

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fifth session
22 February - 4 March 2011

**The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication,
development and current challenges**

Moderator's summary

1. On 24 February 2011, the Commission on the Status of Women convened an expert panel on “the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges” to provide an opportunity to discuss issues to be considered in preparation for the priority theme of the Commission in 2012. Ms. María Luz Melon, Vice-Chair of the Commission, moderated the discussion. Ms. Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), made opening remarks. The panellists were: Ms. Emma Siliprandi, researcher, Center for Food Research (NEPA), Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil; Ms. Marzia Fontana, development economist, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK; Ms. Godavari Dange, Secretary of the Sakhi Federation, Maharashtra, India; and Ms. Marcela Villarreal who spoke on behalf of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP). Representatives from Member States, regional groups and civil society contributed to the discussion.
2. It is estimated that 70 per cent of the developing world's 1.4 billion people in extreme poverty live in rural areas. The large disparities in wellbeing that exist between urban and rural residents throughout the world are a consistent cause of concern. They affect the opportunities, resources and services available to women and girls in rural areas in significant ways.
3. The urgency of rural women's empowerment has steadily moved to the forefront of the attention of policy makers, development practitioners and activists. The substantial contributions that women in rural areas bring to economic growth and the fight against hunger, malnutrition and poverty are now well established. An in-depth discussion on the situation and empowerment of rural women and their role in rural development is therefore long overdue. There is a need to assess critically whether past efforts have brought the expected results – and if not, how to change course.
4. Recent global crises, such as the financial and economic crisis as well as the food and nutrition crises, natural disasters such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and challenges such as climate change have demonstrated the urgent need to reduce rural women's vulnerabilities and improve their capacity to manage and overcome shocks. Stronger action in this area would lead to important improvements not only in rural women's livelihoods, but those of their families, communities and nations and contribute significantly to rural development.

5. Good practice examples and initiatives that can be scaled-up and replicated now exist in a range of areas, and include: integrating gender perspectives into various national policy initiatives and programmes, legislative changes, and gender-responsive budgeting, and supporting organizations at grassroots level. Based on these experiences, participants identified a number of key areas where new and concerted policy measures and interventions are necessary to make measurable and accelerated progress in rural women's empowerment. To be successful, however, a holistic approach is needed where policies are designed as a package of reinforcing measures and implemented with attention to specific institutional settings and economic structures. Experience indicates that no single-sector measure can be fully effective. To reach all rural women, specific attention should be paid to their diversity, including specific groups such as indigenous women and rural women with disabilities. The gender perspectives of, and linkages between rural poverty, urban migration, development of slum areas and urban poverty should also be explored.

6. In addition to the fifty-sixth session of the Commission in 2012, other opportunities should be fully utilized to accelerate the empowerment of rural women, in particular their economic empowerment. These include the Fourth United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries, scheduled to take place in May 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey, and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, in Brazil (Rio+20).

7. Participants identified the following interrelated issues and areas that should guide the preparations for the fifty-sixth session of the Commission, and stressed that all stakeholders should take concrete measures to support rural grassroots women's effective participation in the preparations for, and deliberations at the session.

Invest in agriculture and, in particular, women farmers

8. Most of the world's rural people depend on the agriculture sector for their livelihoods. This is also the sector that contains the highest proportion of precarious jobs, characterized by informal arrangements, low levels of remuneration and little or no social and health protection. Yet it is the mainstay of the economy of most of the developing countries. The agriculture sector has suffered decades of neglect, with steadily declining investment from both domestic and international sources. While in the 1980s, some 12 per cent of official development assistance (ODA) went to agriculture, by 2003 this share had shrunk to a mere three per cent. This neglect has had detrimental consequences for the billions of women and men that depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and for the world as a whole, as illustrated by the food crisis of 2007-08. It has translated into increasing levels of hunger, poverty and malnutrition.

9. Investment in agriculture is a matter of setting priorities. The proportion of hungry people can only be reduced when investment in the agricultural sector is relatively high. In order to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, agriculture sector policies and initiatives need to be gender-responsive and include provisions to measure their differential impact on men and women. Women need to be recognized as rural producers in their own right. Ensuring women's access to markets and their role in value chain development deserves greater attention.

Promote decent work for rural women

10. The decent work agenda launched in 2000 represents a critical step towards the goal of achieving employment for women in both rural and urban areas. Implementation gaps are severe particularly for women in rural areas. In rural labour markets, women and men often work in different types of employment, for example as self-employed farmers, temporary waged workers, employers, and as unpaid family workers. Some of this work involves long hours and is not sufficiently remunerated. Women often work in the lowest paid and most precarious forms of employment and continue to be the vast majority of ‘contributing family workers’ with no independent access to income, while men are much more likely to be found in ‘own-account work’ where they usually receive at least some form of payment. Household production and market production also appear to be more intertwined in rural areas than in urban areas and pressures on households to provide goods and services both for sale and for the home are stronger. Efforts to promote decent work for rural women are urgently needed. Recent joint efforts of ILO, IFAD and FAO with regard to rural areas are particularly promising and should be strengthened.

Promote rural women’s equal access to resources and social protection measures

11. Providing women with equal access to productive resources, assets and markets – in law and in practice - is key to their economic empowerment and to overall rural development and economic growth. Specific policies to reduce gender inequalities in access to all productive resources, including land, financial services, agricultural inputs, technology, education, training and information, are needed. In addition, social protection measures should be developed that take into account rural women’s needs. Resources such as agricultural inputs need to reach both women and men small holders.

