



Commission on the Status of Women

27 February - 9 March 2012

Rural women
Empowerment
Poverty reduction
Rural development

The 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW56) brings together in New York government officials, rural women, representatives of the United Nations and civil society, the media and the private sector. They will meet at United Nations headquarters to review progress, share experiences and good practices, analyse gaps and challenges and agree on priority actions to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the achievement of gender equality.

The Commission will focus on the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

WHY IS THIS THEME IMPORTANT?

Rural women constitute one-fourth of the world's population. They are leaders, decision-makers, producers, workers, entrepreneurs and service providers. Their contributions are vital to the well-being of families and communities, and of local and national economies.

Yet rural women's rights, contributions and priorities have been largely overlooked. Rural women have also been hard hit by the economic and financial crisis, volatile food prices and export-driven agriculture. They need to be fully engaged in efforts to shape a response to these inter-connected crises and in decision-making at all levels.

Unleashing the potential of rural women will make a major contribution to ending poverty and hunger, and to accelerating the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and realizing sustainable development.

NOW IS THE TIME TO ACT

Rural women are key agents of change. Their leadership and participation are needed to shape responses to development challenges and recent crises.

Women are central to the development of rural areas: they account for a great proportion of the agricultural labour force, produce the majority of food grown, especially in subsistence farming, and perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas. It is critical that their contributions be recognized and that their voices be heard in decision-making processes at all levels of governments, and within rural organizations.

Participatory approaches, stakeholder consultations, and support for rural and women's organizations can help ensure that rural women's priorities are re-

flected in macroeconomic policies and rural development and agricultural programmes. Temporary special measures, such as quotas and benchmarks, can often quickly increase the number of rural women in national and local governance and help build capacity for their effective participation in relevant processes. A recent study covering 17 countries in Asia and the Pacific showed that the proportion of women among elected representatives in rural councils varied from 0.6 percent to 37 percent. The countries with the highest number of women in such councils tended to be the ones that had implemented affirmative action measures, such as quotas. However, the percentage of women elected as heads or chairs of these rural councils was consistently below 10 percent [1]. Bold measures are thus called for to ensure that rural women obtain leadership positions in rural governance institutions.

Rural women's economic empowerment is key. If rural women had equal access to productive resources, agricultural yields would rise and there would be 100 million to 150 million fewer hungry people.

Women have equal property ownership rights in 115 countries and equal inheritance rights in 93 countries. However, gender disparities in land holdings are discernible in all regions, showing important gaps in implementing these laws. Rural women also have restricted access to other productive resources, such as agricultural inputs, extension services, and technology, which in turn limits agricultural output. Only 5 percent of agricultural extension services are provided for women farmers. In rural sub-Saharan Africa, women hold less than 10 percent of the credit available to smallholder agriculture. These disadvantages have detrimental impacts not only on women themselves, but also on families and communities in rural areas.

Rural women face more difficulty than men in gaining access to public services, social protection, employment opportunities, and local and national markets and institutions, due to cultural norms, security con-

¹ UNDP, Former UNIFEM, CLGF and United Cities and Local Government Asia Pacific (UCLG)/ASPAC, Women's representation in local government in Asia-Pacific, Status Report 2010: Going beyond national targets in monitoring status for MDG 3 on women's political empowerment.

cerns and lack of identification documents. Recent UN Women research shows that the proportion of women without identification cards reaches as high as 80 percent in some villages in rural Egypt, which hampers their access to health, education, pensions, application for property title or deed, and other social services, in addition to their ability to vote.

Unpaid care work further limits rural women's ability to take advantage of on- and off-farm employment and new market opportunities in the agricultural sector. For instance, eight out of ten people without access to an improved drinking water source live in rural areas, and it is most often women and girls who are tasked with fetching water. Poor rural women can work as many as 16 to 18 hours per day, doing fieldwork as well as handling all their domestic responsibilities. The burden of women's and girls' unpaid care work must urgently be reduced by providing improved infrastructure, labour-saving technologies and care services in rural areas.

