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Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-sixth session

27 February-9 March 2012

Agenda items 3 (a) (i) and 3 (c)

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

Gender mainstreaming, situations and programmatic matters

The role of gender-responsive governance and institutions for the empowerment of rural women

Moderator’s summary

1. On 29 February 2012, the Commission on the Status of Women convened an interactive expert panel on the theme “The role of gender-responsive governance and institutions for the 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. Mr. Filippo Cinti, Vice-Chair of the Commission, moderated the discussion. The panellists were Ms. Bintou Nimaga, technical adviser on gender and women’s economic empowerment at the Ministry of Women’s and Children’s Affairs in Mali; Mr. Andrés Teodoro Wehrle Rivarola, Vice-Minister for Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock of Paraguay; Ms. Lilly Be’Soer, founder of Voice for Change, a non-governmental organization in Papua New Guinea; and Mr. Victor Lutenco, adviser in the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova.
3. Speakers confirmed that rural women have a critical role to play in shaping the response to development challenges, poverty, hunger and the recent global crises including the economic and financial crisis, volatile food prices, and climate

change. The empowerment of rural women has significant benefits, including for their families, local communities, and national economies. Yet rural women continue to face significant barriers to the full enjoyment of their human rights. In order to unleash rural women's potential, there is a need for an enabling policy environment through gender-responsive governance and institutions, with the goal of transforming unequal gender relations and changing public systems that deny women equal rights and opportunities.

4. Participants highlighted gender mainstreaming as an important strategy for ensuring that governance processes, policies, laws and service delivery are gender-responsive. A growing number of countries have mainstreamed a gender perspective into national policies that affect women in rural areas, such as poverty reduction strategies and national development plans. Some national gender equality policies include specific provisions targeting rural women. Gender units or gender focal points have been established in line ministries to support the implementation of the mainstreaming strategy.

5. At the same time, challenges remain in aligning sectoral policies with gender equality policies, and concerted efforts are needed to establish a comprehensive, coherent and multifaceted approach to empowering rural women. Discriminatory laws and policies need to be reviewed and revised. All sectoral development plans and policies, including international trade and macroeconomic policies, need to take into account more systematically the situation of rural women.

6. Advances in legal and policy frameworks have not always been followed by effective implementation. Participants highlighted the need to fully implement the international conventions and agreements that Governments have committed themselves to, as well as existing national laws, in particular those on women's access to land and inheritance. In addition, women need to have knowledge about existing laws and policies and the capacity to claim their rights.

7. Gender-responsive budgeting is an effective tool for delivering results for women in all sectoral areas, including the agricultural sector. To this end, Governments need to build and strengthen capacities in gender-responsive budgeting among government officials and service providers. Increased public resources should be devoted to the implementation of policies and programmes that respond to the needs of rural women. Institutions that support and advocate for rural women, in particular national machineries for gender equality, gender units and gender focal points within line ministries, also need to be adequately resourced.

8. Participants called for increased use of needs assessments in rural areas, including through consultations and dialogues with rural women and women's organizations, in order to support better policy development and implementation for the benefit of rural women. Surveys conducted in rural areas can help to clarify and lead to a better understanding of the multifaceted needs and challenges that rural women face, and should be used to inform policy formulation. As much of the work done by rural women is unpaid work, greater efforts are needed to reflect this contribution in systems of national accounts, given the essential role of such work in rural development and food security. Capacities of national statistical offices should be strengthened to collect sex-disaggregated data and to integrate a gender perspective into household surveys.

9. Accountability, as a core element of good governance, requires monitoring and evaluation of government performance in policymaking, implementation and service delivery, as well as corrective action or remedies in case of performance failure. In the context of a gender-responsive accountability framework, decisions of public authorities need to be assessed against the needs and interests of women and men. In many countries, national machineries for gender equality monitor and evaluate governmental action for gender equality. Examples also exist where line ministries monitor and evaluate the gender-responsiveness of their policies and programmes. Gender-sensitive indicators are sometimes used as a basis for such monitoring and evaluation, and gender impact assessments are another tool for ensuring accountability. Concerted efforts are still needed, however, to systematically evaluate progress made in empowering rural women, including consistent funding for monitoring mechanisms and activities.

