Natalia Zubarevich is a Professor in the Department of Geography at Moscow State University named after Lomonosov. She was a UNDP expert in Russia from 1997 to 2012. She specializes in research on regional and urban/rural development in Russia and other countries of the CIS. She is the author of 240 publications, including 4 monographs.

DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN RUSSIA: SOCIAL AND GENDER ISSUES

The rural population represents 26 percent of the total population of Russia and varies by region, from 71 percent to 5 percent. The largest proportion of the rural population is found in the republics of Southern Siberia and the Northern Caucasus, due to the later onset of urbanization in these areas. The highest density of rural inhabitants is in the south of Russia: 27 percent of the country’s rural population lives in the Southern Federal District and in the North Caucasian Federal District. The regions with more developed agriculture are mainly located in the southern part of the country, which has favourable agro-climatic conditions. The high density of the rural population in the south is combined with a larger size of villages that reach five to ten thousand inhabitants. The low density of the rural population in most other regions of the country is the result of a long process of depopulation and rural to urban migration. The process of depopulation in small and medium-sized villages in many regions of Russia has been going on for a long time, and the density of rural populations in large villages in the south and in suburban areas has been increasing.

The rural population in Russia has been declining since the 1960s, due to two trends: rural to urban migration and the natural loss of the rural population in most regions. The greatest natural decrease (excess of deaths over births) was observed in the 1990s. In the 2010s, the demographic situation began to improve due to a growth in the birth rate. In addition, maternal mortality in rural areas decreased more than three times (from 52 to 16 per 100 000 births in the period 2000-2013), and the life expectancy of rural women increased by 3.4 years (from 71.7 to 75.1 years). The main gender problem is the large gap (more than 11 years) in the life expectancies of rural women and rural men, due to the high mortality of able-bodied men (related to unhealthy lifestyles and alcoholism).

The rural population has also become older, especially in the central and north-western parts of Russia, because of low birth rates and continuous migration to cities. It is mainly elderly women that remain in the villages, and in some regions, the proportion of women above working age can range from 39 to 42 percent of all rural women. The youngest men and women live in rural areas in the southern republics, where there are high birth rates. There are fewer working-age women in rural areas than working-age men (868 women per 1 000 men). This is the result of more active migration from villages by young women. Other patterns are observed in the republics of the North Caucasus and Tuva (950 and 1 180 respectively), where traditional gender roles prevail, the economic activity of women is limited to household duties and men are leaving the villages.

The level of education in the rural population aged 15 years and older is lower than the educational level of the urban population: for example, 13.4 percent of rural women (mostly elderly women) have lower primary education. The level of education of employed rural women is higher than that of men: 22.5 percent of rural women have attended higher education compared with 14.6 percent.
of rural men; and 30.5 percent of rural women have participated in secondary vocational education compared with 18.4 percent of rural men. However, 32 percent of rural women do not have any professional education, and they are the least competitive in the labour market.

For the last ten years, the rate of employment in agriculture and forestry has declined (from 11 to 9 percent of all people employed in the economy). The largest proportion of people employed in agriculture is based in the agricultural south (in the Southern and North Caucasus Federal districts and in the southern regions of Central, Volga and Siberian Federal districts), and in the underdeveloped republics, where there are sizeable rural populations. In Russia, agriculture and forestry are predominantly male sectors, in which women account for only 38 percent. The gender gap is caused by structural transformations in the agricultural sector. After the transition to a market economy, crop production developed more successfully (cereal and sunflower production). These branches are characterized by a high level of mechanization and predominantly male employment.

Other parts of the agricultural economy, for example, labour intensive dairy farming, where there is a predominance of female labour, have not yet recovered from the crisis. This has resulted in the reduction of female employment in the agricultural sector. In addition, since the middle of the 2000s, the number of social institutions in rural areas where mainly women are employed has decreased. This has led to a reduction in the number of jobs for women in the social services sector and in agriculture.

