

**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fifth session
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Opening remarks by

**MS. MICHELLE BACHELET
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AT
THE INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL ON
THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN AND THEIR ROLE IN POVERTY AND
HUNGER ERADICATION, DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT CHALLENGES**

24 FEBRUARY 2011

Chair,
Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues and friends,

We are meeting for a discussion that will help shape the focus and outcomes on the Commission's priority theme in 2012. Your ideas, suggestions and concerns will guide us in our preparations for that session, and ensure that we tackle the most critical issues and achieve concrete and positive change for women in rural areas.

Over the years there has been growing attention and interest in the topic of rural women's empowerment. The substantial contributions that women in rural areas bring to economic growth and the fight against hunger, malnutrition and poverty are well established. The urgency of rural women's empowerment has steadily moved to the forefront of the attention of policy makers, development practitioners and activists. I am pleased to note that events such as last year's MDG Summit and ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Review confirmed the renewed political attention and policy commitments for action.

The large disparities in well-being that exist between urban and rural residents throughout the world are a continued cause for concern. This urban/rural gap also affects the opportunities, resources and services available to women and girls in rural areas. Gender-based discrimination that prevails across a range of social and economic dimensions in many countries further curtails those already limited opportunities. For example, while in many parts of the world agriculture is the main sector of employment for women, only a fraction of allocated resources benefit women farmers.

Recent global crises, such as the economic and food crises, natural disasters such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and challenges associated with climate change have demonstrated the urgent need to reduce women's vulnerabilities. We must improve women's capacity to manage and overcome shocks and contribute to rural development in the most effective manner that will lead to improvements not only in their own livelihoods, but those of their families, communities and nations.

We have many experiences and valuable lessons to build on. As we will hear during this panel discussion, good practices and initiatives that can be scaled-up and replicated in a range of areas. For example, we know that:

- investments in infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water and sanitation and time- and labour saving technologies can significantly contribute to rural women's empowerment and yield important benefits for whole communities such as better health and education;
- public social security schemes can play a critical role in protecting women against persistent vulnerabilities and in fighting poverty;
- providing women with equal access to resources, productive assets and markets – in law and in practice - is key to their economic empowerment and to overall rural development and economic growth;
- quality education and training, including vocational and literacy training, as well as access to health care, is essential for women's socio-economic empowerment, participation in decision-making and to improving families' well-being;
- targeted support to women and women's organizations in rural areas is critical in strengthening rural women's rights and their participation and voice in development processes.

The 2012 session of CSW provides the opportunity to share and collect the lessons learned from successful initiatives, programmes and strategies applied by Governments, UN entities and civil society organizations in different regions. It should identify the key areas where new and concerted policy measures and interventions are necessary to make measurable and accelerated progress in rural women's empowerment. There is also a need to critically assess whether past efforts have brought the expected results – and if not, how to change course.

We will collaborate closely with a range of partners in preparing for the priority theme in 2012, including key UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP), who are represented at this panel, as well as civil society organizations.

We will also draw attention to opportunities for the economic empowerment of rural women in other UN processes, including preparations for the 4th Conference on Least Developed Countries in May 2011 in Istanbul and Rio+20 in 2012.

UN Women is committed to focusing on the situation of rural women across all areas of our work at the global and the national level. I look forward to and count on your support as we work together to translate commitments to gender equality into real change for women, men, girls and boys in rural areas worldwide.

Thank you very much.