Address rural women’s unpaid work

12. While there is increased recognition and visibility of women’s unpaid work, progress to policy and action remain slow. Rural women effectively act as a safety net of last resort to ensure their family’s well-being and to compensate for limited or absent physical infrastructure and social provision by state and local institutions. Their unpaid work has important economic functions that are rarely recognized and valued. It is key to food security and to maintaining adequate levels of productivity among the rural labour force. The disproportionate share of unpaid care work that falls on rural women relative to men restricts the time they have available for paid activities. Family responsibilities may also limit women’s ability to participate actively in workers’ cooperatives and other organizations, and to mobilize for their rights.

13. Policies that recognize the contribution of unpaid reproductive work are needed along with the provision of reliable and affordable support for care responsibilities. In rural areas, care is still mainly provided through family members. Other forms of care remain scarce, and include small-scale initiatives run by voluntary organizations. There is an urgent need for more government-supported rural day care centres, as well as strengthening rural community services for the elderly. Initiatives that promote behavioural change around gender roles and encourage a fairer distribution of care work between men and women are needed, in particular measures to encourage men’s involvement in the care of children, the sick and elderly, including in rural areas affected by HIV and AIDS.

Invest in infrastructure and services

14. Insufficient physical and social infrastructure and services in rural areas continue to limit opportunities for economic, social and political empowerment and adversely affect the achievement of global development goals, including in the areas of health and education. Public investment in roads, rural electrification, telecommunication and water and sanitation infrastructure can significantly contribute to reducing rural women's unpaid work and generate other benefits such as better health for women and their families and better opportunities for paid work. The provision of electricity, for example, would decrease the time women in remote rural areas spent on cooking and collecting fuel. Cereal mills, food processing equipment, pressure cookers, refrigerators and other affordable home-based technologies can also significantly help to reduce the time and energy rural women must invest in food preparation, and improve food availability and incomes from food sales off-season. Rural women in most parts of the world, however, continue to be underserved by technologies. The poorest women continue to use labour-intensive traditional technologies or have no access to technology altogether. Public works programmes, which generate employment through infrastructure projects, have helped low income households to cope with sudden or seasonal fluctuations in employment. Well designed employment guarantee programmes can simultaneously fulfil the two objectives of generating jobs for women and men, and improving infrastructure. Examples demonstrate, however, that these benefits are more likely to arise if women and communities are directly involved in the design of such programmes.

Invest in quality education and training

15. Enhanced investment in quality education and training in rural areas, including vocational and literacy training, is another central intervention with strong multiplier effects. Insufficient or unequal access to quality education and training continues to be a major constraint to rural women's socio-economic empowerment, including in obtaining decent and productive employment.

Promote and protect rural women's rights

16. Special efforts are necessary to ensure that rural women are aware of their rights, and can claim them. Barriers to women's full enjoyment of those rights persist in law and in practice, and include gender stereotypes, patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory practices within families, communities and institutions. Women's land, tenure, property and inheritance rights need to be addressed with urgency.

Enhance rural women's capacity to mobilize for collective action

17. Targeted support for rural women's organizations is critical for strengthening rural women's enjoyment of their rights, and their participation and voice in development processes. Experience shared by women grassroots leaders show the importance of women's collective action. Rural women's organizations, including cooperatives, should be especially encouraged. They are an essential factor in overcoming challenges to empowerment at family, community and institutional level.

18. Women's organizations, such as savings and credit groups, health-oriented and cooperative farming initiatives, can act as important advocacy and support groups. They offer teaching and training activities, including training of trainers, and opportunities for improving

self-esteem and capacity building. They can also play a useful role in developing women's leadership and organizational skills, and offer a structure for women to negotiate with local authorities for basic services, such as safe water, sanitation and health care, and channels for participation in the national and global women's movements. Some women's cooperative farming initiatives and rural producer groups have made important contributions to ensuring better nutrition.

19. Rural women's organizations should be recognized as legitimate interlocutors of the Government and other stakeholders when developing and monitoring public policies. Women in rural areas need support to organize and be brought into all levels of decision-making, agenda-setting and programme design and implementation as expert stakeholders. Efforts are also needed to explore how to better utilize the knowledge and expertise gained by young women who have received training. At the same time, it is important to ensure access to education and training to all women, including older women. Successful examples of grass-root programmes that train older women in technical skills such as solar power maintenance were shared, which demonstrate the potential and contribution women can make to the wellbeing of the entire community through education and training, and contribute to defuse negative gender stereotypes.

Strengthen rural institutions

20. Rural institutions, in particular farmer and producer organizations, need to be promoted and strengthened. Steps are necessary to ensure that women participate on equal terms with men in decision-making processes. Rural women also need to have a voice in local and regional government and have equal access to public services and administration.

Improve data collection and analysis

21. To develop more effective policies and programmes for rural development and rural women's empowerment, it is necessary to strengthen countries' capacity to collect and analyse data that are disaggregated by sex and age as well as by rural and urban population. It is also necessary to better utilize existing data, such as available time-use surveys, in policy-making. Gender markers and indicators should be used to measure the impact of policies on women and men in rural areas.