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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

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

Focus: Economic Empowerment of Rural Women

**THE REPORT OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON:
ENABLING RURAL WOMEN'S ECONOMIC
EMPOWERMENT:
INSTITUTIONS, OPPORTUNITIES AND PARTICIPATION**

by

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Excellencies, Distinguished delegates and keynote speakers, Dear colleagues, Honorable Ministers and representatives of Member States, Ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great honor to address this 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to present the report generated by the Expert Group Meeting (EGM organized by UN-Women in cooperation with FAO, IFAD and WFP) on “Enabling Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment: Institutions, opportunities and Participation”, Accra, Ghana, 20-23 September, 2011¹. *Rural women’s concerns and their high relevance to the 56th session priory theme of the Commission on the Status of Women were long overdue and therefore are timely addressed.* This paper consists of two parts: 1) the key issues and 2) the recommendations and the ensuing discussions. This priority theme carries a spark of flint, a light line and a little piece of heaven for rural women in the world and the many poor living in rural areas.

Introduction

Participants recognized the importance of understanding the **diversity** among rural women and the important role of **indigenous rural women** as a specific group. Despite **women’s critical contribution to rural development**, rural women’s rights and priorities remain insufficiently addressed in legal frameworks, national and local development policies and investment strategies at all levels². They continue to **face serious challenges**. The meeting highlighted the importance of **recognizing women as economic actors** rather than as independent players who carry out specific roles and responsibilities in isolation. The EGM identified a wide range of issues and challenges related to rural women’s empowerment. Discussions focused on **seven important aspects**:

The impact of economic policy choices on gender equality

The main challenges recognized by the group were the **negative impact of globalization**, neoliberal economic policy choices, and the **economic and food crises** on social and economic development, **food and security and livelihoods** and gender equality and women’s empowerment.

The impact of the financial and food price crises on gender equality

The financial crisis, (2008, 2011), have led to **great economic uncertainty and social repercussions**. These crises pose **additional challenges** to women already faced with systemic and structural factors causing gender disparities in the economy, including labor markets. Increased **food prices have negatively impacted investment in education and health care**, especially withdrawal of girls from school.

¹ EGM report available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/egm.htm>

² United Nations (2008). Women 2000 and Beyond. Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges. New York.

Rural women in agricultural and non-farm work: Farmers, producers, workers and entrepreneurs

Agriculture is a livelihood source for about 86 percent of rural women and men, and provides employment for about 1.3 billion smallholder farmers and landless workers. **Rural off-farm and non-farm employment** plays a critical role for rural women's economic empowerment and poverty reduction. In addition, **unpaid activities** are essential to the livelihoods. Internal and external **migration** is increasingly becoming an important livelihood strategy for women and men.

The increased number of **large retailers** has led to **unequal power relations** introduced by global value chains and markets. Value chain development needs to uphold the principles of dignified '**decent work**', and guaranteeing **rights** at work.

Accessing **decent and productive rural employment** and income-generating activities is still a great challenge depending on whether **home-based activities** are recognized and protected.

Women producers and entrepreneurs could gain from improved **access to financial services**. Particular constraints to women's access to financial services³ include **policy and legal barriers** as well as cultural "**norms**". Rural women in **post-conflict** settings, face additional challenges.

Microfinance systems have produced contrasting results for rural women: **positive** in terms of changes in livelihoods and decision-making improvement, and **negative** impacts such as women getting indebted, **conflict** between spouses, and increases in **domestic violence**.

Formal and non-formal education and informal education contribute positively to rural women's empowerment. However, in many parts of the world, religious, political, social, and economic constraints **limit girls and women's access to education**.

Rural women's access to and control over land

Land is not only an **economic and productive resource**, but equally a **source of security, status and recognition**. Women's access to and control over land is a key factor in rural women's economic empowerment and can potentially lead to gender equality alongside addressing material deprivation and food and nutrition insecurity. The main obstacles to rural women's access to land are **institutional barriers** to their social recognition. The

³ Rural finance includes retail and wholesale institutions that offer financial services to the poor and extremely poor including informal private sector providers (e.g. large-scale farmers, traders, processors, employers as part of sharecropping or leasing arrangements, putting out systems, market transactions, employment), informal mutual financial mechanisms (rotating or accumulating savings and credit associations, burial societies), formal sector providers (banks, post-offices, insurance companies), and specialist microfinance institutions (for poor, extreme poor), membership-based financial organizations (credit unions, cooperatives, and integrated rural development programs (through programs and links to financial institutions) Source: World Bank, FAO, IFAD (2009). Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook (Agriculture and Rural Development Series). Washington: World Bank.

