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RURAL WOMEN IN A CHANGING WORLD: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

INTRODUCTION

“WE ALSO RESOLVE TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AS EFFECTIVE WAYS TO COMBAT POVERTY, HUNGER AND DISEASE AND TO STIMULATE DEVELOPMENT THAT IS TRULY SUSTAINABLE.” —MILLENNIUM DECLARATION, 2000¹

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 reproductive 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. Rural women are not a homogeneous group; there are important differences among women in rural areas based on class, age, marital status, ethnic background, race and religion.

In many countries, gender-based stereotypes and discrimination deny rural 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.

Rural development is affected by the ongoing processes of globalization: the commercialization of agriculture, the liberalization of international trade and markets for food and other agricultural products, the increase of labour migration, and the privatization of resources and services. These transformations do not occur in a vacuum but interact with other complex processes at different levels, including domestic economic policies, local livelihood strategies and sociocultural structures and practices.

The changes associated with globalization, diversification of rural livelihoods, increased labour mobility, climate change and food insecurity, as well as other global trends, have brought both gains and challenges for women. Although there are common trends, there are also major differences according to regions, countries and even within countries, as well as diversity among women based on class, ethnicity, religion, age and other factors.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, and in some countries the effects of conflict and its aftermath, have increased the

responsibilities of women in rural areas for productive and care work. Climate change and food insecurity are creating new challenges for women in rural areas.

The changes under way 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.

LINKING RURAL WOMEN TO THE GLOBAL MARKET

Transformation in rural areas is linking rural women more closely to the global market. People buy flowers in New York packaged by women workers in Ecuador. A consumer in Sweden buys cheap clothing produced by rural women workers who have migrated to towns and cities in search of work in Asia. A Jamaican domestic worker now living in Canada sends home money to her family living in the rural areas. A South African woman worker picks fruit destined for a European supermarket. A woman farmer in Uganda moves from producing food on her own small plot to farming crops under contract to an exporter. A Moroccan seamstress sews clothing that will soon be on a shelf in a Spanish department store. A woman in a village in Bangladesh makes money by selling the services of her cellphone, and a woman in a village in Jordan is able to find the best market for her handicrafts through the Internet. The extent to which rural women can effectively utilize these market opportunities is dependent on their access to and control over productive resources, assets and services, as well as their roles in decision-making processes.

Despite attention to rural women 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 Development Goals, which recognize their contributions, 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. Effectively addressing emerging issues, such as climate change and the food crisis, requires their full involvement.

It is important to monitor the changes in the rural economy from a gender equality perspective. As the World Bank has pointed out, the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women is “smart economics”.² Given the critical role of women in rural areas, addressing gender inequalities can increase the efficiency of resource use and enhance rural development outcomes.³ Issues such as land and property rights, access to services and resources, food security,

employment and income and participation in decision-making need to be taken into consideration.

An important step for increasing the visibility of the role and contribution of rural women was the establishment by the General Assembly of the International Day for Rural Women, to be commemorated on 15 October every year, beginning in 2008.⁴

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 contribute to greater recognition of women’s contributions to the social, economic and political development of rural areas and recommends strategies for supporting their contributions. It highlights changes in social structures and patterns of mobility that directly affect their situation. It raises critical issues for improving the situation of rural women in terms of strengthening their capabilities, increasing their access to and control over opportunities and resources, enhancing their agency and leadership, and ensuring their rights and security.

ATTENTION TO RURAL WOMEN IN THE UNITED NATIONS

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PROCESSES

Ensuring gender equality—that both women and men can equally enjoy all human rights and participate in and benefit from all development processes—is a key concern for the United Nations.⁵ Over the past decades, United Nations conferences and summits have addressed the situation of rural women. The *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995) emphasized the need for the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes that improve the situation of women producers in rural areas, increase their incomes and provide household food security.⁶ The outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century” emphasized the need for women’s equal access to productive resources, such as land, capital, credit and technology, gainful employment, and decision-making, as well as access to education and health services. It drew attention to the large number of rural women working in the informal economy with low levels of income, little job and social security, and few land or inheritance rights, or none at all. It highlighted

microcredit and other financial instruments as successful strategies for economic empowerment of women living in poverty, in particular in rural areas.⁷

In the context of the *10-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action* carried out in 2005,⁸ the Governments of more than 90 Member States provided information on the situation of women in rural areas. Crucial issues raised included the overrepresentation of rural women among the poor, the need to expand education programmes to rural women and girls and to improve their access to microcredit, and the difficulties faced by rural women when trying to gain access to health care, including primary and preventive health care. Several countries noted that the shift from food production to cash crops had a negative impact on the lives of many small and marginal farmers, mostly women, and threatened household food security. More efforts had to be undertaken to strengthen women’s participation in decision-making processes and to ensure their involvement in rural development policies. Specific mention was also made of the multiple forms of discrimination faced by rural indigenous women.

