

Education and technology are key to bettering lives of rural women

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According to UNICEF, women make up two-thirds of the world's illiterate population, with a vast majority of these women living in rural areas. Women in rural areas spend more time on household work and bringing up families. As a result, they tend to spend their waking hours collecting water, fuel, caring for children and processing food. This life of virtual servitude is perpetuated by poor rural infrastructure and systemic patriarchy which hinders the development and participation of women in the economic sphere.



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According to Statistics South Africa, men are more likely than women to be engaged in economic activities, while women are more likely to be engaged only in non-economic activities. Women are thus more probable than men to be doing unpaid economic work, such as subsistence agriculture.

Gender inequality is one of the major causes of poverty and hunger. The World Food Programme estimates that 60% of chronically hungry people are women and girls. On average, women make up about 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, including South Africa. Research has shown women could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30%, raising total agricultural output by 2.5 to 4%, if they had access to the same productive resources as men.

To correct this, women need to be trained in income generating opportunities to improve their lives. Whilst most rural women are involved in farming, they still need to be formally educated on how to increase agricultural productivity and entrepreneurship skills. This would not only produce healthy crops, but create successful, sustainable businesses as well. Teaching women the importance of education, family welfare and nutritional eating habits will drastically change their lives.

Access to educational opportunities

However, the reality is that women in rural areas do not have equal access to educational opportunities in comparison to

their male counterparts. Illiteracy levels amongst women are high as they are forced to leave school at an early age to marry and look after their families. A study by UNICEF shows that women in sub-Saharan Africa collectively spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting water. Furthermore, a lack of access to education for women is one of the most significant barriers that hinder enhancing skills that will allow them economic freedom.

Being able to attain educational and economic participation in society are the essential elements to ensuring the empowerment of women.

With education being a fundamental human right, the government has a huge responsibility to ensure that money and effort is invested into rural areas to uplift and change lives. The digital revolution is slow in reaching rural areas. The divide between technology in rural and urban areas is still too wide. The government must scale up technology in rural areas to change the lives of women. Having access to technology, women could then gain access to training, financial and banking applications, as well as easier access to communication and social media. Technology can make a significant contribution to allowing rural women to overcome obstacles and unlock opportunities that will enable them to access and communicate with the rest of the world.

Programmes for self-sustainability

Both private and public society can assist. By creating awareness programmes, corporate social responsibility initiatives could prioritise women that need sponsorship and training to become self-sustainable. We need to understand the challenges they endure and provide them with the tools that will enable them to acquire knowledge to change their lives. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that women gain access to well-paying jobs. UNICEF's research indicates that when more income is placed into the hands of women, child nutrition, health and education all improve. We need to create an environment which enhances their ability to influence positive change and steer their lives towards building a better society.

Women have a significant role to play in alleviating poverty and providing stability for their children. To turn the tide of poverty, these women need to be empowered. Educating them from a young age will empower and arm them with the ability to transform their lives economically as well as socially. Every additional year of primary school increases girls' eventual wages by 10-20%. It also encourages them to marry later and have fewer children and leaves them less vulnerable to violence.

Over the past 13 years, SAIL has trained thousands of women – many of whom are from rural areas and working in municipalities and within communities across the country. We have upskilled and empowered them to move into higher positions within their workplace. Today these women are making their presence felt in their respective industries and are growing the number of women in positions of power. By offering training, education, resources and opening up opportunities for women, we can ensure they are able to live fulfilling lives, positively impacting on their families as well.

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