

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

Chair's summary

At its fifty-sixth session in 2012, the priority theme of the Commission on the Status of Women was “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”. Consideration of this priority theme was especially timely given the global context of the financial and economic crisis, and the volatile food and energy prices, that are exacerbating the disadvantages and inequalities faced by rural women and girls. It also provided a timely opportunity to contribute to the deliberations at the upcoming United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012.

The Commission held a high-level round table and two panel discussions on the theme. Moderators' summaries are contained in documents E/CN.6/2012/CRP.3, E/CN.6/2012/CRP.4 and E/CN.6/2012/CRP.5 and are available on the Commission's website.

The outcome of the discussion of the Commission on the Status of Women on its priority theme is usually in the form of agreed conclusions, negotiated by all States. Agreed conclusions make action-oriented recommendations for all Member States, relevant intergovernmental bodies, entities of the United Nations system and other stakeholders, in order to accelerate the implementation of previous commitments. Agreed conclusions are made widely available, and distributed among Member States, the United Nations system, civil society and other stakeholders.

As has been the practice of the Commission, the Bureau had prepared a proposal for the agreed conclusions which served as the basis for negotiations. Many additional key issues and recommendations were advanced by Member States aimed at accelerating the empowerment of rural women. However, after many hours of deliberations and negotiations, divergent views were not bridged, and the Commission was unable to adopt agreed conclusions on this year's priority theme for the benefit of rural women who had hoped that the Commission would achieve something concrete for them.

In my capacity as Chair of the Commission, I present this summary of the key issues and recommendations in an effort to record and demonstrate the commitment of all Member States to work constructively and purposefully for the empowerment of rural women everywhere. The summary is organized in two parts: the overall framework and context for the empowerment of rural women and a set of action-oriented recommendations that emerged from the deliberations. Issues where there was disagreement or that were not finalized are not included in the recommendations.

Framework and context for the empowerment of rural women

A number of international instruments and commitments provide the framework for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of rural women, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, and the declarations adopted by the Commission on the occasion of the tenth and fifteenth anniversaries of the Fourth World Conference on Women; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol, the relevant conventions of the International Labour Organization and other relevant international conventions. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is important for the empowerment of rural indigenous women.

The promotion and protection of, and respect for, the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women, including the right to development, which are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, should be mainstreamed into all policies and programmes aimed at the eradication of poverty. Measures should be taken to ensure that every person is entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy political, economic, social, and cultural development.

Rural women are recognized as, inter alia, leaders, decision-makers, producers, workers, entrepreneurs and caregivers. Their contributions to local and national economies, agriculture, including farming, pastoralism, fishing, and forestry, and household livelihoods must be fully acknowledged and appropriately valued since they are prerequisites for their empowerment as well as for inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development. Investing in rural women and girls accelerates progress toward eradicating poverty and hunger, improving health outcomes, and achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

In recognition of the need to eliminate all forms of discrimination against rural women and girls, it is necessary to address the inequalities and multiple disadvantages that they face, and to promote equal treatment of rural women, irrespective of their sex, age, marital status, race, disability, because they are indigenous women, or are women living with HIV and AIDS, and other factors.

Investment in and strengthening of efforts are encouraged in order to meet the basic needs of rural girls and women of all ages through improved availability, access to and use of critical rural infrastructure such as energy and transport, capacity building and human resources development measures, and the provision of a safe and reliable water supply and sanitation, nutritional programmes, affordable housing programmes, education and literacy programmes, and health and social support measures.

The ongoing adverse impacts of the world financial and economic crisis, the volatile food and energy prices, food insecurity, climate change, the lack of investment in sustainable rural development, agriculture and environmental protection, and demographic changes exacerbate the disadvantages and inequalities that rural women and men, girls and boys and their families face. Special attention must be given to women and girls, who often bear the greatest burden of poverty, particularly in remote areas.

It is important to protect the right to food. The multiple and complex causes of food crises in developing countries, especially for net food importing countries, and their consequences for food security and nutrition require a comprehensive and coordinated response by national Governments and the international community, with the full participation of rural women in decision-making.

Rural women, including smallholder farmers and indigenous women, often do not have equal access to land, productive resources, financial services, information, skills development, support services, agricultural and non-agricultural employment and social protection, infrastructure and transportation, markets, and appropriate new technologies, which they need to realize their productive potential and contribute to sustainable development and inclusive growth in rural areas.

Creating an enabling environment to ensure the full and equal participation of rural women in all spheres and levels of decision-making is necessary including in the development, implementation, and evaluation of macroeconomic policies, national development plans, and poverty reduction strategies.