10. Rural women in many parts of the world continue to face barriers in accessing essential services and infrastructure, including water and sanitation, social protection, financial services, education and health care, and to information and technologies. Participants highlighted a range of initiatives, including programmes that directly target rural women, for example through subsidies or conditional cash transfers.

11. Skills training and capacity-building in activities such as food preservation, processing, packaging and marketing have been implemented in a number of countries. Participants discussed efforts to transform existing service provision structures so that they are more gender-responsive and cater to the needs of the local population through direct consultations with the beneficiaries, and also to build the capacity of service providers so that they are better able to respond to the priorities and needs of rural women. One example, the “one window” model in the Republic of Moldova, which is similar to other one-stop service centres in other countries, offers a range of services, including land registration, extension services, labour inspection, entrepreneurship development, and employment services, at one physical location easily accessible to rural women and men. Family-friendly policies such as parental leave for women and men and expansion of childcare services in rural areas have created opportunities for rural women to seek and obtain paid work.

12. In addition to access to services, rural women’s access to and control over productive assets including land, finance and credit, tools and equipment is critical for their empowerment. Gender-sensitive land reforms and land titling programmes, special ombudspersons and land rights tribunals have contributed to rural women’s enhanced access to and ownership of land. Special funds and microcredit programmes that target rural women have helped to expand their access to credit and finance, enabling them to purchase necessary tools and equipment. Efforts have also been made to address cultural norms and discriminatory statutory and customary laws that continue to restrict or deny rural women access to productive assets.

13. Participation of women in national and local governments, public administration and service delivery contributes to ensuring the responsiveness of institutions to women’s rights, priorities and needs, and to increased gender-responsiveness of policies and programmes. However, rural women are frequently absent from decision-making positions, processes and institutions because of historical, social and institutional barriers, lack of access to informal networks, and

cultural norms and prejudices against women. Certain groups of women in rural areas, such as indigenous women, may face additional barriers in regard to participation in decision-making. Women remain underrepresented in mainstream farmers' organizations, cooperatives and other rural institutions, as members and in leadership positions, owing to a lack of training, cultural constraints and lack of knowledge about rights and opportunities. Concerted efforts and effective strategies are needed to boost rural women's participation and leadership in agricultural cooperatives and other rural associations and networks.

14. Measures have been taken to strengthen rural women's participation in public and policymaking processes, at the national and local levels. Quotas, benchmarks and other temporary special measures, especially when included in constitutions and other legal instruments, have led to significant increases in women's participation in politics and public life. Women's parliamentary caucuses or committees have discussed and highlighted rural women's issues, and have promoted women's participation and leadership in parliaments and local councils. More targeted efforts are needed to increase rural women's effective participation in agrarian reform and budget processes, at all levels of government, for example through participatory approaches and broad-based consultations with rural women.

15. Women's organizations and networks in rural areas play a key role in effecting change and transforming the lives of rural women. Their work ranges from addressing women's basic needs in emergency situations, conflict or natural disasters to ending violence against women, advancing women's economic empowerment, and promoting their political participation and leadership. Support is needed for these organizations to build their capacity, sustain and upscale their initiatives, secure adequate funding, and foster cooperation and collaboration among these organizations.

16. Cultural norms and attitudes, and patriarchal traditions can pose significant challenges to the empowerment of rural women. Effective strategies are needed to eliminate prevailing gender stereotypes and transform norms and traditions that discriminate against women. Gender-sensitive school curricula, the support of rural leaders and awareness-raising efforts have contributed to changing attitudes and societal support for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

17. Participants stressed the importance of forging partnerships among a broad range of stakeholders in efforts to promote the empowerment and rights of rural women. South-South cooperation is an important way for developing countries to share experiences and good practices in addressing common challenges in rural areas. Collaboration among Governments, United Nations entities, civil society, the private sector and academia needs to be stepped up to support the voices of rural women inside government and non-governmental institutions. Partnerships should be forged between women and men to promote rural women's rights and empowerment. Good practices and strategies need to be developed and shared in order to better mobilize men in efforts to empower rural women.