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# How Feminism Can Feed the Planet



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

NOV 2, 2022   [Farming](#), [food security](#), [social equity](#), [women](#)



People tend to treat the environment as a separate issue to deal with after things like the economy and human rights. We even tend to think of environmental justice as a side issue of environmentalism. But [equity is essential to sustainability](#) and even major international organizations like the UN are starting to recognize the connections between social justice issues like gender equality and environmental sustainability concerns like global food security.

## Feminism

Despite a persistent myth that feminism is no longer necessary, women [in America](#) and around the world face significant inequities. According to the [World Bank](#), 2.4 billion women are not afforded equal economic opportunity and 178 countries maintain legal barriers that prevent women's full participation in the economy. Women around the world have only three-quarters of the legal rights afforded to men, with only 12 countries achieving legal gender parity. These inequities were [exacerbated](#) by the pandemic.

[Women in rural areas](#), especially in poorer countries, face the most sizeable barriers. In some countries, over 50% of girls from poor rural households will be married as children. Women account for about 40% of the agricultural labor force but make up only 15% of landowners worldwide. Discriminatory structural

### What Do You Think?

**Are you considering moving because of climate change?**

- Yes
- No
- I'm researching my options to decide

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and cultural barriers constrain the decision-making power and political participation of rural women. Women farmers are less able to access land, credit, agricultural inputs, and markets than their male counterparts. They routinely obtain lower prices for their crops.



Women account for about 40% of the agricultural labor force but make up only 15% of landowners worldwide.

## Food Security

The ability of Earth's natural systems to replace used resources is decreasing due to human activity. [Climate change](#) resulting from greenhouse gas emissions released when humans burn fossil fuels is combining with [desertification](#) that results primarily from human land use decisions. At the same time that resources are becoming endangered, we are [using those resources](#) faster than ever. There are almost 8 billion people on the planet and by 2056, the [global population](#) could reach 10 billion. Without technical innovation and changes in human behavior, Earth's ecosystems will not be able to support that population. A [global food crisis](#) is already on the horizon, with [up to 222 million people](#) in 2023 likely to experience acute food insecurity (that's the bureaucratic term for [starvation](#)).

## Feeding the World Through Feminism

The solution to global food insecurity may depend on achieving equity for women, especially rural women in developing nations. Gender gaps cost some [15%](#) of [OECD](#)-member economies. Women's economic empowerment boosts productivity, economic diversification, and income equality, in addition to the noneconomic benefits of equality. The United Nations estimates that giving women equal opportunities in agriculture could reduce malnourishment by [12% to 17%](#).

The UN's [Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice](#) calls for a shift to gender-responsive agroecology, a [regenerative](#) alternative to industrial agriculture proven to benefit women in small-scale farms, support food security, and protect biodiversity. The UN works to [empower rural women](#) by working directly with the women themselves through training and education. They also engage with governments to develop equal rights under the law and in government programs.



Shopping at the farmers market where women tend to be better represented helps support local women farmers while buying fair trade or direct trade products can help support women farmers further afield.

## Supporting Rural Women

Individuals like you can also help to close the equity gap for rural women, even if you live in the city. You can [shop locally](#) and buy direct from the [farmers market](#), where women farmers tend to be better represented and where sales produce a higher return for the farmer. (And if you are a woman engaged in agriculture or interested in farming, connect with the USDA [Women in Agriculture Mentoring Network](#) and the Farm Service Agency's [loan programs](#) for women farmers and ranchers.) Support women farmers further afield by buying [fair trade](#) or [direct trade](#) products. You can provide women farmers in developing countries with the credit they need through microloan programs like [Kiva](#) or [Microloan Foundation USA](#).

Support for rural women does not have to be directly related to agriculture. Many nonprofits work to improve conditions for rural women around the world.

## Related Nonprofits

[Maternal Health Fund](#) – Childbirth injuries can lead to incontinence and disabilities that result in women being ostracized from their communities. They are rare when women receive medical care, but globally, around 30% of rural women give birth without a skilled health worker present. In places like Uganda and Ethiopia, that number can be much higher. Maternal Health Fund works to prevent and treat childbirth injuries, allowing women to re-enter society with purpose and self-esteem.

[Girls Not Brides](#) – Marriage without the free and full consent of both spouses is a human rights violation. Each year 12 million girls around the world marry before the age of 18, too young to give full consent. Early marriage curtails their economic and educational opportunities. It is often accompanied by genital mutilation and high-risk pregnancy. Girls Not Brides is a diverse network of civil society organizations working to end child marriage around the world.

[Women for Women International](#) – Women for Women works at the intersection of women and conflict. They provide skills, knowledge, and resources that create sustainable change for networks of women affected by conflicts around the globe.

[National Movement of Rural Women](#) – NMRW is a South African economic justice program that supports community-owned projects to create employment and strengthen networks among members.

[Rural Women Foundation](#) – Working in Nigeria, the Rural Women Foundation focuses on community development to reduce gender inequality and promote income-generating activities for rural women.

