEF and WHO, 2018).



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The main barriers to rural and indigenous girls' education include household poverty, geographic isolation, political marginalization, long distances to schools, and inadequate safety and deficient sanitation in the school environment. In many cultures, girls may not be able to attend schools or complete their education because of cultural and religious norms, such as the expectation that girls should marry early. A related problem is the functioning of schools and the curricula and materials used, which often ignore the importance of educating youth in their own cultures and languages and can reinforce gender stereotypes. Adolescent girls who do not attend school are more vulnerable to forced marriage, early pregnancy, violence

Sudan, Fardous North. Resumption of school meals in Blue Nile after a five-year hiatus. In the Photo: the Abubakr AISiddig School, Fardous North.

Good practice: WFP home-grown school feeding programme

School meals programmes create employment opportunities and improve the livelihoods of communities near the schools by sourcing or cooking the meals locally. To enhance skills development, WFP offers training and partners with local, women-owned businesses as part of gender-transformative school feeding and home-grown school feeding programmes.

A meta-analysis of school meals programmes in 32 sub-Saharan countries found that on-site meals combined with take-home rations for girls led to an increase in girls' enrolment that was 12 per cent greater than the change in boys' enrolment (Gelli, 2015).



El Salvador, San Salvador, Barrio San Jacinto, Comunidad Cruz Roja. 21-year-old Rosa Raquel Gonzalez Molina applies the agricultural skills learned through WFP Vocational Trainings.

and even human trafficking than those who attend school. Addressing these challenges requires transformative education interventions that eliminate structural inequalities that act as a barrier to girls' and women's education in rural areas, including barriers outside the education sector.

Indigenous women and girls suffer specific severe challenges within the educational sector. Although there has been progress in their enrolment rates, indigenous girls continue to have the lowest chance of completing basic education, and their traditional knowledge and skills are often overlooked outside of their native communities (United Nations, 2017). They usually have less access to formal education; even when they do have access, they may have higher dropout, absenteeism and repetition rates, lower literacy rates, and poorer educational outcomes than their non-indigenous counterparts. Thus, formal education systems do not

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