EGM also noted the phenomenon of **commercial land acquisition**, often referred to as ‘**land grabbing**’.

Rural women’s access to research and technology

The extent to which rural women participate in technology research and development, together with their **access to new technologies** are important factors that affect women’s economic empowerment, both in relation to agricultural production and other enterprises (e.g. value addition, processing, storage⁴). Women’s **needs, interests, and constraints**, often **differ from men’s** depending on their responsibilities, which are dynamic and change in response to social and economic conditions.⁵

In addition to the **public sector**, more focus on **value chain research and development on crops and livestock** that are typically under women’s responsibility is needed. The **capacity of rural women to adopt new technologies depends** also on **time and labor demands and financial investment** requirements.

Farmers’ groups have proven to be effective in terms of sharing knowledge and disseminating new technologies⁶. **Participatory research** and development has contributed to the adoption of technologies.

In the past two decades, there has been increased interest in the development and adaptation of **information and communication technologies** for rural areas such as electronic and mobile (e- and m) technologies that can enhance rural women’s access to information. Largely, rural populations, and specifically **rural women have not been widely consulted in climate change adaptation/mitigation research** (e.g. drought resistant crop varieties) even though they are often the most impacted by changes in weather and ecosystems.

Effective national and local institutions

The EGM recognized the importance of **representative and accountable forms of government** for the empowerment of rural women. This requires **addressing the social relations and structures that limit rural women’s place and voices**⁷ in leadership and decision-making and facilitating mechanisms for ensuring accountability, participation and transparency in decision-making.

⁴ Technology research and development includes, for example, building on women’s indigenous technological skills and know-how of ecosystems, crops, medicinal plants, livestock, water and fuel sources, production, harvesting, storage, and value addition processes; as well as other knowledge and skills such as those applied for caring children, the elderly, and the ailing. Another important dimension is in improved and ergonomically aware agricultural implements and tools that consider women’s needs and address their labor and time constraints.

⁵ Rathgeber, Eva (2011). Rural Women’s Access to Science and Technology in the Context of Natural Resource Management. Expert paper prepared for Expert Group Meeting. EGM/RW/2011/EP.6.

⁶ Rathgeber, Eva (2011). Rural Women’s Access to Science and Technology in the Context of Natural Resource Management. Expert paper prepared for Expert Group Meeting. EGM/RW/2011/EP.6.

⁷ The term “voices” is included here to recognize diversity of women, including indigenous women and women in different socio-economic and geographic groups.

Indigenous women face specific struggles to ensure their rights, particularly in relation to **foreign trade and global markets**.

Institutional change is required to become more inclusive of both rural men and women. Women may be constrained in their participation due to **mobility restrictions** and other constraints, and **lack of familiarity with policies and rules**.

Although, farmers and producers' organizations play a key role in representing the interests of rural constituents, there are generally **few women in leadership positions**. Farmers' organizations can also be more effective by institutionalizing training that **recognizes the differential needs and challenges of women and men farmers, including budgets, and day care facilities**. There has been growing attention to the importance of **engaging men in working towards social change** that addresses gender-based discrimination and inequalities.

Enabling legal and policy environment

A number of international commitments are in place which guide Member States and other stakeholders on how to concretely **address gender-based discrimination in rural areas**. In the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)⁸, **article 14** on rural women is **the only text in international law that specifically addresses rural women**. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women continues to highlight its concerns in the implementation of Article 14 during dialogues with Governments.

The **Millennium Development Goals**, particularly **MDG3 on gender equality**, are an important reference point. The EGM pointed to the need for **enabling national policies and legislation** that recognize and translate agricultural and non-farm labor into decent work.

National level policies that support women's rights to resources and services are important for strengthening rural institutions. To provide viable **economic alternatives to migration** for rural women, public policy needs to **ensure improved agricultural productivity and incomes** for women and providing related social services.

With specific reference to **value chains and markets**, there is a clear need to **ensure balance between policy and investment choices** that may offer potential decent work opportunities for rural women, given the renewed interest in investing in agriculture.