It is important to reduce rural women's disproportionate share of unpaid work and to promote equal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men, with a view to increasing, inter alia, rural women's opportunities for participation in the workforce and time for education, training and leisure.

The full integration of women into the formal economy, in particular, into economic decision-making, means changing the current gender-based division of labour, into new economic structures where women and men enjoy equal treatment, pay and power, including sharing of paid and unpaid work. This is of fundamental importance in achieving sustainable development, sustained economic growth, eradicating poverty and hunger and combating diseases. Investing in the development of women and girls has a multiplier effect, in particular on productivity and efficiency, in all sectors of the economy.

Substantial additional investment, supportive policies and enhanced regional and international cooperation are necessary in support of sustainable agricultural development, while special attention should be paid to the role rural women can play in reaching the poverty and hunger eradication targets of the Millennium Development Goals.

There is deep concern about the pervasiveness of violence against women and girls in all its forms and manifestations worldwide, particularly those living in rural and remote areas as they face additional barriers to accessing support and protective services. Violence against women and girls is an impediment to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and prevents them from realizing their full potential in every aspect of life and development.

The crucial role of national machineries for the advancement of women, which should be placed at the highest possible level of government, is recognized, as are the relevant contributions of national human rights institutions where they exist, and the important role of civil society, especially women's organizations, in advancing the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, particularly for women and girls living in rural areas.

Action-oriented recommendations for the empowerment of rural women

The following actions are to be taken, as appropriate, by Governments, at all levels, including local authorities and national machineries for the advancement of women, in cooperation with the relevant entities of the United Nations system, international and regional organizations and international financial institutions, within their respective mandates, as well as civil society, including national human rights institutions where they exist, rural women's organizations, farmers' and producers' organizations, cooperatives, as well as the private sector and other relevant stakeholders:

A. Strengthening gender-responsive policy environments

a. Prioritize rural development and agriculture, as well as integrate and mainstream a gender perspective into rural governance processes, such as policymaking and public administration, and into national development plans, rural development, agricultural and infrastructure policies, programmes and service delivery, with a view to achieve equal access for rural women to productive resources, land, financial and social services, including health, education and social protection, decent work and employment opportunities, and labour-saving technologies;

b. Undertake legislative and administrative reforms to ensure women's equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication and markets;

c. Pursue a gender perspective in developing legislation, policies and programmes on internal and international migration to protect and promote the human rights of rural women and girls, including, inter alia, those who are migrant workers, with a view to eliminate the demand that fosters the trafficking of women and girls and the worst forms of child labour, and to enhance preventive and punitive measures, including legislative measures, to deter such abuses;

d. Continue to strengthen policies relevant for women's empowerment aimed at addressing inequalities affecting women and girls throughout the life-cycle, in particular those that may arise from sex, age, marital status, race, disability, because they are indigenous women, or are women living with HIV and AIDS, and other factors;

e. Ensure the active participation of rural women and girls and their organizations in the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of policies and activities related to, as applicable, climate change, humanitarian emergencies, including natural disasters, disaster preparedness and risk management, humanitarian assistance, conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction so that they take into consideration the needs and priorities of rural women and girls;

f. Promote gender mainstreaming in laws, policies, and planning, budgeting, and evaluation processes, programmes and service delivery, including by, as appropriate, establishing gender equality units or focal points in, or providing expertise on gender issues to, line ministries, and ensure that they take into consideration the priorities and needs of rural women and girls;

g. Ensure that government officials, elected representatives at all levels, including parliamentarians, where appropriate, the judiciary, and other relevant actors have the capacity and knowledge to use available tools and mechanisms, including gender-responsive budgeting, for the development, implementation, and evaluation of laws, policies, and programmes that benefit rural women and girls;

h. Promote, protect, and raise awareness of the rights of rural women, including through developing, implementing and evaluating outreach programmes;

i. Ensure rural women's full and equal participation and representation in political decision-making processes, at all levels, to enable them to hold public and private sector service providers accountable for the accessibility, quality, affordability and sustainability of services provided to women and men in rural areas;

j. Develop, implement and evaluate regulatory frameworks and incentives for private sector engagement and build innovative partnerships, including public-private partnerships, for value chain development and rural women's equal access to national, regional and international markets;

k. Strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices to collect, analyze and disseminate comparable sex-, age- and disability-disaggregated data; and develop relevant gender-sensitive indicators to serve as a basis for gender-responsive legislation, policy design and strategy development in rural areas;

B. Leveraging investment for sustainable rural development to eradicate poverty and hunger

l. Ensure that rural women can benefit fully and equally from current and future financing to support inclusive growth, rural development, agriculture and climate change mitigation and adaptation with the goal to eradicate poverty and hunger in rural areas, including in response to the adverse impact of the world economic and financial crisis;

m. Support women smallholder farmers, including female-headed households in subsistence farming, by facilitating their access to agricultural inputs, extension services, financial services, infrastructure including transportation, safe drinking water, sanitation and irrigation, storage facilities, information, relevant technologies and markets;

