

7 March 2012

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-sixth session

27 February-9 March 2012

Agenda item 3 (a) (i)

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: priority theme: the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges

Key policy initiatives and capacity-building for gender mainstreaming: focus on economic empowerment of rural women

Moderator’s summary

1. On 28 February 2012, the Commission on the Status of Women convened an interactive expert panel on the theme “Key policy initiatives and capacity-building on gender mainstreaming: focus on economic empowerment of rural women”. This interactive panel was part of the Commission’s consideration of the priority theme “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”.

2. The discussion was moderated by Ms. Ana Marie Hernando, Vice-Chair of the Commission. The panellists were Ms. Malika Abdelali-Martini, a socio-economist and gender research specialist at the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, in the Syrian Arab Republic; Ms. Shahnaz Wazir Ali, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister of Pakistan; Ms. Anna Kaisa Karttunen, a rural development specialist in Finland; Ms. Jemimah Njuki, member of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and team leader for the poverty, gender and impact programme at the International Livestock Research Institute in Kenya; and Ms. Cheryl Morden, Director of the North American Liaison Office of the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The present summary synthesizes the key points discussed by panellists and participants.

3. Many commitments have been made for rural women's economic empowerment and the global policy framework provides a strong basis for action. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women outlines specific obligations for States parties to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas. Despite these commitments, Governments and many other stakeholders have been slow in responding effectively to the needs and priorities of rural women. An enabling policy environment for rural women's economic empowerment needs to be created as a matter of urgency, by placing their concerns in the mainstream economic agenda, in particular in the areas of agriculture, finance and national planning. Addressing the needs and concerns of rural women in all policies at all levels requires a dual-track strategy which includes a stronger focus on gender mainstreaming across the board, and targeted measures that respond to the diversity of rural women, in all parts of the world. It also requires a holistic approach that addresses all dimensions of empowerment, including economic, political and social empowerment.

4. In the last decade, rural areas have been transformed as a result of migration to urban centres. Financial and economic crises, volatile food prices, climate change, coastal erosion, landslides and hurricanes pose particular challenges for people living in rural areas. Comprehensive rural development policies that are integrated with sectoral policies are needed to address these challenges coherently and promote the sustainable development of rural areas.

5. It is now firmly recognized that gender equality and women's empowerment is a prerequisite for achieving all of the Millennium Development Goals. Rural women play a vital role at different levels of agricultural production and rural development, and are crucial in the translation of agricultural production into improvements in food and nutrition security. Yet they continue to have limited access to economic opportunities, resources, assets, public services, social protection, infrastructure, transport, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Women farmers are often at the bottom of the agricultural value chain and have limited access to markets, agricultural extension services and the most basic agricultural inputs, such as seeds and tools.

6. Economic empowerment of rural women is crucial for realizing and securing their rights. The *World Development Report 2012* of the World Bank recognized that gender equality is a core development objective in its own right, and that increasing gender equality is also smart economics. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that, if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 per cent. This would raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 per cent, reducing the number of malnourished people by 12 to 17 per cent. Focus, therefore, should be on enhancing rural women's agency, harnessing their power and unleashing their potential to boost local economies. An approach that casts rural women as agents of change is increasingly used by countries that are developing strategies to enhance their role in sustainable agricultural production, climate change mitigation and environmental protection.

7. Ensuring women's right to land is vital for rural women's economic empowerment. Gender inequality in access to land persists because of discriminatory inheritance laws, customary laws, and traditional norms and practices. Land reform processes, such as land-titling projects and resettlement

schemes, can help reduce inequalities in access to land if they are conceptualized and implemented in a gender-responsive manner. Land titling, for example, can help to secure women's rights when registration requires both spouses' names. Policies and legislative reforms concerning inheritance can also increase women's access to land. Priority should be given to raising women's awareness of their rights, enforcing legislation and increasing women's access to legal assistance.

8. Microcredit schemes with no collateral and low interest rates have been successful in increasing rural women's access to credit, as property often belongs to husbands or male family members. Some rural microcredit schemes aim at guaranteeing food security in rural areas, while others focus on encouraging small-scale entrepreneurship. Rural women, however, need access not only to microcredit, but also to savings and other financial services. Support should be provided to building systems and institutions that can deliver the range of financial services rural women need. Access to crop and health insurance is also important for rural women, particularly women small-holder farmers.

