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Enabling rural women's economic empowerment: institutions, opportunities and participation

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Trends in the Implementation of Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Introduction of the CEDAW Convention

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the General Assembly in 1979. On 3 September 1981, thirty days after the twentieth member nation had ratified it, the Convention entered into force.

The Convention has turned into the most powerful international treaty within the system of the United Nations to safeguard the human rights of women. It has been rapidly ratified by member states of the United Nations, and, as of today, there are 187 States parties to it, which is the second-highest number of ratifications.

The Convention moves beyond guarantees of equality and equal protection before the law in existing legal instruments and sets out measures for the achievement of equality between men and women, regardless of their marital status, religious belief, age, disability and national origin, in all aspects of political, economic, social, family and cultural life.

The Convention obliges State parties to eliminate both direct and indirect discrimination against women including women in rural areas through legal, policy and programmatic measures. The obligation applies to all spheres of life and requires State parties to take all

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise.

Article 14 on rural women

Article 14 of the CEDAW Convention is the only international treaty obligation that deals with the specific needs of rural women. It guarantees rural women the protection of their human rights under the entirety of the Convention's provisions thus reinforcing all other provisions for the benefit of rural women. Therefore, State parties are called upon to ensure that the Convention as a whole is applied to rural women, and to ensure that rural women are to have the same right to participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning, to have equal access with men to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and land resettlement schemes, to access adequate health-care facilities, including family planning, to benefit from social security programs, to obtain all types of training and education, and to be accorded equal rights with men to enjoy adequate living conditions, including housing, sanitation, electricity, water supply, transport and communications.

Given the fact that the majority of the world's women live in rural areas, their situation which is characterized by multiple forms of discrimination – such discrimination always based on sex or on other grounds – is systematically addressed by the Committee during the constructive dialogues with State parties. At 47th Session in October 2010, the Committee adopted the General Recommendation No.27 on older women and protection of their human rights in which the situation of disadvantaged group of women including older women living in rural areas is highlighted. General Recommendation No.28 on the core obligations of State parties under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women encourages State parties to address all aspects of their general obligations under the Convention to respect, protect, promote and fulfill women's rights to non-discrimination and to the enjoyment of equality with men..

Article 14 of the Convention is always read in conjunction with other articles, particularly articles 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 16 (on core obligation of State parties, temporary special measures, stereotypes, political life, education, employment, health, economic and social benefits, marriage and family life). Since 2008, the Committee has reviewed 91 reports of State parties and expressed or reiterated its concern over the precarious situation of rural women, including women heads of households, older women, indigenous women and women with disabilities. The Committee also regularly takes into account the Beijing Platform for Action and Millennium Development Goals when considering reports submitted by State parties to the Convention.

Good practices and initiatives

During the consideration of reports of State parties, the Committee recognized the efforts of respective governments to improve the situation of women in rural areas, particularly women's access to land, education, health care and information, and to eliminate specific forms of discrimination that affect them. The following are examples of proactive/affirmative measures taken by State parties to advance and empower women in rural areas and to improve respect for as well as to protect their human rights.

Ownership and inheritance of land is important for rural women's economic

empowerment, which also defines women's economic status in rural areas within and outside the household. The combined initial, second and third periodic report of **Botswana**, examined by the Committee in 2008, contained important information regarding rural women's participation in land development program. The report indicated that the primary objective of the Arable Land Development Program was to address the problem of access to draught power by small farmers by providing subsidies such as inputs and draught power. The program initially failed to reach women mainly due to the beneficiary contribution requirement. In 1991 the program was redesigned and the contribution for women was reduced from 15% to 10%. This has resulted in more women participating in the Arable Land Development Program.