Like other countries, Russia has a higher level of unemployment among the rural population compared with the urban population. This is a consequence of a lack of jobs in rural labour markets. The level of unemployment among rural women is lower than among rural men, but gender differences are minor (7.9 percent for women and 8.7 percent for men in 2013). The main reasons for this include that: (i) women are more likely to accept a job with lower status and a lower wage; (ii) women more often receive the status of economically inactive when they lose work; and (iii) women are retiring earlier than men (at the ages of 55 and 60 years respectively). Furthermore, in most regions, the unemployment rate for women is lower than it is for men.

Agriculture and forestry are the lowest paid sectors of the economy. In 2014, the average wage in these sectors accounted for 55 percent of the average wage in the economy as a whole. Gender differences in wage levels are minor. Women’s wages amount to 84 percent of men’s wages. In the social sphere, where wages are also below average, there are almost no gender differences.

It is not possible to analyse the gender pay gap at regional level; the gap can only be assessed in relation to the whole economy. As a rule, the poorer and less developed a region is, the less significant the gender pay gap. However, a substantial gender pay gap is observable in the regions which specialize in extractive industries, especially in oil and gas production.

There is a greater risk of poverty in the rural population because of lower wage levels and higher unemployment. In 2014, the wages of 20 percent of those employed in agriculture and forestry were below the subsistence minimum for the able-bodied population: across the whole of the Russian economy, only 11 percent of employees earned such low wages. According to the Household Budget Surveys, 40 to 41 percent of all households classified as poor are located in rural areas.

The poverty risk index, calculated by the Federal State Statistics Service, shows that in Russia, families with children are at maximum risk of poverty, and the above working age population faces the minimum risk. In rural areas, the birth rate is higher and therefore the risk of poverty among families with children is also higher. A children’s allowance is paid to families with incomes below the subsistence minimum. In most regions, this accounts for between 10 and 20 percent of the subsistence minimum of the child. In the above working age rural population, where there is a higher number of women, the problem of poverty is not monetary but social in nature. In accordance with Russian legislation, pensioners in receipt of a pension below the subsistence minimum are allocated additional payments from the state budget. However, the main problem faced by rural pensioners is the low availability of services, especially health care services, which leads to the social deprivation of elderly women, who predominate in rural areas in some regions of Russia. In addition, the elderly population spends a considerable amount of money on medicines, but these costs are not adequately represented in the subsistence minimum for a pensioner.
Regional differences in poverty levels can only be assessed for the entire population and they depend on many factors including: the level of economic development in the region; the age structure of the population; the proportion of rural inhabitants; and the regional poverty line (subsistence minimum). The underdeveloped republics, which have a large share of the rural population and the largest numbers of children, have the highest poverty rates (ranging from 15 to 34 percent). Furthermore, many regions of Siberia and the Far East, where there are higher costs of living, also have high poverty rates (ranging from 15 to 17 percent). In other regions, the differences in poverty rates are minor.

This analysis demonstrates that typical gender problems are not necessarily prevalent in rural Russia: the level of remuneration of women employed in agriculture is slightly lower than that of men; the unemployment rate of women is lower; the life expectancy of rural women is 11 years longer than that of men; and the level of education of employed rural women is higher. In addition, women in Russia are well represented among the heads of administrations of rural settlements, especially in the peripheral areas where there are acute problems with development.

Russia has a large territory and multinational population, therefore gender problems in rural areas are geographically differentiated. We can distinguish between several types of regions in Russia:

- **The central part of Russia, the North-West and part of the Volga region** are characterized by (i) the ageing structure of the rural population and (ii) the social exclusion of rural inhabitants, predominantly elderly women, due to underdeveloped transport infrastructure and limited access to social services (health care and social protection). Urgent problems include the degradation of human capital, marginalization and alcoholism among men.

- **Agrarian regions of the South** (with a large proportion of the Russian population) are characterized by (i) a reduction in the number of women’s jobs in agriculture, (ii) mass migration of young people to cities and (iii) labour migration of rural men and women, including migration outside their region.

