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

WRITTEN STATEMENT*

by

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

On behalf of FAO, IFAD, and WFP, I am delighted to address the priority theme for the next CSW, the empowerment of rural women. An in-depth discussion on rural women was long overdue. The rural areas are home to the majority of the population in the poorer countries. Indeed, 71% of the populations of the least developed countries and 55% of the less developed countries live in the rural areas. The rural areas are also home to 70% of the developing world's 1.4 billion extremely poor people.

Most of the world's rural people depend on the agriculture sector for their livelihoods. In 2008, two thirds of employed women and men in sub-Saharan Africa worked in agriculture, mainly as unpaid family workers or own account workers. In South Asia, 70% of women and 44% of men workers were engaged in agriculture. This is also the sector that contains the highest proportion of precarious jobs, mostly characterised 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 80s some 12% of ODA went to agriculture, by 2003 it had shrunk to 3%. This neglect has had detrimental consequences for the world as a whole, including creating the conditions for the food crisis of 2007-08, and for the billions of women and men that depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. This neglect has translated in increasing levels of hunger and poverty. The world was able to reduce the proportion of hungry people only when investment in the agricultural sector was relatively high.

Agriculture and off-farm rural employment constitute the basis for ensuring global food security and rural women's economic empowerment. This empowerment is not only essential for the eradication of hunger and poverty. It is the basis for other forms of empowerment. Remunerated employment enhances women's self esteem as well as their capacity to participate in the decisions that affect them in the family and in the community. This participation will contribute to improve their status and to change the cultural norms that limit their opportunities. There is ample evidence for the multiplier effects of rural women's economic empowerment, including improving the nutritional status of their family members and the reduction of hunger. Education is another powerful status enhancer with strong multiplier effects. All forms of empowerment are closely linked, but research has shown that economic empowerment is among the most powerful enablers of other forms of empowerment.

Rural women's economic empowerment depends on their capacity to produce in agriculture, mostly as small holder farmers and on the quality of the off-farm employment they have access to. There are major shortcomings in both. Women have consistently less access than men to essential productive resources such as land (first and foremost), rural finances, agricultural inputs, technology, education and information. They are also less organized and have less voice in the organizations in which they do participate. Plots managed by women produce significantly less than those managed by men due to this systematic lower access. However, it has been shown that under conditions of equality, women produce as much or more than men. This has clear implications for the agenda of any government that is serious about its objectives to reduce hunger.

Evidence shows that, although gender inequality varies considerably between regions and sectors, globally, women benefit less from rural employment, whether self- or wage employment, than men do. Women face inequalities in all the pillars of the decent work agenda defined by the ILO and adopted by the whole of the UN System: employment creation/enterprise development, social protection, standards and rights at work and governance and social dialogue. In rural labour markets, women and men often work in different combinations of employment, for example as self-employed farmers, temporary waged workers, employers, and as unpaid family workers. Women often work in the lowest paid and most precarious forms of employment and outnumber men among the unpaid family workers.

Women are more engaged than men in domestic and reproductive tasks, which are crucial for the maintenance of households, families and communities, but remain largely invisible to the economy. This restricts their time and mobility to engage in productive work. Rural women work longer hours than men. In Benin and Tanzania, for example, rural women work 17.4 and 14 hours more than men per week, while rural Indian women work almost 11 hours more than urban women and 12 hours more than urban men. Rural women in most parts of the world continue to be underserved by technologies. The poorest women continue to use labour-intensive traditional technologies or use no technologies at all.

Underdeveloped physical and social infrastructure and services in remote areas, including roads, telecommunication and transport systems, water supply and health and child care increase women's reproductive workload. This is compounded by droughts, environmental degradation, climate change and HIV and AIDS, increasing the burden on women and girls to take care of their sick family members and orphaned children. As a result, girls in particular end up dropping out of school.

Insufficient or unequal access to education and training for rural youth, particularly girls, is a major constraint for their possibility of obtaining decent and productive employment in their adult life. Too few women are trained as technicians and scientists in agriculture and related fields. This limits their capacity to run productive farm and off-farm enterprises, and to obtain skilled jobs and jobs in non-traditional agricultural export industries, which tend to be better paid than traditional agricultural ones.

There are also vast inequalities within the rural areas, with indigenous women suffering double or triple discrimination. Indigenous women, however, have vast resources that tend to be overlooked or ignored by centralized development models, such as their indigenous knowledge in particular related to plant and animal genetic resources, biodiversity and medicinal plants.

What can countries do?

Rural women's empowerment should be high on every country's development agenda. It is not only essential for the status of women and their personal realization; it will bring major national gains in reduction of poverty and hunger. A **package of measures** is needed, as there are no silver bullets and no single-sector measure can be fully effective. A part of this package is outlined here below.

Investment in agriculture is a matter of priority. However, not any investment will do the trick. People centred **investments need to take into account women's and men's specific needs and aim to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.** **Promotion of Decent work** in agricultural employment will result in enhanced productivity as well as in reduced hunger and poverty. Ensuring women's access to market and their role in value chain development deserves greater attention. **Agriculture sector policies need to be gender sensitive** and include provisions to measure their differential impact on men and women. Gender sensitive policies to promote small holder production and productivity are especially important, as women represent a significant part of the small holders and small producers.

Specific policies to reduce gender inequalities in access to all productive resources, including land, financial services, agricultural inputs, technology, education, training and information, are of the utmost importance. Ensuring education for every girl and boy, from primary to vocational training, will also be a central intervention with strong multiplier effects.

Rural institutions, in particular farmer and producer organizations need to be strengthened, ensuring that women participate in equal terms as men and have equal voice in their decisions. Rural women also need to have a voice in local and regional government and have equal access to services and public administration.

Investment in rural physical and infrastructure and in particular in services that reduce women's reproductive work burden such as water and energy supply, health and child care will go a long way in contributing to rural women's economic empowerment.

Developing countries' capacity to collect and analyse **sex-disaggregated data** about women in agriculture and rural areas and their use will contribute in an important way to more effective policies and to enhance rural women's empowerment.

Special efforts need to be taken to ensure that rural women are cognisant of their **human rights and that an enabling environment** is promoted for them to be able to exercise these rights.

Social protection measures should be developed taking into account rural women's needs. Productive safety nets such as subsidized fertilizer and other agricultural inputs need to reach women small holders and not only men, as has been the case up to now.

Special attention needs to be paid to the specific needs of all rural women, and in particular to those who tend to be doubly marginalised, such as **indigenous women.**

Valorising women's vast **indigenous knowledge** will not only contribute to rural women's empowerment, but to society as a whole.