

Speech by MG Women May 15, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing Major Group WOMEN the opportunity to share our recommendations and thoughts with you today.

I would like to bring to this session some of the spirit and excitement generated at a side event organized by WOCAN last night to launch a new Network of Women Ministers of Agriculture. This was attended by over 50 women and men who came to listen to women ministers of 6 countries and women farmer representatives from Asia and Africa all of who spoke of their passion and commitment to increasing women's leadership and empowerment in relation to agriculture and natural resource management, and to their believes that having women in leadership positions makes a difference when it comes to reorienting agriculture and natural resource management sectors to address rural women's needs.

As said by our group before, the MG Women seeks recognition of the primary roles of women as farmers and environmental managers. Rather than being regarded as a vulnerable group, women – through their extensive knowledge, experience and substantial roles related to land use – are experts in agriculture and natural resource management. They are key agents – not vulnerable victims – in the way forward and as such, should be placed forefront and centre of a transformation of institutions (including those of the UN system) that generate policies, technologies, knowledge and programs so as to orient structures and processes to address women's needs as food producers and environmental managers through gender mainstreaming.

Women practice sustainable agriculture that incorporates practices of integrated pest management, soil conservation and minimal use of chemical fertilizers in many parts of the world. But to come up from subsistence levels, these women farmers need additional tools and knowledge, access to credit and markets and land rights that enable them to reduce their heavy workloads and generate sufficient profits from their labor. A new form of vocational and extension training that puts women farmers at the centre, that mobilizes massive numbers of gender sensitive male and female extension agents and makes use of innovations in modern communications technologies could transform women farmers' knowledge and access to agricultural services.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation measures similarly need to engage women as primary actors and as those most impacted by climate change. HIV/AIDs, malaria and other waterborne diseases also affect women and children heavily, affecting agriculture and rural development efforts as well as household livelihoods. The growing problem of suicide amongst male farmers has also had serious impacts on women and their abilities to manage farms .

But investments and political commitments to women are needed for this to happen. Women leaders at all levels – from farmer groups to professionals to ministers –are part of a vertical chain that is forming to build a mutually supportive, network of individuals and organizations that share a passion and commitment to this cause.

We urge and welcome all UN agencies and others represented here in this room to join us in this endeavor.