- **Underdeveloped regions** (North Caucasus, South Siberia) are characterized by (i) a lack of jobs in rural areas, (ii) the younger age structure of the population, and (iii) the growing working age population. These factors lead to the mass migration of young people (mostly men) to urban areas; the predominance of self-employment in rural areas; and the generation of incomes through private commodity economies, where it is mostly women who are engaged. In rural areas in these republics, patriarchal gender roles prevail and the social and labour mobility of women is low.

- **North, Siberia and the Far East** are characterized by a reduction of human resources due to migration and marginalization. The agricultural sector is less developed and there are large amounts of shadow economic activity in the regions which have the poorest climatic conditions for agriculture (for example, gathering mushrooms, berries and nuts and fishing for sale). Labour mobility is limited due to the large distances between settlements. Moreover, the availability of social services is low because of the reduction in the number of social institutions in rural areas and the remoteness of the cities. Gender issues are less prominent than social ones (for example, the degradation of human capital).

One can conclude that the socio-economic problems found in Russian rural areas are much more significant than the gender ones. Explicit gender discrimination is mainly found in the underdeveloped republics. In other regions, the inequality of rural women and men is much less evident, because the rural development challenges in Russia are caused by factors that affect all of the population, without gender differences.

Gender mainstreaming in rural areas is not a priority for the Russian authorities, because social problems are considered to be more important. In the period of economic growth, the main way to address them was to redistribute the energy sector revenues to increase levels of social transfers and benefits to support the population. Less attention has been given to other important issues, such as improving institutional conditions for business, creating new jobs, stimulating economic activity and facilitating the mobility of women.

Redistributive government policy has contributed to the alleviation of social problems in rural areas. In Russia, different forms of support have been used, and women have benefited from these measures. Some of the most important measures include:
Increases in pensions and additional payments from the state budget to the level of subsistence minimum for a pensioner, targeted at those who have low pensions (women, especially those in rural areas, form a large share of the pension age population).

Parent capital, which can be used to improve the living conditions of a family and to pay for the education of a child, and an increase in other maternity benefits (these measures contribute to reducing poverty among families with children and are particularly important for rural areas, where fertility rates are higher).

Higher wages for employees in the public sector (for example, those employed in education, health care, culture and social protection, where women are better represented than men, especially in rural areas).

Housing subsidies for rural teachers and doctors and other benefits, which have had a positive impact on gender inequality.

This broad spectrum of social support measures was only possible when the state received high oil revenues. The fall of oil prices in 2014 led to reduced income from oil and gas production, and therefore to reduced opportunities to provide social support to the population, including women.

The institutional reforms aimed at the development of the rural economy are necessary, in particular the creation of new jobs, including jobs for women. More effective policy in the sphere of social services is also needed to ensure their availability within the rural population. Some important measures have not yet been sufficiently implemented. These include:

- Encouraging the territorial mobility of the rural population and its concentration in suburban areas, where there is a more diversified labour market and a wider choice of jobs, in order to reduce the risk of unemployment.

- Reducing institutional barriers to the development of agricultural holdings and private farms, which would contribute to the growth of employment and incomes in the rural population.

- Creating conditions for rural industrialization (for example, the processing of agricultural and forest production), especially in the agrarian regions of the south and in the suburbs of major cities where there is a higher density of working-age rural inhabitants.

- Developing mobile social services, primarily in health care and social protection, and in particular in peripheral areas with low population densities and a predominance of small villages or sparse rural settlements. These measures will enhance the accessibility of social services for the rural population.

In addition to the institutional measures which are necessary for the development of the rural economy, the problem of targeted social support for families with children (the most vulnerable group of the population in rural areas) needs to be resolved. Children's allowances paid to families with incomes below the subsistence minimum are very small, and it is necessary to increase them. This measure will contribute to the reduction of poverty in rural areas.

References