To support **gender-sensitive policy-making**, there is a continued need for **improved statistics and data collection and analysis**. Beyond the numbers of women and men participating or being represented, and beyond the income generated by women, a **more holistic understanding** of the impacts of policy choices over the long term on rural women and men must be prioritized.

⁸ Xiaoqiao Zou (2011). Trends in the Implementation of Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Expert paper prepared for Expert Group Meeting. EGM/RW/2011/EP.4.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me now to highlight the main recommendations adopted by the Expert Group Meeting:

Recommendations

The participants of the Expert Group Meeting recognize

- Rural women's and men's lives, livelihoods, are **multi-dimensional and dynamic**;
- Rural women as **agents of change**;
- Women as **leaders**, decision-makers, producers, workers, entrepreneurs, and service providers in national and local policies, alongside men;
- **Diversity of rural women**;
- **Full enjoyment of indigenous women and men to land**;
- Governments responsibility for **human rights of rural women and men**;
- **Violence against women** persists;
- **Multifaceted characteristics of rural economies**;
- **Inequalities and challenges** in accessing economic and social opportunities and services;
- **Economic marginalization** of rural women.

Therefore, a number of measures need attention:

New **rural development frameworks** need to take into account the **risks and opportunities** of rural women and men, and should respond to the **rights, aspirations and needs** of rural women and men.

National and international governance systems need to promote **inclusive economic growth strategies**. Effective **decentralization** can be an important strategy for rural women's economic empowerment. The **green economy**, can provide policy instruments to achieve **sustainable development and help mitigate climate change** for current and future generations.

The implementation of recommendations has to be in accordance with international conventions and human rights standards⁹.

The following **recommendations** are addressed to a range of different stakeholders including ministries of agriculture and natural resources (fisheries and forestry), agrarian reform, rural development, trade and finance, health, education, science and technology, labor, environment; national gender equality machineries; donor countries; multilateral agencies; funding agencies; research and academic institutions; employer organizations; trade unions; professional and trade associations; farmers' organizations; rural women's organizations; and the private sector.

The expert group recommends:

⁹ See full EGM report *ibid*. EGM report available at:
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/egm.htm>

1. Economic policies, growth and equality

1. Ensure that **economic policies fully prioritize decent work and employment generation**;
2. Facilitate an **institutional and policy environment that promotes decent work** for rural women;
3. **Increase investments in infrastructure**;
4. **Develop and implement policies and programmes that support women** in the agricultural sector;
5. **Promote rural and indigenous women’s knowledge, products and services**; and protect them;
6. Develop and implement **policies, programmes and incentives** to enable rural women’s active and **effective engagement in the global value chain**;
7. **Introduce tax systems and other fiscal and macro-economic measures that redistribute wealth** to poor segments of society, including rural women;
8. Develop and adopt **measures that offset the negative impact of global and regional trade agreements** on rural women’s production and livelihoods;
9. **Emphasize channels for development, testing, application and dissemination of frameworks and tools**;

2. Equal access to and control of land and other rural productive resources

10. Ensure that **national laws and policies guarantee women’s right to land**;
11. **Ensure that laws and policies on land are implemented and known** by the target communities and titleholders;
12. Support the development and implementation of **gender-sensitive land and property laws**, both statutory and customary;
13. **Promote changes in customary law** to ensure women access to land, on an equal basis with men;
14. Ensure that the option of **joint titles** is provided during land reform and records updates;
15. Take measures for the **consent of each spouse for the sale of land, or its use as collateral**;
16. Ensure that the **registration of land for collective use** is under the names of all female and male user-members of the community;
17. Institute and enforce policies that **limit the quantity of national land that foreign countries and corporations can buy**; Hold Governments accountable for “land grabbing”;
18. Take measures to **protect the rights** of rural women affected by land expropriation;
19. Ensure that **changes** in land administration or changes in land tenure systems **do not cause environmental damage, do not destroy the ecosystems**;
20. **Prepare resettlement plans** for internally displaced people, refugees and returnees;

21. **Enable small-holder farmers** and agricultural workers, in particular women, to become more productive, competitive and profitable;
22. Recognize and support **women as actors in climate change adaptation and mitigation**, disaster risk reduction and resilience strategies;
23. Develop **environmental service payment schemes** (e.g. carbon, water) taking into account rural women's rights and capacities;
24. Ensure that rural women and men have **access to productive resources and inputs**;
25. Take measures to **facilitate uptake of technology by rural women** by involving them in all stages of research, training, entrepreneurship and innovation;