In the *Millennium Declaration*, adopted in September 2000,⁹ Governments committed to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were subsequently developed, provide a subset of goals, targets and indicators from the global conferences and summits of the 1990s, including the goal to halve poverty by 2015.¹⁰ The MDGs are particularly relevant for reducing poverty among rural women in developing countries. MDG 3 is specifically focused on the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women, with targets on education, health and political participation. Women in rural areas can be actors in and beneficiaries of the achievement of other goals, such as MDG 1, on reducing poverty and hunger; MDG 2, which aims for universal primary education; and MDGs 4 and 5, which focus on children's and maternal health. MDG 7, on environmental sustainability, is also critical for rural women as users and custodians of natural resources.

At the 2005 *World Summit*, world leaders reaffirmed that "food security and rural and agricultural development must be adequately and urgently addressed in the context of national development and response strategies ... [and that] rural and agricultural development should be an integral part of national and international development policies". They also reaffirmed that gender equality and the promotion and protection of the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all are essential to advance development, peace and security. World leaders stated that "progress for women is progress for all". Heads of State and Government made a commitment to promote gender equality and eliminate pervasive gender discrimination. They highlighted issues that particularly affect women living in rural areas, such as guaranteeing the right of women to own and inherit property, ensuring secure tenure of property and housing by women, and ensuring equal access for women to productive assets and resources, including land, credit and technology.¹¹

In 1992, the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* and its *Agenda 21*¹² recognized the critical role of women in environmental management and development and called for the active involvement of women in economic and political decision-making as a condition for the effective implementation of its programme. Agenda 21 addressed the role of women in national ecosystem management and control of environment degradation and called for measures to ensure women's access to property rights and credit as well as agricultural inputs. The

urgency of the situation of women and children living in rural areas was recognized, especially those suffering from drought, desertification and deforestation, armed hostilities, natural disasters, toxic waste and the aftermath of the use of unsuitable agrochemical products. Ten years later, the *Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development* noted that "enhancing the role of women at all levels and in all aspects of rural development, agriculture, nutrition and food security is imperative".¹³

The *Monterrey Consensus*, from the International Conference on Financing for Development in 2002, called upon Governments to establish gender-sensitive investments in basic economic and social infrastructure that are fully inclusive of the rural sector and that ensure sustainable development. The Consensus also recognized the importance of microfinance and microcredit schemes, including for women in rural areas.¹⁴

During the past 20 years, the Third Committee of the General Assembly has systematically addressed the situation of rural women.¹⁵ In its recent resolution in 2007,¹⁶ the General Assembly urged Governments and the United Nations system to create an enabling environment for improving the situation of rural women, and to ensure systematic attention to their needs, priorities and contributions. Governments should create an enabling environment so that rural women fully participate in the development, implementation and monitoring of macroeconomic policies and programmes and poverty reduction strategies, based on the Millennium Development Goals, as well as in policies and activities related to emergencies, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

The *Commission on Sustainable Development* has also recognized the importance of paying attention to gender equality concerns in order to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development. In recent sessions,¹⁷ the Commission highlighted the need to involve all stakeholders, particularly women and youth, in the planning and management of land and water resources as well as in sanitation systems. Particular attention should be paid to women's equal rights and access to basic services and land tenure and to the provision of education and vocational training to improve their access to decent jobs. The Commission recognized that the energy demands of poor and rural women and children should be an integral part of energy planning and energy projects. The Commission also noted that mainstreaming gender issues into energy decision-making processes was of high priority, including by increasing capacity-building, technical training and enterprise development

for women, involving women in national energy policies and programmes, and investing in energy infrastructure that addresses the concerns of women.

The *United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues* recognizes that indigenous women continue to face multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, race and ethnicity. At different sessions,¹⁸ the Permanent Forum has called for improved access for indigenous women to health care and education and to employment opportunities, and for the protection and promotion of their human rights. The Forum also recognized the Millennium Development Goals as a strategic framework to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women, including for indigenous women, and called on States to ensure that indigenous women's expertise was reflected in all national and international development strategies in consultation with indigenous women and their communities and organizations. It also stressed the need for the participation of indigenous women in governance and decision-making structures at all levels and called for capacity-building and training of indigenous women in leadership skills.

The Third Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2004¹⁹ was focused specifically on the situation of indigenous women. The Forum noted that indigenous women, who numbered more than 150 million throughout the world, often remained invisible because of marginalization and discrimination. They face similar challenges across regions, such as social dislocation due to political conflicts and migration; poverty and underdevelopment due to environmental degradation and lack of access to such public resources as adequate health care and education; and marginalization due to their cultural difference and minority status within States. The deterioration of the natural environment and subsistence-based food security due to economic globalization has contributed to the outmigration of indigenous women to urban centres, where they are no longer under the protection of traditional law and become particularly vulnerable to forced labour, trafficking and prostitution. The Forum issued policy recommendations at international, national and community levels, which called for the increased participation of indigenous women in decision-making and governance; the ending of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, class and culture; and efforts to address issues in education, physical and mental health, and economic life, as well as in the area of violence against indigenous women.

