

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

Panel discussion
“The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”

Thursday, 24 February 2011, 1:15 – 2:45 p.m.

ISSUES PAPER

I. Introduction

A panel discussion on “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges” will be organized in the margins of the fifty-fifth session, in accordance with the methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women (ECOSOC resolution 2006/9). This discussion will be the first step in guiding the Commission’s approach to addressing this priority theme during the fifty-sixth session in 2012 (ECOSOC resolution 2009/15).

II. Background

Since the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, significant advancements have been made in awareness of and attention to gender equality issues, women’s rights and the empowerment of women at global, regional and national levels, with more and more explicit attention being paid to the situation of rural women. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) calls on States parties to eliminate discrimination against rural women.¹ The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 highlighted the need for policies and strategies to improve the situation of women producers in rural areas, increase their incomes and provide household food security.² In 2000, the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly drew attention to the large number of rural women working in the informal economy with low levels of income, little job and social security, and few or none land or inheritance rights. It emphasized the need for rural women’s equal access to productive resources, such as land, capital, credit and technology, gainful employment, and decision-making, as well as access to education and health services.³

The importance of addressing gender equality and empowerment of women for global economic and social development and the need for increased attention to rural areas are also recognized in key global frameworks for development such as the Millennium

¹ United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378

² *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.13), chap. I, resolution 1, annexes I and II.

³ Resolution S-23/2, annex, and resolution S-23/3, annex.

Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),⁴ the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development,⁵ the Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development⁶ and the 2005 World Summit Outcome.⁷ In 2010, at the United Nations High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, Member States committed to accelerating progress in promoting gender equality and advancing the economic, legal, and political empowerment of women through a range of specific measures. They emphasized the promotion of the empowerment and participation of rural women as critical agents for enhancing agricultural and rural development and food security and pledged to ensure equal access for rural women to productive resources, land, financing, technologies, training and markets.⁸

Rural women's needs and priorities have been addressed in various resolutions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and its functional commissions. In resolution 64/140, the Assembly recognized the crucial role of rural women in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty as well as the vital contribution they make to the well-being and development of their families and communities. The important role and contribution of rural women was emphasized in the Council's 2010 Ministerial Declaration, which called for concerted action to support rural women's economic empowerment. The Commission on the Status of Women has consistently addressed issues related to the situation of rural women, including in its fifteen-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The 2009 Gender and Agriculture Source Book by the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) brought new attention to the important role of women in the agricultural production in addressing food and nutrition insecurity and promoting broad-based poverty reduction worldwide.

The fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2012 provides a critical opportunity to review progress in implementation, further develop policy guidance and put forward key recommendations in this important area.

III. Critical issues

Rural women play a critical role in rural economies and societies in both developing and developed countries. Across regions rural women have proved that they are resourceful

⁴ See General Assembly resolution 55/2.

⁵ Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.II.A.1 and corrigendum), chap. I, resolution 1, annex.

⁶ Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development, Monterrey, Mexico, 18-22 March 2002 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.II.A.1 and corrigendum), chap. I, resolution 2, annex.

⁷ See General Assembly resolution 60/1

⁸ See General Assembly resolution 65/1.

and committed to new ways to improve their own lives, those of their families and communities. Despite this knowledge and the attention given to rural women in international frameworks, women in rural areas continue to face serious challenges in carrying out their multiple roles within their families and communities and their rights and priorities are often insufficiently addressed by national development strategies and gender equality policies.⁹

It is estimated that at least 70 per cent of the world's very poor people live in rural areas. Rural poverty is the result of lack of assets, limited economic opportunities and poor education and capabilities, as well as disadvantages rooted in social and political inequalities. Rural women, in particular, are often disproportionately held back by disadvantages rooted in such inequalities.¹⁰ In many countries, gender-based stereotypes and discrimination deny rural women equitable access to opportunities, resources and services.¹¹ This means that rural areas in most regions of the world are farthest from achieving the Millennium Development Goals.¹² Policies that enhance gender equality and women's empowerment are therefore crucial for rural development, poverty reduction and economic growth and the achievement of internationally agreed goals and commitments for development.¹³