9. Having access to credit is not sufficient for rural women's economic empowerment; both formal and non-formal education are necessary foundations for rural women to overcome social barriers, utilize information and communications technologies, interact with the formal banking system, enhance their business skills and increase their productivity, claim their rights, and access resources. Rural women need training in financial literacy to be able to use credit in the most effective way, bolster their self-esteem, learn how markets operate and become familiar with price-setting and product distribution. They also benefit from knowledge about the benefits of savings for future investment.

10. Many countries have put in place programmes to further develop women's and girls' capacities, knowledge and skills related to financial management and savings as well as the use and management of new technologies, in particular information and communications technologies and renewable energy technologies. Interventions, such as distance learning programmes, have demonstrated the importance of taking into account the various constraints rural women face in accessing education. The use of so-called "boarding centres" in the Middle East and North Africa, for example, created secure spaces for bringing together for training purposes rural women with limited mobility.

11. Acknowledging the importance of transfer of technology to rural areas, stakeholders have taken initiatives to increase rural women's access to new technologies, including information and communications technologies, green technologies and alternative energy sources. Among these initiatives are education and training programmes to enhance rural women's and men's capacities, knowledge and skills in working with these technologies, and programmes to increase women's entry into traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering. Some programmes focused on strengthening rural women's role in sustainable resource management, through increasing their participation in the development, use and management of innovative products, organic agricultural production systems, community-based renewable energy sources and green technologies. Training of women in the cultivation of organic vegetables in one country resulted in increased yields, hence enhanced food security, raised household income and increased participation of women in household decision-making. The need to protect indigenous knowledge was emphasized.

12. Rural women's access to decent work and employment remains limited. Some initiatives, such as gender-sensitive rural employment guarantee schemes, successfully provided off-farm employment opportunities for rural women. There is a need to recognize and value the unpaid work of rural women, and to pay increased attention to alleviating the burden of unpaid work of rural women so that they can engage in remunerated work. The provision of services and investment in infrastructure has been instrumental in reducing this burden of unpaid work. The availability and quality of infrastructure and services can help rural women to reconcile work and family responsibilities, and increase their access to paid employment, markets to sell their products, information, agricultural inputs and supplies. More efforts are needed to provide rural women with access to basic services such as running water, sanitation, and electricity for their households and businesses, as well as with transportation, especially in remote areas. Access to sexual and reproductive health services in rural areas is fundamental for rural women's survival as well as their ability to control their fertility and take advantage of economic opportunities.

13. The need to improve the collection of data disaggregated by sex, age and rural/urban areas as well as gender-sensitive indicators was emphasized. Collection of data, however, is not sufficient. Analysis and use of data to better understand the root causes of discrimination and inequality is critical for gender-responsive policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in rural areas. The use of information and communications technologies can facilitate countries' efforts to collect and analyse sex-disaggregated data and create records. A set of standard indicators is urgently needed on issues such as asset ownership, land and housing in order to monitor and evaluate programmes and initiatives in rural areas. To this end, there is a need to increase the capacity of countries to collect and analyse data disaggregated by sex, age and rural/urban location.

14. The economic empowerment of rural women should be pursued in partnerships with stakeholders, including men and boys, women's organizations, grass-roots organizations, cooperatives and the private sector. Rural men and boys need to be sensitized for the elimination of discrimination against women and the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, in their families as well as in their communities. Above all, stakeholders need to engage in ongoing and systematic dialogue with rural women to better understand their needs and concerns.

15. An enabling environment needs to be created for rural women to organize themselves. In particular, women's participation and leadership in farmers' organizations should be strengthened. Linking rural women, including women farmers, to urban markets and rural cooperatives, and encouraging their participation in agricultural fairs, can help them to share knowledge and information, sell their products and expand their businesses. Better knowledge networks that include rural women should be created to increase the evidence base on rural women's economic empowerment through dialogue and sharing of insights, good practices, lessons and innovations, and to scale up innovative interventions.