



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 December 2022

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-seventh session

6–17 March 2023

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Associated Country Women of the World, Association of Families and Women in Rural Areas, Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore, Commonwealth Medical Trust, Graduate Women International (GWI), Institute for International Women's Rights - Manitoba Inc., International Alliance of Women, International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience, association sans but lucratif, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Make Mothers Matter, Mothers' Union, National Alliance of Women's Organizations, Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, Red Dot Foundation, Rozaria Memorial Trust, Solar Cookers International, Soroptimist International, Soroptimist International Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI) Limited, Training for Women Network, Wales Assembly of Women, Widows Rights International, Widows for Peace through Democracy, Women for Water Partnership, and Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Associated Country Women of the World and its 9 million rural women members welcome the Commission on the Status of Women's priority theme of: Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. We recognise that technological innovation and solutions are critical for achieving global food security and increased empowerment. However, there continue to be fundamental gaps which prevent those responsible for global food production from accessing these innovations. In the five years since the empowerment of rural women was the priority theme, we have seen gaps between urban and rural communities grow, women in these communities suffer ever-worsening impacts of climate change, and the devastating reality of vaccine inequality has deepened the lines between developed and developing, have and have-not.

Compounded by COVID-19, food insecurity has long been identified as a critical threat to rural communities, exacerbated by escalating climate and environmental crisis, interrupted supply chains, conflict, fuel crisis, and international escalation in living costs. In 2020, 2.37 billion people did not have access to adequate food. This is an increase of almost 20 per cent in one year, mainly affecting rural women and girls – and the figures in 2022 are likely to be significantly worse.

Rural women play essential roles in global food systems, from raising crops and processing harvests, to distribution and food preparation, nourishing their families and their communities – as well as the wider world. Despite our reliance on rural women, they continue to have less access to food, higher levels of hunger and malnutrition. Discriminatory gender norms and power imbalances often position women as last to eat, and with least. Responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work also rests with women, driving further disparity.

Whilst food, nutrition, climate change, and clean water are not the only issues of concern for rural women, accessing technology and the space, inspiration, and means to innovate are only meaningful if these concerns are addressed and stabilised. We recognise that Indigenous women are the custodians of traditional knowledge and are vital for achieving food security and safeguarding our land and water. Inclusion of Indigenous communities in programmes to improve access to technology is crucial, and this must be done with full participation of community leaders.

COVID-19 has illustrated the need for genuine equality and empowerment of all women and girls in all their diversity. Vaccine inequality continues to be one of the greatest barriers to establishing a safe, healthy future for all – itself is threatened by the drastic, unparalleled, and disproportionate impact of climate change and associated environmental disaster on rural women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and Sustainable Development Goals have all called for action and change, we cannot wait any longer.

We support the Secretary-General's conclusion in the key proposals from Our Common Agenda, in that all States Parties must place women and girls at the centre of their agendas. We agree that "climate change will be an added stressor that will aggravate women's vulnerability" and agree that the damage to homes, livelihoods, and communities caused by climate change mean that women and girls – already left furthest behind – face reducing opportunities to achieve their potential. The barrier standing in the way of progress is governments who choose to ignore the reality of life for women and girls, those same women and girls upon whose labour the success of the nation depends.

In almost every country, women are subject to intersecting forms of discrimination, violence, and disproportionate poverty. The increase in domestic and gender-based violence during the pandemic shows just how volatile life is for women around the world. As well as bearing the responsibility of a vast majority of the world's unpaid care work, women are less secure in their employment, less likely to advance or be paid the same as the men around them, and more likely to be attacked in their homes. Widowhood and any status relating to marriage or men keeps women from full participation and legal protection, and is often a grounds for discrimination and gender-based violence. Food and water insecurity are combined with unstable living conditions in nations. These inequalities are well recognised and condemned in developing and less-developed states, but also dominate the lives of women in so-called developed nations too, where stigma and taboo keep women from reporting and being believed.

Rural women in low-income countries account for around 49 per cent of the agricultural labour force, and around 41 per cent in more developed nations. It is in the interests of every government to invest in empowerment of rural women, and ensure a human rights framework that provides a basis for education, health, and economic prosperity.

Rural women account for 25 per cent of the world's population but are often ignored and dismissed by international agreements, processes, and governments who implement them. We welcome inclusion of text that highlights the need for geographic location to be considered when assessing women's human rights, and draw attention to the reality that those women in communities furthest from administrative centres are often also those furthest from participation in decision-making, particularly in conflicts, post-conflict areas, and all too frequently in humanitarian emergencies. Special attention must be paid to ensure the inclusion of rural women and those forgotten by all but those who would target them for violence.

Recommendations

Continue development of capacities for disaggregated data collection, interpretation and analysis, including new qualitative indicators.

Challenge stereotypes, promote sharing of domestic care work, make provision for paid maternity leave and publicly funded childcare.

Recognise and support Indigenous women as custodians of traditional knowledge in natural resource management, climate change mitigation, and community resilience. This must include participation in green and blue economy development planning, and legal protections, including adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Urgently make safe water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities universally available, particularly in rural areas. International support to facilitate local action to achieve this in an environmentally sustainable way. Incentivise environmentally friendly behaviour, introduce effective penalties for ecologically harmful practices that threaten our collective future.

Engage in social dialogue at local, national, and regional levels, ensuring greater representation of rural women; including supporting rural workers' collectives and cooperatives involvement at all levels of decision-making.

Encourage national and local institutions to adopt gender-responsive strategies, including addressing gender-balance in staffing, suitable training for staff, addressing existing imbalances in policy, law, or reality.

Strengthen laws that protect women working in informal sectors. All International Labour Organisation member states should ratify Convention 190 as part of gender equality efforts.

Recognise widows in international texts and documents, ensuring protection in line with other recognised groups, and promote full participation in decision-making at all levels.

Accelerate and scale implementation of innovative clean cooking solutions, such as solar cooking, which improve human health, economic well-being, women's empowerment, and the environment, particularly for vulnerable populations worldwide.

Adopt UN Women's Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice, and strengthen partnership between civil society and governments towards supporting small-scale women farmers and preservation of biodiversity.

Associated Country Women of the World

Association of Families and Women in Rural Areas

Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore

Commonwealth Medical Trust

Graduate Women International (GWI)

Institute for International Women's Rights - Manitoba Inc.

International Alliance of Women

International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience,
association sans but lucratif,

International Federation of Business and Professional Women

Make Mothers Matter

Mothers' Union

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform

Red Dot Foundation

Rozaria Memorial Trust

Solar Cookers International

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