- n. Expand opportunities for women smallholder farmers to diversify their production and increase their productivity by engaging in commercial farming and entrepreneurship, and promote their access to markets, including for small-scale production and lucrative high-value products;
- o. Urge national, regional and international efforts to strengthen the capacity of developing countries, especially their smallholder farmers, in particular rural women, in order to enhance the productivity and nutritional quality of food crops, including through appropriate mechanization in agriculture; promote sustainable agricultural practices; and enhance food security and nutrition-related programmes and policies that take into consideration the specific needs of women and girls;
- p. Promote sustainable livelihoods of small agricultural producers, especially rural women, taking into account their disadvantaged position in the global food supply chain;
- q. Recognize the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, and their traditional knowledge and practices, in the preservation, conservation and sustainable use of traditional crops and biodiversity for present and future generations as an important contribution to food security and nutrition, as well as in the achievement of development goals;
- r. Support and invest in joint United Nations programmes that aim to empower rural women and, in this regard, enhance UN-Women and other United Nations system-wide efforts through predictable, stable and sustainable financial support and encourage an increase of such financial support, while encouraging UN-Women to seek to expand its financial support base;
- s. Strengthen international cooperation in the area of the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges, and welcome and encourage, in this regard, South-South, North-South and triangular cooperation and recognize that the commitment to explore opportunities for further South-South cooperation entails not seeking a substitute for but rather a complement to North-South cooperation;

C. Promote and enhance access to markets, land, assets, employment, education and public services

- t. Enact, revise and implement laws to ensure that rural women are accorded equal rights to own or lease land and other property, including through inheritance and registration processes for land tenure;
- u. Increase rural women's access to justice, raise their awareness of their legal rights, provide them with access to affordable legal aid and support, and encourage the strengthening and improvement of the administration of justice;
- v. Increase rural women's knowledge of and equal access to affordable financial services, including micro-finance services, such as credit, savings, insurance and remittance transfer services; and develop financial products and financial literacy training targeting rural women;
- w. Provide rural women migrant workers with targeted financial and non-financial advice and opportunities to invest their remittances in the local economy;
- x. Ensure and expand the equal access to opportunities for full employment and decent work, in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, for rural women, in particular for landless women; and facilitate rural women's transition from the informal to the formal sectors, including through public works programmes and through promoting and strengthening women's economic opportunities in micro- and small enterprises, sustainable social enterprises, and cooperatives;

y. Take concrete measures to improve rural women's skills, productivity and employment opportunities through technical, agricultural, vocational education and training;

z. Pursue policies and strategies that improve the functioning of domestic, regional and international markets and ensure equitable access for all to those markets, especially smallholder and women farmers in developing countries; note the importance of non-trade distorting special measures that are consistent with the rules of the World Trade Organization aimed at creating incentives for smallholder farmers in developing countries to enable them to increase their productivity and to compete on a more equal footing in world food markets, and refrain from taking measures that are inconsistent with the rules of the World Trade Organization and that have adverse impacts on global, regional and national food security;

aa. Stress that a universal, rules-based, open and non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system will improve agriculture and rural development in developing countries and contribute to world food security, and urge that national, regional and international strategies promote the participation of farmers, especially smallholder farmers, including women in community, domestic, regional and international markets;

bb. Promote women's equal access to markets, including for small-scale production, through safe and sound infrastructure, new technology, access to and transparency of information, including on up-to-date market pricing and regulations, and where appropriate, public purchase programmes;

cc. Identify and create opportunities to achieve affordable, reliable and safe transportation systems so that rural women and girls can access educational and training facilities and health care, and that rural women can access workplaces and markets;

dd. Establish or expand national social protection systems with a gender perspective to provide basic social protection and social support measures for rural women of all ages, and take measures to ensure sustainable, long-term financial support for such systems, recognizing that social protection floors can provide a systemic base to address poverty and vulnerability;

ee. Ensure that information on social protection measures and benefits is widely available and accessible to rural women;

ff. Raise awareness about, and provide all citizens, including women and girls in rural and remote areas, with access to affordable personal identification documents to facilitate rural women's equal access to productive assets and services and strengthen, in this regard, birth and marriage registration;

gg. Provide rural women with access to agricultural extension services, technical assistance, and programmes, including food procurement programmes; acknowledge the importance of a gender perspective in agricultural extension services; and, in this regard, consider taking concrete actions to, inter alia, enhance training and increase the number of women agricultural extension officers;