HUMAN RIGHTS TREATIES

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* is the only human rights instrument that specifically addresses the situation of rural women. Article 14 calls on States parties to eliminate discrimination against rural women and to ensure that all provisions of the Convention are applied to rural women.

ARTICLE 14 OF THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

(1) States parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the Convention to women in rural areas.

(2) States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:

- (a) To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels;
- (b) To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning;
- (c) To benefit directly from social security programmes;
- (d) To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency;
- (e) To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self employment;
- (f) To participate in all community activities;
- (g) To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes;
- (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.

The *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* monitors compliance of States parties with the provisions of the Convention, considers reports in a constructive dialogue with the States parties and, in its concluding observations, proposes recommendations for further steps to be taken to ensure full implementation of the Convention. The Committee also issues general recommendations offering clear guidance on the application of the Convention. In its general recommendation 21 on equality in marriage and family relations, the Committee addressed equality in property rights and noted that discriminatory property and inheritance rights contravene the Convention and need to be abolished. These are critical issues for rural women and their access to productive resources. In its concluding observations, the Committee noted that although a significant population of women lives in rural areas, especially in developing countries, national policies rarely take their important roles into consideration.

The Committee has consistently called on States parties to develop policies, strategies and programmes in priority areas for rural women and allocate necessary budgetary resources; to recognize rural women's contributions to the economy; and to ensure their access to credit, capital, employment, marketing opportunities and productive resources. It has stressed, in particular, the need for rural women's full access to land and property, including through ownership, co-sharing, inheritance and succession. The Committee has noted that the participation of rural women in local and national public decision-making is a means of empowerment and of enhancing access to productive resources. The Committee has focused on the low levels of education and training of rural women, including the particularly high percentage of illiterate rural women, especially in developing countries.

The Committee has also highlighted issues that are rarely raised in other forums, such as the impact of harmful local customs and practices that perpetuate discrimination, including societal and domestic violence. In this context, the Committee has pointed to the situation of older rural women who suffer aggravated marginalization and isolation, which expose them to greater risks of violence.

Two other international conventions address issues of importance to the situation of women in rural areas. At its sixty-first session, the General Assembly adopted the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*,²⁰ which defines the rights of persons with disabilities and sets out a plan of implementation. The Convention specifically calls on States parties to ensure the equal rights

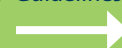
and advancement of women and girls with disabilities (article 6) and makes several references to the rights of people living in rural areas (articles 9 and 26). The right to the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination on the basis of disability includes access for persons with disabilities to gender-sensitive health services close to people's own communities, including in rural areas (article 25). The adoption of the Convention provides a new opportunity for systematically monitoring the situation of women with disabilities in rural areas and for developing policies and programmes to ensure that rural women with disabilities enjoy human rights on an equal basis with others.

The *United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification* is another instrument of importance to rural women. It is the only multilateral agreement on the environment that addresses gender equality issues through its explicit recognition that women need to participate fully in all action to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.

THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN'S RIGHT TO FOOD IN INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

The human right to adequate food is of crucial importance for the enjoyment of all rights. This right is recognized in several instruments under international law. After the right was formally recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) established binding legal obligations for States parties to respect, protect and fulfil the right, including for women. While the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) does not explicitly mention this right, several other Convention articles, such as articles 2, 3, 4 and 5, are integral to ensuring to women, on a basis of equality with men, the right to adequate food. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights emphasizes the importance of equal access to food or resources for food. Towards this end, national strategies to ensure food and nutrition security for all should give particular attention to the need to prevent discrimination, particularly against women (general comment 12, 1999).

The World Food Summits in 1996 and 2002 reinforced the commitment to realizing women's right to food. Most recently, the Voluntary Guidelines





on the Progressive Implementation of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Council in November 2004 provide important guidance for action from a gender perspective.

UNITED NATIONS ENTITIES

A number of United Nations entities focus specifically on the situation of rural women in their work programmes. The *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*, for example, established the Socio-economic and Gender Analysis Programme in 1993 to promote gender awareness and provide gender-sensitive methodologies and studies in the areas of agriculture, forestry and fisheries practices and nutrition. FAO has also developed a Gender and Development Plan of Action (2002-2007).

