



## Oral statement to the 54th session of the Commission on the Status of Women

### International Alliance of Women

### Of Hunger, Climate Change and the Empowerment of Women

Surely a mother's most basic instinct must be to see that her children have enough to eat. Yet all around the world, including in many richer countries, millions of mothers wake up each day not knowing how they are going to feed their children. Malnutrition is the biggest indirect cause of death among under-5 children in developing countries and a major source of reduced life expectancy.

In most cultures, women play a vital role in ensuring food security. They are directly responsible for much of the hard manual work that goes into food production, often toiling for little reward and exposed to many forms of exploitation. They usually process and store food, market it, prepare it and cook it. And above all, they have the lead responsibility within the family for assuring that all can eat adequately. Often, they become the first victims within a family of food shortages. And so, for women throughout the world, progress towards the eradication of hunger and malnutrition is fundamental in the quest for equality. They have, therefore, a strong vested interest in seeing that governments live up to their commitments to end hunger and poverty.

Since 1996 there have been 3 Food Summits at which governments have repeatedly committed themselves to ending hunger, with the intermediate goal of halving the number of hungry people in the world by 2015. Many governments are also parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, through which they recognize "the equal right of men and women" to enjoy all human rights, including the right to adequate food. But many nations still have to translate these global commitments into direct action to end hunger in their own country - and so the numbers continue to rise rather than fall.

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So over a billion people face daily hunger and another 2 billion suffer from “hidden malnutrition”, due to vitamin and micronutrient shortages, because either they cannot afford to buy the extra food they need, or they are unable to produce it for themselves. Hundreds of millions of people are literally going hungry in a world of plenty.

Brazil and several other countries are showing that, through direct action, hunger and malnutrition levels can fall quickly and induce other important social and economic benefits. Part of the answer is to stimulate increased production by small-scale farmers, the majority of them are women, who themselves are short of food, giving them the means to increase their output to supply the expanding local food demand stimulated by expanded social protection programs. These now provide all the poorest families in the nation with a safety net in the form of a small monthly grant that makes the difference between chronic hunger and adequate nutrition. The reach of the school lunch program has also been broadened. As a result, the country’s Zero Hunger Program, launched in January 2003, now provides 12 million poor families with the means to eat well. And one of the key reasons for its success is that it relies, whenever possible, on women in the family to collect and manage the monthly allowances, knowing that they will instinctively spend these on seeing that their children eat well.

Social safety nets, like Brazil’s or a similar program in Ethiopia, enable poor families to break out of the hunger induced downward spiral of hunger, weakness, sickness, job loss, reduced income, asset shedding, destitution and premature death. They also protect families from the worst impact of shocks, including those induced by climate change. This is not only because their better physical condition adds to their resilience to stresses, but also because the existence of a functioning social protection program, enables a rapid scaling up of targeted assistance emergency disaster relief, when and where it is most needed.

Given the huge task ahead and the fact that only 5 years remain to reach the hunger “halving” goal, 2010 is a critical year. If the target is to be met, every country in the world should use this year to plan how to reach it (or help other do so), put the necessary institutions in place and mobilize the funding required.

Women’s organizations around the world should use this meeting of the Committee on the Status of Women and other events this year to urge the UN and the governments of their own countries to take the hunger crisis, climate change and the empowerment of women as a essential way into a democratic future.