Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you here at this joint event to commemorate the International Women’s Day 2012.

By coincidence; the first International Women's Day was celebrated on March 19, 1911 in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland. Substantial progress has been made in advancing status of women in social, economic and political spheres over the last 100 years. However, there are still a lot to accomplish ahead of us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of this year’s celebration, “Empower Rural Women-Eradicate Hunger and Poverty”, could not have come at a more opportune time than now when food security and rural development is on the top of development agenda.

Rural women are active agents of economic and social development. They play crucial roles ensuring food and nutrition security, eradicating rural poverty and improving the well-being of their families, yet continue to face serious challenges as follows;

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Women make up over two-thirds of the world’s 800 million illiterate, and many of them live in rural areas. In some countries, far fewer rural women can read and write than rural men. For example, in Cambodia 48 percent of rural women are illiterate compared to 14 percent of rural men. In Pakistan, a half-kilometer increase in the distance to school decreases girls' enrolment by 20 percent. Yet, literacy and education can be powerful tools for empowering rural women and fighting poverty and hunger.

Technical and vocational training, workplace training and training in basic literacy are needed to address the various challenges rural women face when they pursue income generating activities.

UNIDO assists its Member States to improve the entrepreneurial/technical skills of rural women by supporting the development of gender responsive policies and strengthening
service providers operating in skills training, entrepreneurship and technology promotion, and information dissemination in rural communities.

Women face gender disparities in access to and control over land.

For rural people, land is perhaps the most important asset to support production and provide for food, nutrition and income security. Yet women represent fewer than 5 percent of all agricultural land holders in North Africa and West Asia, while across Sub-Saharan Africa, women average 15 percent of agricultural land holders. Lack of land ownership in turn is a major constraint in accessing financial services, particularly credits and loans where assets are needed as collateral.

Rural women spend an enormous amount of time and energy accessing water and fuel wood for domestic and agricultural use. In rural areas of Guinea, for example, women spend more than twice as much time fetching wood and water, while in Malawi they spend over eight times more than men on the same tasks.

**UNIDO** supports its Member States to strengthen institutional capacities and legal frameworks to guarantee women’s full legal rights to own property and to inherit as a critical issue for the economic empowerment of rural women. UNIDO provides advice on integrating gender considerations in industrial policies, assists implementation of programmes that improve rural women’s access to clean energy sources, and helps women entrepreneurs and producers.

**Finally, let me say a few words on UNIDO’s own policies:** UNIDO’s policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women ensures that our industrial development projects, programs and policy advice is gender responsive and UNIDO commits itself to achieve the goal of gender balance in our Organization.

I take this occasion to inform that UNIDO has recently strengthened its capabilities to monitor and report on its work on gender equality and the empowerment of women to our member states and to the public at large.

As I conclude, please allow me to reiterate that UNIDO looks forward to our continued close collaboration with member states, sister UN agencies and development partners. I thank colleagues and the organizing committee for their efforts in hosting international women’s day.

**Happy Women’s Day... Thank you**