From its beginning, the *International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)* sought to ensure that women ben-

efited from its resources. This concern was incorporated in its *General Conditions for Agricultural Development Financing*. Since the early 1990s, gender equality concerns have been central to the IFAD poverty reduction strategy. The IFAD strategic framework 2007-2010 reiterates the need to take into account differences in gender roles and responsibilities, based on the understanding that addressing inequalities and strengthening the capacity of rural women have a major impact on poverty reduction and on household food security.²¹

The *United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)*, in collaboration with the *United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)*, organized an Expert Group Meeting on the situation of rural women within the context of globalization, hosted by the Government of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, from 4 to 8 June 2001. The meeting examined the impact of major global trends on the situation of rural women in developing and transitional economies and proposed recommendations for a research and policy agenda to maximize the beneficial effects of globalization for rural women.²²

THE CHANGING RURAL ECONOMY AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN

Liberalization policies have promoted the elimination of trade and market barriers and the reduction of government-financed price supports for basic agricultural commodities. They have led, in some cases, to large-scale farming and the prioritization of commercial cash and export crops over food crops for household and local consumption. In many areas, as subsistence agriculture is giving way to commercialized agriculture, both small and large farmers produce for the market and, increasingly, for export. With commercialization, the market plays an increasingly important role, linking rural communities (producers and consumers) to the wider economy. More inputs—such as fertilizers, seeds and farming equipment—are purchased, and much of the output is commercially marketed.

The changes in agricultural production have been accompanied by related changes in the organization of production in both agriculture and industry. These include the intensification of large-scale plantation farming, the outsourcing of production as part of the development of global commodity chains, the creation of rural industries and the establishment of export processing

zones. Another important trend is the growing involvement of large agro-businesses in developing country agriculture. These developments stimulate diversification and the further integration of rural areas into international markets.

Non-traditional agricultural export commodities and high-value foods are increasingly important in some developing regions compared with traditional exports, such as coffee, tea, sugar and cocoa. African examples of such diversification include horticultural products and cut flowers in Kenya and Zimbabwe, tobacco in Mozambique, and vanilla cultivation in Uganda. In Asia, aquaculture, such as shrimp farming, has become important, while in Latin America fruit and flower production has increased in many areas.

As aquaculture has expanded since the mid-1980s in parts of Asia, for example, large tracts of coastal land and mangrove forests have been taken over for shrimp farms that export to Europe and the United States of America. While poor and landless families may gain from waged labour on shrimp farms, the land available for local food production has been reduced, soil salinity has

decreased food crop yields and the availability of fish for low-income consumers has declined as a result of competition from aquaculture.²³

Livelihood diversification is a significant aspect of the changing rural economy. Diversification can take various forms, including: farm-based income via the production of non-traditional exports through own-farm work or wage employment in agribusiness; non-farm income via micro-industry and trading enterprises in rural areas; and wage labour, either in rural industries or via labour migration by family members to work in urban industry and export processing zones.

The landscape of rural areas in the Philippines has, for example, changed as rice paddies were converted to industrial estates and export processing zones. The dismantling of subsidies for farm inputs prompted farming households to desert increasingly unprofitable farming occupations by selling their land or becoming different kinds of farmers. These changes sometimes had very different and unequal impacts on women and men.²⁴ The following box provides some specific examples of the ways in which livelihoods have increasingly diversified in the Philippines and illustrates the impacts on rural women.

IMPACT OF LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION IN THE PHILIPPINES ON RURAL WOMEN

Large landowners: Women landowners, or women from landowning families who sold their farms to developers, acquired large sums of money which they invested in small businesses, such as convenience stores or basket weaving, or used to buy another farm. Some women “invested” in daughters and sons by underwriting the cost of their migration for overseas employment.

Small farmers: Land conversion occurred as farmers moved from unprofitable traditional crops to



weeders and harvesters were redundant in the new activities. Women were forced to look for different means of livelihood and their options were often limited. They could not engage in microenterprises unless they had capital or access to credit, and they could not work in the new factories unless they had the necessary education or training. Many moved to towns or cities and found work as domestic servants, sweatshop labourers, laundresses, or hawkers of various goods. Younger women were sometimes trafficked as commercial sex workers.

Subcontracting: The operation of industries has led to subcontracting out parts of the production process from high-wage cities to lower-wage rural areas. The move of production activities to rural areas in the Philippines has created jobs for rural women. Despite the exploitative nature of much of the subcontracting system, women have flocked to these jobs as they lost their traditional farming livelihoods.

Exportation of labour: Many rural women have left to work as maids or nannies or to seek other forms of employment in the Middle East and the West. The remittances from these overseas workers have provided rural families the capital to buy farm inputs or make farm improvements. They have also given older women the capital to go into small businesses. In many cases, transfer payments have financed the education of children or younger siblings. The material affluence that is associated with overseas employment has, however, sometime blinded people to the hazards of many of the jobs held by women.

Source: J. Illo (2001), “Earning a living: globalization, gender and rural livelihoods”, paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on the situation of rural women within the context of globalization, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 4-8 June 2001, organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) in collaboration with the United Nations

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