While considering the fifth and sixth periodic report of **Zambia** in July this year, the Committee received information that the State party had revised its Lands Act Chapter 184 of the Laws and decided to reserve 30 per cent of titled land specifically for rural women. The Government was making progress in achieving the targeted 30 per cent allocation of land to women. In practice, a compulsory 30 per cent of new land grants were reserved for that purpose. In order to prevent abuse of that system, the panel interviewing potential recipients consisted of women, civil society members, elderly people and representatives of a diverse range of other groups.

Education and training for women is the key factor to empower women in rural and remote areas. The fourth periodic report of **Lithuania**, examined by the Committee in 2008, stated that to promote employment, vocational schools located in rural areas co-operated with local communities, offered non-formal education programs, and implemented labor market programs meeting the local needs, especially the needs of women in rural areas. Much focus was placed on the improvement of organization of vocational training. Efforts in this area included the development of a common quality assurance system for the primary and continued vocational training, the improvement of the curricula, and the inclusion of entrepreneurship subjects in the curricula. To develop new vocational training and study programs, 54 institutions have received support from the European Social Fund. The vocational training quality assessment procedure has been upgraded. To improve the match between vocational training and the needs on the labor market, vocational training standards are being developed and the demand for specialists in individual economic sectors is being investigated.

To enhance accessibility of pre-school and pre-primary education with a priority for rural areas, 86 pre-school and pre-primary education groups were established, with 46 of them in rural areas; and 85 positions of pre-school and pre-primary pedagogues were supported financially, with 37 of them in rural areas. Many women and girls in rural areas have benefited from these programs.

The Government of **Fiji** has also attached great importance to the training in rural areas. In its combined second, third and fourth periodic report, examined by the Committee in 2010, the Government indicated that the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs conducted the Rural Fijian Women Training Program aimed at assisting rural indigenous women's organizations to be better organized and focused with a clear direction on the type of development they wish to undertake. The initiative begun in 2006 and in 2007 the training covered 46 different locations within 14 provinces in Fiji. A total of 817 women were trained in 2007. Besides, 307 village training motivators were also trained and 49 follow-up visits were made to villages which had the training in 2006. As a result, women's organizations in villages were able to prepare

development plans with clear vision and mission statements and list of activities they were to undertake.

The right of women to control all aspects of their health is vital to their life and well-being and is also basic to their economic empowerment. In its combined fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh periodic report of **Uganda**, examined by the Committee in 2009, the government of Uganda indicated that a number of interventions were undertaken to enhance access to health services for rural women. These included establishment of health centers to enhance physical access, stocking government health facilities with core essential drugs all year round and an increase in the number of trained health workers. An offshoot of these interventions has been an increase in the percentage of people using health care facilities from 40%-45%. Of particular relevance to rural women was the improvement in the percentage of deliveries in health care centers from 25%–29%.

Policies, strategies and programs that address the needs of rural women are essential to foster the empowerment and advancement of women. The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh periodic report of **Panama**, examined by the Committee in 2010, described that the Ministry of Social Development, through the National Directorate of Women, oversees the Network of Governmental Mechanisms for Women, in which the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock's Rural Women Program plays an active part. Another initiative is called "With You Rural Woman", which grants micro-credits to women in rural and indigenous communities (with 355 women beneficiaries). The loans approved support livestock, agricultural, commercial, services, and manufacturing activities.

In addition, there are two large-scale social inclusion programs for people living in poverty or extreme poverty:

- The "Get Ahead for Panama" Literacy Campaign, a program benefiting both men and women, mainly those excluded from the formal education system; and
- The Opportunities Network Program, which seeks to strengthen poor families' capacities by guaranteeing health care and education services to improve their standard of living. The Program has led, among other achievements, to a 39% increase in visits to doctors/health centers, a 2% decline in the school dropout rate, and an 11.5% increase in pre-school enrolment. It has had a direct impact on the quality of life of rural and indigenous women.