[Rural Women Development Trust](#) – Founded by members of the Dalit community in Tamil Nadu, India, Rural Women Development Trust works to rescue and rehabilitate Dalit families from bonded labor, stand up against social injustice, train women with sustainable vocational skills to help them attain economic independence, access to healthcare and quality education for their children.



# LEARN THE FACTS: RURAL WOMEN AND GIRLS

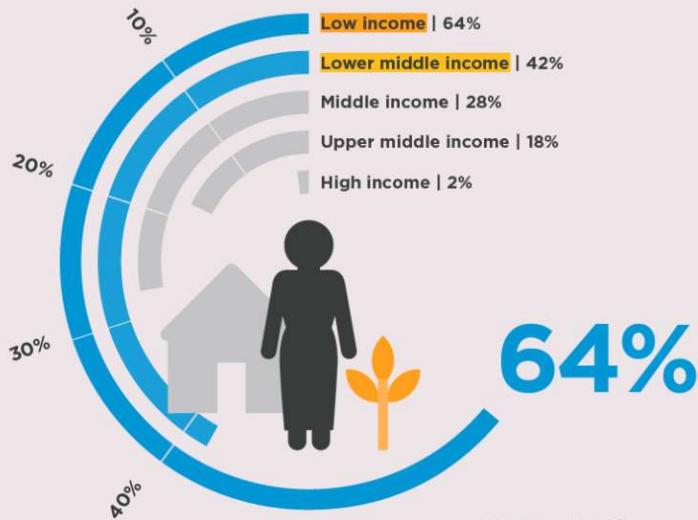
Rural women ensure food security for their communities, build climate resilience and strengthen economies. Yet, gender inequalities, such as discriminatory laws and social norms, combined with a fast-changing economic, technological and environmental landscape restrict their full potential, leaving them far behind men and their urban counterparts.



Below are just some of these challenges and their consequences.

## LABOUR

### THE SHARE OF WOMEN WORKING IN AGRICULTURE BY COUNTRY INCOME LEVEL



\* Data as of 2019

**Agriculture remains the most important employment sector for women in developing countries and rural areas, a sector that largely falls within the informal economy with little or no social protection and labour rights.**

## CONSEQUENCES

Lower standard of living; poorer wages and health; limited access to social services; restricted upward mobility; lack of collective voice and agency.

## LAND RIGHTS



Less than



# 15%

of agricultural landholders are women.

## CONSEQUENCES

Less income security; less decision-making power in households and communities; inability to access credit to start a business or improve agricultural productivity.

## REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH



Around

# 30%

of rural women

give birth without a skilled health worker present, compared to only

# 10%

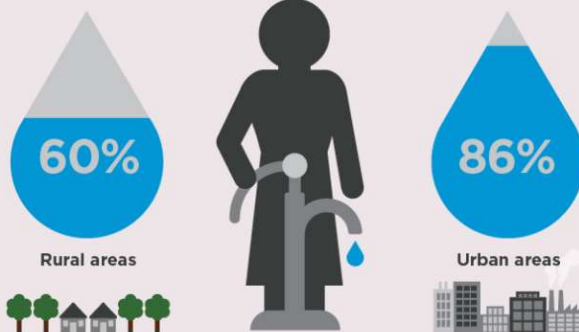
of urban women.

## CONSEQUENCES

Increased chances of life-threatening complications, severe bleeding, infection and maternal mortality.

## WATER

### POPULATION WITH ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER



Women and girls are often responsible for fetching water in rural areas.

## CONSEQUENCES

Barriers to education and employment; more unpaid domestic work; higher risk of maternal mortality and violence; psychosocial stress.

## CHILD MARRIAGE



Girls from poor rural households are significantly more likely to be married before the age of 18 than girls from wealthy urban ones.

In some countries, over

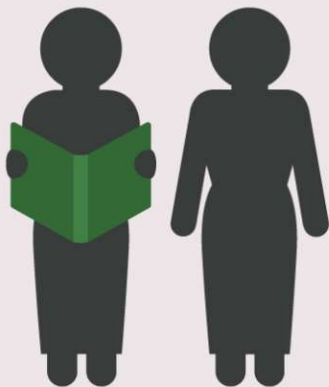
**50%**

of girls from poor rural households will be married as children.

## CONSEQUENCES

Barriers to education and employment; greater risk for intimate partner violence; early pregnancy; maternal complications; vulnerability to STDs, including HIV.

## LITERACY



Only  
**2%**

of the poorest rural women in low-income countries complete upper secondary school.

## CONSEQUENCES

Barriers to employment and decision-making; lower income; lower-quality jobs; increased health consequences; decreased individual and social well-being.

## ICT

Most of the



# 3.7 billion

people not connected to the internet tend to be poorer, less educated, and rural women and girls.

## CONSEQUENCES

Limited means of getting new skills, information and knowledge; decreased livelihoods, wellbeing and resilience; limited economic opportunities.

### Empowering rural women and girls requires:

1. Decent work and social protection
2. Education and training
3. Sustainable energy and technology
4. Clean water and sanitation
5. Eliminating violence and harmful practices
6. Including women in decision-making and leadership
7. Increasing women's climate-resilience



## SOURCES

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Image: [UN Women](#)

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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