Effective strategic, policy and programmatic responses are called for to build the asset base of women small-holder farmers, improve their access to resources and services, expand their opportunities to diversify their production, increase their productivity, and facilitate their access to high-value product markets.

Financing for rural development, agriculture and climate change should prioritize rural women and girls.

The international community contributed USD 7.5 billion in official development assistance to rural development and the agricultural sector in 2008–2009. However, only 3 percent of the amount was allocated to programmes in which gender equality was a principal objective, and only 32 percent to those in which gender equality was a secondary objective.

Greater financial resources are needed for rural development, and such investment must respond to the situation and priorities of women and girls. Governments should prioritize infrastructure projects, such as roads and transportation to local markets, community-based water schemes, and renewable energy sources, and invest in rural women's initiatives that promote sustainable agriculture and biodiversity. It is crucial to ensure that rural women benefit equally from current

and future financing to support rural development, agriculture and climate change mitigation and adaptation.

There is also a need to ensure that government officials and service providers have the capacity to use available tools, including gender-responsive budgeting, for the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of gender-responsive rural development and agricultural policies and programmes, infrastructure development and service delivery.

Ad-hoc interventions are not enough — the broader policy environment must be responsive to the rights and needs of rural women and girls.

Insufficient attention has been given to the situation of rural women, and policy responses have tended to be sporadic and limited in scope. The empowerment of rural women demands comprehensive strategies that address the many obstacles they face. Policy makers must therefore adopt a systematic approach for the empowerment of rural women. They must also ensure that rural women's priorities are reflected in all international, national and local governance processes, including policy development, public administration, service delivery, financing and accountability mechanisms. Rural women and girls should be prioritized in rural development and agriculture policies and programmes, national development plans and poverty reduction strategies to achieve equal access for women to productive resources, essential services, employment opportunities, and labour-saving technologies. States must abolish laws and change policies that discriminate against rural women and girls, such as those that limit women's rights to land, property and inheritance, or that restrict their legal capacity.

Strong action and accountability is needed to advance the rights, opportunities and participation of rural women.

Global partnerships should be scaled up to deliver on international commitments for advancing rural women's livelihoods and rights. The 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women is an occasion to solidify consensus among governments and civil society on urgent actions needed to make a real difference in the lives of millions of rural women. The policy recommendations to be adopted by the Commission

need to be fully implemented at the national level. They should be carried forward into other key policy forums, such as the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

Commitment at the international level must be followed by comprehensive action on the ground, and effective accountability mechanisms must be put

into place — rural women and girls cannot wait and governments cannot fail them. Non-governmental and grass-roots women's organizations are critical in raising awareness among rural women and girls of their rights, and the responsibilities and obligations of national and local governments in respecting, protecting and promoting these rights.

GLOBAL DATA

- 70 percent of the developing world's 1.4 billion extremely poor are living in rural areas. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to nearly a third of these, while South Asia is now home to about half.
- In 2010, 925 million people were chronically hungry, of whom 60 percent were women.
- Agriculture provides a livelihood for 86 percent of rural women and men, and employment for about 1.3 billion smallholder farmers and landless workers, 43 percent of whom are women.
- An estimated two-thirds of the 400 million poor livestock keepers worldwide are women.
- The burden of unpaid care work is substantial. Globally there are: 884 million people without safe drinking water; 1.6 billion people without reliable sources of energy; 1 billion people who lack access to roads; 2.6 billion people without satisfactory sanitation facilities; and, 2.7 billion people who rely on open fires and traditional cooking stoves. Rural women carry most of the unpaid work burden due to lack of infrastructure and services.
- In rural areas of the developing world excluding China, 45 percent of women aged 20-24 were married or in union before the age of 18, compared to 22 percent of urban women.

For more analysis and policy recommendations on the empowerment of rural women, read the reports of the United Nations Secretary-General on the priority theme 'The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges' (E/CN.6/2012/3) and 'Empowerment of rural women: the role of gender-responsive governance and institutions' (E/CN.6/2012/4). These are available for download in the six official UN languages at: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/documentation.htm. Unless indicated otherwise, all examples and data used in this note are extracted from these reports.