At its 48th session in January this year, the Committee examined the combined sixth and seventh periodic report of **Bangladesh**. The report highlighted the Government's efforts to reduce poverty. "Steps Towards Change: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction-II (NSAPR-II)" was adopted in the light of the Millennium Development Goals, with a particular emphasis on reducing feminized poverty. NSAPR-II stressed the need for reducing feminized poverty by providing support for Small and Medium Enterprise initiative of women through resource mobilization; providing credit facilities to women on easy terms; establishing market linkages for women to market women's products through cooperatives; and organizing skill training to facilitate employment opportunities.

The Combined fourth and fifth periodic report of **Nepal**, examined by the Committee in July 2011, indicated that the Government formulated the Women Development Program to specially focus on rural women. This Program now has coverage of 54,350 women's groups which include more than 340,000 women members. 752 women cooperatives have been registered and 442 are in a process to be registered. Women's co-operatives and groups are mobilizing more than Rs. 483 million out of their savings.

The Government of **Nepal** also highlighted the advancement and economic empowerment of rural women as one of its major concerns. To cater to the credit needs of rural women, five Rural Development Banks have been established in five development regions since the early 1990s. Up to 2005, a total of Nrs. 12.5 billion had been lent to nearly 146,000 women borrowers. Four other rural development banks in the private sector also mobilize credit to rural women borrowers.

Challenges and areas of concerns

While welcoming the efforts made by State parties in promoting women's rights in rural areas, the Committee remains concerned about the conditions of rural women's suffering in various countries. In many countries, the situation of women living in rural or farming areas continues to deteriorate because of lack of development, migration to towns, the ageing of the population and the limited access to education and training, health care including reproductive health services, employment, land ownership, and community decision-making processes. Women themselves are often unaware of the rights they have under the law, and they may not be empowered to claim them effectively. Besides, customs, attitudes, beliefs and traditions, rooted in various social and cultural histories and practices, still persist. Rural women are often among the poorest and most vulnerable and are also not recognized for their contribution to food production, and thus, to the family and community economy in general.

In many cases, implementation of Article 14 seems limited, to a large extent, by general economic factors—including scarce state resources, low economic development—that make it almost impossible for State parties concerned to provide basic health, education and sanitary services; expand electrical networks and access to water, transport and communications; or build roads and irrigation infrastructure. In other cases, there are no specific measures adopted by State parties in implementing each of the provisions of Article 14 due to lack of political will to bring about gender equality or lack technical support from outside. In several cases, although governments grant priority to the conditions of rural women, they lack special policies, programs or measures to improve women's status in rural areas. Even if there are strategic plans or programs, they have no adequate gender perspective and the implementation usually lags behind.

In addition, the Committee also notices that disasters triggered by natural hazards such as flood, drought, tropical storms and earthquakes are on the rise, which poses serious challenges for the world, particularly for the developing countries, to fully implement the CEDAW Convention and achieve Millennium Development Goals, especially food security and poverty reduction. Women in rural areas are affected most by these complex issues.

The following are the main concerns expressed by the Committee regarding Article 14.

- Lack of comprehensive/systematic strategies and plans for poverty reduction or lack of a gender perspective in various development projects or programs
- Unequal allocation of both human and financial resources between urban and rural areas and between men and women
- Under-representation of rural women in decision-making processes, and their rights and needs are often neglected

- Violation of the human rights of women and girls, especially those in disadvantaged groups, and adversely affecting their equality and advancement due to the prevalence of harmful traditional practices and the persistence of customs and traditions
- Lack of access to justice, health care, ownership of land, inheritance, education, credit facilities and community services
- Movement of migration of young people including young women from rural to urban areas that impacts gender roles in many rural communities where older women are more likely to take on the added responsibility
- Feminization of poverty and poor conditions of rural women including older women, women with disabilities, women-headed households, women affected by HIV/AIDS and indigenous women
- Lack of sufficient information and statistical data, particularly sex-disaggregated data on situation of rural women

Conclusion and recommendations

In the last decade, state governments, the international community and other stakeholders including NGOs, have made great efforts to promote rural women's economic empowerment and eradicate the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women, especially women in rural and remote areas. This has been fully reflected in the concluding observations of the CEDAW Committee and in a number of resolutions and agreed conclusions on the situation of rural women adopted by the General Assembly and the Commission on the Status of Women, which highlighted the importance of improving rural women's conditions and opportunities, and sound gender-sensitive agricultural policies and strategies.