The global food crisis provided a serious reminder of the importance of sustainable agriculture to food and nutrition security and development. It also brought renewed attention to the significant role rural women play in agriculture. In many parts of the world it is the main sector of employment for women and in some regions women are responsible for a large proportion of food crops.¹⁴ The role of rural women in agriculture in developing countries is essential for ensuring food and nutrition security and eradicating hunger.¹⁵ Many rural women are not only food producers but they also have the primary responsibility for food distribution at the household level. Women's contribution to food production and food security, however, continues to be constrained by their unequal access to essential resources and technologies, tools, assets and services, including land ownership and access to extension services.¹⁶ It is critical that the currently increased attention to food and nutrition security issues generates equal benefits to women. To effectively tackle hunger, improved collection of gender-sensitive data as well as targeted measures are needed to ensure that women farmers have equal access to agricultural resources and an equal voice in decision-making at all levels.¹⁷

⁹ United Nations (2008). *Women 2000 and Beyond. Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges*. New York.

¹⁰ IFAD (2010). *Rural Poverty Report 2011. New realities, new challenges: new opportunities for tomorrow's generation*. Rome.

¹¹ United Nations (2008). *Women 2000 and Beyond. Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges*. New York.

¹² United Nations (2008). *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*. New York.

¹³ A/64/190 and E/2009/72.

¹⁴ A/64/190 and FAO (2007), "Women and Food Security", Rome.

¹⁵ FAO. (2009). *How to feed the world in 2050*. Rome.

¹⁶ United Nations (2008). *Women 2000 and Beyond. Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges*. New York.

¹⁷ FAO, IFAD, WFP High-level luncheon. "From Dialogue to Action: The Empowerment of Rural Women in Agriculture," 29 June 2010.

Most of the rural poor, in particular women and youth, are represented in the low-productivity employment segment of the rural economy both in subsistence farming and agricultural wage labour and in non-farm self-employment.¹⁸ Access to decent work remains limited in both agricultural and non-agricultural work. Work is generally more likely to be either unpaid or low-wage, informal, vulnerable, and to lack social protection. For women, many barriers persist to their equal access to decent work, including the lack of education and training, transportation and child-care services, as well as constraints due to unequal care and household responsibilities.¹⁹ Global advances in information and communications technologies (ICT) could harbour significant potential for facilitating rural women's economic empowerment through the acquisition of new skills and access to employment opportunities and markets. Initiatives for measuring, reducing and redistributing the burden of unpaid work are essential both for recognizing and making more visible the agricultural and non-agricultural work of rural women and for increasing their access to all forms of paid employment.²⁰

Promoting and ensuring the full enjoyment of the rights of rural women and expanding their access to opportunities, resources and services requires comprehensive action at different levels. Rural women are less likely than urban women to own property.²¹ It is estimated that rural women own less than ten per cent of property in the developed world, and two per cent in the developing world.²² In a number of countries women remain at a disadvantage due to inequality in statutory and customary laws on access to land ownership and other types of property and inheritance.²³ Although evidence suggests that lending to women is more cost-effective when compared to men,²⁴ significant barriers to women's equal access to credit exist. In some regions it is estimated that women receive less than ten per cent of all credit going to small farmers and only one per cent of the total credit going to the agricultural sector.²⁵ Microfinance and microcredit have been recognized as useful tools for providing opportunities for rural women to move out of extreme poverty. But even in these areas, women continue to face discrimination in access to credit, usually receiving smaller amounts than those allocated to men.²⁶ Many

¹⁸ FAO (2011). Rural employment guidance material #1: Guidance on how to address rural employment and decent work concerns in FAO country activities. Rome.

¹⁹ A/64/190 and report of the workshop on Gaps, trends and current research in gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty, Rome, FAO, IFAD, ILO, 31 March-2 April 2009.

²⁰ Marzia Fontana with Cristina Paciello (2009). "Gender dimensions of rural and agricultural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty - A global perspective." Overview Paper presented at the FAO, IFAD, ILO workshop on "Gaps, trends and current research in gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty, Rome, FAO, IFAD, ILO, 31 March-2 April 2009.

