

CSD-16

Drought and Desertification
Major Group Statement: Women

Thursday, 8 May
Afternoon Session

Interaction between humans and the natural environment, such as over-grazing, have brought about remarkable changes over the years, leading to drought and desertification. Women are significantly – and specifically – affected when erosion and diminished soil fertility result in decreased crop and livestock productivity, thereby reducing the resources derived from such products.

As environmental conditions of drought and desertification worsen, more men migrate for longer periods, sometimes even permanently. Women are particularly affected as their workload increases. Such migration means that men contribute less and less to family incomes and women, therefore, have a responsibility to expand their productive role to ensure living standards above mere survival for their households. Women are facing the consequences of drought in the dry regions, such as those in the Sudan and the Ethiopian Somali regions, including problems fetching clean drinking water for health and sanitation. In these areas women usually travel two or three hours per day to collect 15 to 20 litres of water, which they carry on their heads or backs.

As women in Drought-affected areas increase their contribution in terms of farm labour and household maintenance they are also becoming responsible for more decision-making, as long-term migration sometimes means that major decisions, such as the purchase or sale of livestock or changes in cropping patterns cannot wait until the men's return. Women are becoming de facto heads of household, and this increases the vulnerability of families to extreme poverty, as women assume traditionally male responsibilities without the same level of access to social, technological and financial resources. Women's workloads and responsibilities have become greater, but women have not enjoyed a corresponding rise in influence and opportunity.

It has been shown that both women and men benefit from a gender approach that reinforces their joint participation in restoring the productivity of degraded land, and ensures that women are involved in planning and carrying out dryland development activities.

In this regard I want to thank Professor Faggi and our colleague from the Indigenous Peoples Major Group for drawing attention to the role that indigenous and local knowledge must play. That knowledge is often women's knowledge and needs to be recognized and integrated into planning and policy making around drought and desertification issues.