

**Panel discussion to mark the first observance of  
the International Day of Rural Women**

**United Nations Headquarters, New York  
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**Introductory remarks by the Moderator, Carolyn Hannan  
Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

Distinguished delegates,  
Distinguished panellists,  
Colleagues and friends,

I welcome you to this panel organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women, together with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), to commemorate the first observance of the International Day of Rural Women. We have an excellent panel to help us take this important opportunity to recognize the critical role of women in rural development. The Secretary-General has prepared a message for the first observation of the International Day which pays tribute to the valuable contributions of rural women, including indigenous women, to agriculture and development. Copies of this message are available in the room.

Following the General Assembly resolution 62/136 of 18 December 2007, the International Day for Rural Women is to be commemorated annually on 15 October, the day before World Food Day. This year the World Food Day will focus on “*World Food Security: The challenges of climate change and bioenergy.*” As the Secretary-General noted in his message, this first International Day of Rural Women is especially timely as it comes in the midst of a world food crisis and global financial turmoil. The presenters in the panel today will focus on these issues, among others.

Before giving the floor to our first speaker let me say a few words of introduction. I would like to briefly highlight the history of this International Day. During the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, women’s non-governmental organizations called for an official commemoration of the role of rural women in development. Since then, World Rural Women’s Day has been observed by a number of NGOs on 15 October. The day before the World Food Day was chosen to highlight the critical role of rural women in food production and food security. Women’s NGOs around the world are delighted that the United Nations decided to establish the International Day of Rural Women.

Many organizations around the world are commemorating this new International Day of Rural Women. Two of these organizations – The Associated Country Women of the World and the Women’s World Summit Foundation have conveyed their appreciation for the establishment of the International Day of Rural Women by the General Assembly and their best wishes for the first observance in the United Nations through this panel discussion. The Associated Country Women of the World wrote: “We trust that the founding of an International Day of Rural Women will raise the profile of rural women and enhance awareness of their crucial role in keeping rural areas alive. On behalf of our member societies

worldwide, who are also celebrating International Day of Rural Women, I wish you a successful and valuable meeting”.

Since its establishment more than 60 years ago, the Division for the Advancement of Women has worked on the issue of rural women. In recent years, the primary attention to rural women has been on a biennial basis in the context of the General Assembly, under the agenda item in the Third Committee and through the consideration of women in development in the Second Committee. The Commission on the Status of Women also includes attention to rural women in relation to the priority themes under consideration. Ambassador Belle, the Chairperson of the Commission, will provide more information on the role of the Commission.

Rural women play a critical role in the rural economies of both developed and developing countries. In most parts of the developing world they participate in crop production and livestock care, provide food, water and fuel for their families, and engage in off-farm activities to diversify their families' livelihoods. In addition, they carry out vital functions in caring for children, older persons and the sick.

To understand the situation of rural women, it is necessary to examine the full diversity of their experiences in the context of the changing rural economy, including their position within household and community structures; the gender division of labour; their access to and control over resources; and their participation in decision-making.

The many changes underway in rural areas have a direct impact on women's lives, in both positive and negative ways. Economic changes can intensify gender biases - for example land privatization programmes can undermine women's traditional land use rights. On the other hand, women's increased access to paid employment and independent cash income in some areas can positively affect intra-household dynamics and the perception of women's roles in society. Many women, particularly younger women, have found that independent sources of income give them the confidence to question traditional views of rural women's roles both in the household and in society, and to challenge gender biases in access to resources.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, and in some countries the effects of conflict and its aftermath, has increased the responsibilities of women in rural areas for productive and care work. Currently climate change and food insecurity are creating new challenges for rural development, with direct impact on the lives of women in rural areas.

Despite recognition of their critical roles in international frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Millennium Declaration, rural women continue to face serious challenges in effectively carrying out their multiple roles within their families and communities. Their rights and priorities are often insufficiently addressed by national development strategies and gender equality policies.

In many countries, gender-based stereotypes and discrimination continue to deny women equitable access to and control over land and other productive resources, opportunities for employment and income-generating activities, access to education and health care, and opportunities for participation in public life. Given women's critical roles, addressing gender inequalities can significantly increase the efficiency of resource use and

enhance rural development outcomes. Effectively addressing emerging issues such as climate change and the food crisis require the full involvement of rural women.

To commemorate the first observation of the International Day of Rural Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women is launching a publication in its Women 2000 and Beyond Series – entitled “*Rural women in a changing world: Opportunities and challenges.*” This publication focuses specifically on the situation of rural women in developing countries in the context of changes in the rural economy.

The publication aims to stimulate increased recognition of women’s contributions to the social, economic and political development of rural areas. It recommends strategies for supporting their contributions. Changes in social structures through, for example women’s increased participation in the labour market and the increased numbers of female-headed households in some areas, are highlighted, as well as changes in patterns of mobility, including through migration, and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The publication raises critical issues for improving the situation of rural women - improving their *capabilities* through health and education; increasing their access to and control over *opportunities and resources*, including land, water and sanitation, financial services, extension programmes, technologies and ICT; enhancing their *agency and leadership*; and ensuring their *rights and security*, focusing on violence against women and the context of armed conflict.

It is our hope that this publication will contribute to increasing the focus on the role of rural women, in particular in the context of climate change and the food and energy crises, and lead to accelerated efforts and increased investment to improve the situation of rural women and support their critical contributions to rural development.

I thank our excellent panelists for agreeing to participate in the panel, and all participants who have joined us to commemorate this important day and express solidarity with rural women. The presentations and discussions will enhance our understanding of the situation of rural women and of ways to address the challenges they face.

The message of the Secretary-General provides an important call to action in relation to investment in rural women - “I urge all countries to seize the opportunity we will have next month at the Conference on Financing for Development in Doha to put the needs of rural women at the top of the global agenda. By making women active partners in addressing the world’s pressing food crisis, we can do much more than solve the immediate problem; we can pave the way for a more secure global future. On this Day, let us commit to that mission.”

Thank you.