²¹ United Nations (2010). The World's Women 2010. New York

²² A/64/190 and United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the Global Land Tool Network (2008), "Secure land rights for all", Nairobi.

²³ United Nations (2010). The World's Women 2010. New York

²⁴ United Nations (2001). Positive impacts from incorporating gender perspectives into the substantive work of the United Nations. New York: United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women

²⁵ A/64/190 and International Development Association (ODA) (2008), "Gender: Working Towards Greater Equality", Washington, D.C., World Bank.

²⁶ E/2010/4-E/CN.6/2010/2

country examples demonstrate the importance of capacity-building, dissemination of information, gender-sensitive statistics, legal assistance, mobilization and advocacy in enhancing women's rights and access to productive resources.²⁷

Education and health are two other areas that require sustained attention. Despite significant advances, in many countries, gaps remain between girls' and boys' enrolment and participation in education with gender disparities being far more severe in countries with greater rural and poor populations.²⁸ Rural children and those with a mother with no education are twice as likely to be out of school. In addition, illiteracy among rural women remains an area of concern. While efforts have been made to broaden the range of health services and quality of care, women living in rural areas still face significant barriers to health care and reproductive health. Fertility rates in rural areas are generally higher than those of urban areas due to rural women's lower access to education, family planning and healthcare services. Rural areas also have some of the highest rates of maternal mortality and obstetric fistula²⁹. The HIV and AIDS pandemic has increased the responsibilities of women in rural areas for both productive and care work.³⁰

There is also evidence indicating that rural women are exposed to high levels of violence, especially indigenous women and those from ethnic minorities, and that access to law enforcement, legal protection and services remain limited or non-existent.³¹

In addition, although there has been progress in women's participation in decision-making globally, the under-representation of women from rural areas in political and public life remains high in most societies. In some areas, discriminatory attitudes and practices at the local level limit the space for women's political expression within their communities.³² Rural institutions, such as agricultural producer and rural worker associations, rural credit unions, women's associations, water users' groups and self-help groups, can play a critical role in contributing to rural women's economic empowerment and public representation.

Women living in rural areas play an essential role to effectively mitigate and adapt to climate change and ensure more sustainable rural development. Rural women often depend on access to natural resources for food and fuel, and they are often more aware of the urgency to manage resources in a sustainable manner and to preserve biological diversity.³³ Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to the gender equality dimensions of climate change, natural resource degradation and the impact of natural disasters.

²⁷ A/64/190 and United Nations (2009). World Survey on Women in Development: Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance. New York.

²⁸ United Nations (2010). The World's Women 2010. New York

²⁹ United Nations (2008). Women2000 and Beyond. Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges. New York.

³⁰ A/64/190

³¹ E/2010/4-E/CN.6/2010/2

³² E/2010/4-E/CN.6/2010/2

³³ A/64/190 and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007), Indigenous Women and the United Nations system: good practices and lessons learned, New York.

These and other issues that impact the empowerment of rural women, including specific groups of women such as girls/young women, indigenous, older women or women with disabilities, need to be further examined. Lessons learned from various contexts that have produced tangible results need to be better shared and good practices scaled up.

IV. Format and outcome of the panel discussion

The panel will take the form of an interactive dialogue. Three expert panellists will make presentations of five to seven minutes. Member States, United Nations system entities and non-governmental organizations will be encouraged to share experiences, raise issues that should be considered within the theme, and/or respond to the panellists' presentations. Interventions from the floor will be limited to three minutes. A moderator's summary of the dialogue will be posted on the website of UN Women.

V. Issues for consideration in the discussion

To provide guidance in preparing for the fifty-sixth session, the following issues could be considered:

- What are the key areas where new and concerted policy measures and interventions are necessary to make measurable and accelerated progress in rural women's empowerment? What gaps need to be addressed? What is the role of different stakeholders?
- What current challenges and emerging trends have an adverse impact on the situation of rural women? How can those be addressed by different stakeholders?
- How can existing policy commitments to rural women's economic, legal and political empowerment be more effectively translated into concrete actions on the ground? What measures and strategies have been successful and how can those be scaled up?
- What are good practice strategies for gender-responsive rural development, poverty and hunger eradication and food and nutrition security?