3. Provision of and entitlement to services

26. Necessary space and infrastructure for rural **women's access to information, education and training**;
27. Create mechanisms that **empower rural producers' and women's organizations**;
28. Promote **South-South exchange** and use of knowledge, technologies, ICTs and internet;
29. Ensure that **access to essential services** for poor rural communities is **free from cost recovery and user fees**;
30. Increase rural **women's access to financial services**;
31. Support **community-managed financial services**;
32. Invest in **off-farm care services for children, elderly and persons with disabilities**;
33. Recognize and invest in **community health insurance**;

4. Leadership, decision-making and voice

34. Develop programmes to ensure **awareness of rural women** about their rights, policies and the national and local government roles and duty;
35. **Strengthen gender-responsive accountability mechanisms** to influence policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring at all levels;
36. **Quotas**, to promote rural women's participation in decision-making processes;
37. Enhance the economic **empowerment** of rural women;
38. **Gender units** established and/or strengthened at senior levels;
39. Free-of-charge access to **personal identification documents**;
40. **Develop the capacity** of rural women's, men's to be **more inclusive**;
41. Assist **informal rural women's groups** to affiliate with formal;
42. Promote **knowledge sharing**;
43. Support **regional level dialogues** among rural women farmers' organizations

5. Monitoring and evaluation

44. Ensure that **data collected at all levels is disaggregated** by sex, age, and other variables, and analyzed, published, and used for informed policy-making and planning and for the establishment of satellite accounts;
45. Promote the administration of **time-use surveys** and facilitate their use;
46. Ensure that the measurement of **economic growth includes the contribution of rural women and men in paid and unpaid work**;
47. Ensure that available **data and information is widely disseminated** and accessible;
48. **Develop the capacities of rural women and their organizations** in data and information management to advocate with their own governments at national and local levels and hold them accountable;
49. Provide **training in participatory methods** to scientists and policy-makers at different levels and in different disciplines;

6. Resources

50. Allocate **adequate financial resources in national budgets** for the economic empowerment of rural women;
51. Ensure **financial support for rural women's organizations**, including for awareness-raising on rural women's rights;

7. UN system

52. The UN system should comply with **gender equality and diversity commitments** within its own organizations in order to serve as role models for Governments and other organizations and to legitimize policy guidance on gender equality issues in their operations;
53. The UN system, in particular FAO, ILO, the UN Statistics Division, UNESCO, UN-Women and WHO, should **improve gender statistics and data disaggregated** by sex, age and other variables. In particular, they should:
 - a. establish **multi-disciplinary teams** in support of national statistical offices to support gender equality policy processes and economic empowerment of rural women;
 - b. promote **south-south exchanges**; and
 - c. strengthen **dialogues between users and producers** of data in different sectors (e.g. health, education, labor, agriculture and rural development).

8. Documentation

This report and all documentation relating to the meeting (see Annexes II and III) are available online at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/egm.htm>

9. Conclusion

Honorable Ministers, distinguished representatives of Member States, the hard work related to the improvement of rural women's conditions remains with you. In addition to issues raised in the report, evidence indicates that more needs to be done through an interactive dialogue and partnership between UN agencies and member states. Bringing back rural women into the international forum at the same time with agriculture is of tremendous importance. Agriculture is the engine of the economy and a source of livelihoods of the majority of people in developing countries.

The main challenges that need attention are **climate change, food security, food price crises**. They carry a number of opportunities such as an increased understanding of **good governance**, increased **accountability** for women, and understanding the **impact of the Arab Spring** on gender relationships. **Inclusiveness** is another aspect that requires attention given the heterogeneity of societies. Although relatively new, the **green economy** is worth considering into the gender agenda, with more understanding of the potential of **social capital**. Rural organizations need strengthening and there is a need to **unlock budgets and finance institutions in front of women**.

I therefore urge you to hold your respective governments to their obligation to consider these recommendations that would contribute to women's empowerment and make the contribution of rural women in the economy more inclusive, visible, sustainable, efficient, leading to equitable benefits for members of the nation, thus making positive impact to national and regional processes.

I appreciate this opportunity to have introduced the recommendations of the EGM on improving rural women's conditions. I encourage you to read the full EGM report and related documentation online at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/egm.htm>

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Thank you for your attention.