hh. Reduce the unpaid work burden of women of all ages by, inter alia, providing improved access to infrastructure, including clean water, electricity, and time- and labour-saving technologies, and promoting care services for children, older persons and persons with disabilities in rural and remote areas, and taking measures to increase the participation of men in caregiving both within households and in care professions;

ii. Develop, promote and implement family-friendly legislation, policies and services, including parental and other leave schemes, and affordable, accessible and quality care services for children, persons with disabilities, older persons and other dependent persons, in order to promote the reconciliation of work and

family responsibilities for rural women and men, recognizing that the unequal sharing of responsibilities of daily life has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, and on their economic empowerment;

jj. Pursue and promote gender-based approaches for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) founded on data disaggregated by sex and age, taking into account urban-rural realities, in an effort to address the critical differences and the risks of morbidity and mortality from NCDs for women and men, including rural women, given that NCDs can affect women and men differently and that women and girls bear a disproportionate share of the burden of care giving;

kk. Strengthen efforts to close the knowledge gap for rural women and girls on HIV prevention and promote access to treatment, care and support, noting that HIV and AIDS presents a significant challenge to rural development, exacerbates poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, and lack of education and economic opportunity;

ll. Promote women's and girls' access to formal, non-formal and informal education and training in rural and remote areas, including through compulsory primary education, scholarships, affordable child care facilities, quality distance education, e-learning, tele-education and community radio, and reaffirm the critical role of education in the achievement of poverty eradication and other development goals, including in the context of the Millennium Declaration and the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All;

mm. Strengthen human rights education, training and learning, and a gender-sensitive education system that considers the specific needs of rural women and girls in order to eliminate gender stereotypes and discrimination against them;

nn. Condemn all forms and manifestations of violence against women and girls, take appropriate action to strengthen and implement legal, policy, administrative and other measures to prevent and eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence and, in this regard, fully engage men and boys, as well as families and communities in preventing and condemning violence against women and girls;

oo. Ensure that integrated gender-sensitive services, including recovery and reintegration services and access to justice, are available and accessible to victims of all forms of violence and victims of trafficking in persons, and in particular to rural women and girls;

pp. Address the social, economic and other factors, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of socio-economic opportunities, humanitarian emergencies, including natural disasters, social exclusion and marginalization, and a culture of tolerance towards violence against women and girls, which makes rural women and girls vulnerable to trafficking in persons and to sexual exploitation, and take urgent action to formulate, strengthen and implement legal, policy, administrative and other measures, including victim support services, in this regard;

qq. Consider the adoption, where appropriate, of national legislation to protect the knowledge, innovations and practices of women in indigenous and local communities relating to traditional medicines, biodiversity and indigenous technologies;

rr. Address the priorities and needs of rural women, especially those living in remote areas, as users of information, and their needs for access to information and communications technology, in order to improve their living conditions;

ss. Make full use of technological, scientific and research innovations, as well as indigenous and local knowledge, to enhance rural women's productivity and income; improve women's working conditions by

reducing their time and labour burden; facilitate their access to information, technology and other means of communication and services, as well as promote women's involvement, participation and decision-making in scientific and research institutions;

tt. Promote the rights of rural women with disabilities, including by ensuring their access, on an equal basis, to productive employment and decent work, economic and financial resources and disability-sensitive infrastructure and services, in particular in relation to health and education, including through international cooperation, as well as by ensuring that their priorities and needs are fully incorporated into policies and programmes, inter alia, through their participation in decision-making processes;

D. Strengthening participation and leadership in decision-making

uu. Strongly encourage the participation of rural women and women leaders of rural organizations in key decision-making and budget planning and allocation processes, including the integration of a gender perspective in the planning and implementation of rural and agricultural policies and programmes, at all levels of government and within rural institutions, such as farmers' organizations and cooperatives;

vv. Implement targeted actions to increase rural women's participation and leadership in governments at all levels, and, as appropriate, in farmers' organizations and cooperatives, including through adopting measures, as appropriate, such as fair and transparent selection processes, and consideration of temporary special measures such as quotas and benchmarks, as appropriate, setting concrete targets and timelines, providing affordable child care facilities, and raising awareness of women's leadership roles among men and boys;

ww. Support rural women's organizations, rural organizations, trade unions, national human rights institutions where they exist, and other civil society organizations, in their efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women, to strengthen their effective participation in policy processes at the local, national, regional and international levels;

In conclusion, the centrality of gender equality and the empowerment of women has to be stressed in the context of sustainable development. With the full and equal participation of rural women, a gender perspective should be integrated in the preparations for, outcomes of, and follow up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, to be held in Brazil in 2012.

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