In almost all countries, particularly in developing countries, women make crucial contributions in agricultural production and rural enterprises. But nearly everywhere these women face more severe constraints than men in accessing resources, opportunities and public services. The "gender gap" in rural areas is widening to a certain extent. Therefore, closing the "gender gap" is essential to the advancement of rural women and will be conducive to reducing poverty and to the sustainable economic development.

To improve the situation of rural women and empower rural women economically, it is essential to pursue the implementation of the CEDAW Convention, the Beijing Platform for Action as well as to devote increased attention to fully attaining the Millennium Development Goals that engage governments' commitment to gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment.

It is also important to acknowledge that the work and recommendations of the CEDAW Committee and of other human rights treaty bodies, of the Human Rights Council and of UN specialized organizations and agencies, are particularly useful and relevant and should be better utilized for pushing further the agenda of protecting and promoting human rights of rural women and women in disadvantaged groups. Monitoring progress in the implementation of these recommendations should be a priority to improve their situation and promote gender equality.

Enabling rural women's economic empowerment requires a strong political will and commitment and concrete measures to be taken nationally and locally, first and foremost by the governments which hold primary responsibility for the advancement of women's status and promotion and protection of their human rights. Governments should work in partnership with other main stakeholders, local and regional authorities, non-governmental organizations, including women's organizations, companies, employers' organizations and international communities.

Specific recommendations/actions:

- **Governments shall**

a. fully recognize the importance of the CEDAW Convention as part of a comprehensive international human rights legal framework directed at ensuring the enjoyment by all of all human rights and at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women on the basis of sex and gender, and adopt gender-sensitive policies and measures, including temporary special measures, in line with Article 4, paragraph 1 of the Convention and general recommendations No. 23 (1997) and No. 25 (2004) of the Committee, to ensure that rural women participate fully and effectively in the political, social, economic, cultural and civil life, and any other fields in their societies.

b. ensure that every provision of Article 14 of the Convention is implemented, and pay special attention to the needs of rural women and make sure that women in rural areas participate in decision-making processes, including community decision-making processes and development planning and have equal access to land and other basic services and infrastructure, as well as economic opportunities, including income-generating projects and credit facilities, training and markets, on an equal basis with men.

c. strengthen initiatives aimed at encouraging and supporting women's economic empowerment including women's entrepreneurship and establish mechanisms to monitor regularly the impact of social and economic development on women in rural areas.

d. collect data, including sex-disaggregated data and measurable indicators, to assess the trends of the situation of rural women in all areas of education, health and employment, and give special attention to the collection of data with respect to the most vulnerable groups of women, such as older women, women with disabilities and indigenous women.

- **United Nations, donor countries and other stakeholders shall**

e. provide technical/financial assistance to those countries that are in need of such assistance in the development and implementation of a comprehensive program aimed at implementing CEDAW Convention, particularly Article 14, the general recommendations and concluding observations of the Committee. UN Women shall take the lead in this regard.

f. encourage and support women's entrepreneurship, especially among rural women,

including by providing training and access to micro credit, and support to carry out targeted activities for rural women in gaining access to financial institutions in establishing business and other sustainable means of livelihood.

g. work with governments, where appropriate, to conduct various training and advocacy programs on the awareness raising among government officials at all levels and of women, especially women in rural areas, of the Convention and other related domestic legislation, so as to enhance women's awareness of their rights and the means to enforce them through, *inter alia*, legal literacy programs and create sound environment for women in development.