

General Statement of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Rural Women

Adopted on 19 October 2011 during the 50th session

The situation of Rural Women has been in the forefront of the UN agenda for many years, including in the General Assembly (GA), Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and in various UN agencies. It is also linked to the effective and full implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

In light of the upcoming 56th session of the CSW with the priority theme ‘The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges’, the CEDAW (the “Committee”) takes the opportunity to make a General Statement on Rural Women.

Normative framework

The Committee is mandated, *inter alia*, to specifically address the rights, needs and concerns of rural women. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the ‘Convention’) states that 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 present Convention to women in rural areas. 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.

In its General Recommendation No. 16 on unpaid women workers in rural and urban family enterprises, the Committee recommends that States parties take the necessary steps to guarantee payment, social security and social benefits for women who work without such benefits in enterprises owned by a family member.

The Committee’s General Recommendation No. 19 on violence against women states that rural women are at risk of gender-based violence due to traditional attitudes regarding the subordinate role of women that persist in many rural communities. Girls from rural communities are at special risk of violence and sexual exploitation when they leave the rural community to seek employment in towns.

Empowerment

The Committee stresses that despite efforts undertaken to encourage the overall empowerment of rural women, there are still many issues that need to be addressed as women, and in particular rural women, face discrimination in all spheres of life.

Education and literacy

Two-thirds of the roughly one billion illiterates in the world are women and girls. Worldwide, girls from rural areas are particularly disadvantaged, with the lowest levels of literacy and education. Available figures show that only 5 percent of services such as education programs, trainings etc. have been addressed to rural women. Notably, literacy programs for girls and women are not easily accessible to more remote rural communities. Distance to schools, fear of sexual assault en route to school or at school, and early pregnancy, together with often heavy household responsibilities, discourage or prevent girls' education opportunities.

Health

Rural women are particularly disadvantaged with respect to their access to health care services. Maternal mortality continues to be strikingly high in rural areas – 640 deaths per 100,000 live-births compared with 447 in urban areas. In every region of the world, the presence of skilled birth attendants and medical personnel is lower in rural than in urban areas. Obstetric fistula, a condition that often develops during obstructed labor, is more prevalent among rural women as results from malnutrition, pregnancy at a young age, and difficult working conditions. In addition, access to overall health care of the girl child, who is usually neglected due to prevailing patriarchal attitudes in many traditional rural settings, which give preference to boys, is often very poor.

Access to resources and opportunities

Rural women have less access to resources, training and skill development opportunities due to illiteracy, prevalence of negative stereotypes and their overall socio-economic status. This limits their effective participation in the community. As a consequence, in some regions, they are further suffering from discrimination in relation to their right to land ownership and transfer of property. Reduction of rural poverty depends on improving access of women to decent work and income generating opportunities, particularly through ensuring their access to productive assets including land, credit, technology and developing their skills and human capital. Reducing hunger and malnutrition depends on real and equal access to and control over productive resources for both men and women in rural areas. Investing in women farmers and closing the gender gap in agricultural productivity would reduce the number of under-nourished people by 12 to 17 per cent. That translates into 100 to 150 million fewer people living in hunger. Despite the recognized role of women in combating food insecurity and poverty, and the importance of women's access to sustainable energy, water, sanitation, education, nutrition and health to the overall development of a country, necessary funding has not matched policy commitments. Of the \$18.4 billion spent on agricultural aid between 2002 and 2008, donors reported that just 5.6 per cent included a gender focus.

In some countries, only 10 percent of credit allowances are extended to women, especially rural women, mainly because national legislation and customary law do not allow them to share land ownership/property rights along with their husbands or male members of their families, or

because female heads of household are excluded from land entitlement schemes and consequently cannot provide the collateral required by lending institutions.

Rural women also have very limited employment opportunities, in general; and when they seek off-farm employment, they tend to be engaged in less skilled and less financially rewarding jobs. Microfinance credits to rural women and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises for women's self-employment also need to be promoted.

Agriculture, Hunger and Poverty

Rural women are key partners in economic and social development. According to comparable data, women comprise an average of 43 percent of the agricultural labor force of developing countries. In fact, in many countries they are the backbone of local and national food security and a critical force in reducing poverty, malnutrition and hunger, and in promoting development. Yet, when it comes to investments and policies, women's contribution to food security and agricultural production is often unpaid, largely invisible, frequently ignored and generally under-supported. Rural women's needs for agricultural technologies, labor-saving agricultural equipment and modern means of communication have to be addressed as well as the valuing and counting of their non-monetized contribution to the economic survival of family and national development.

Agriculture is inextricably linked to poverty eradication, especially in developing countries. The main challenges to agricultural productivity include negative impacts of climate change, natural disasters and man-made disasters, e.g. internal conflicts which disproportionately affect rural women. In addition, the lease and sale of large tracts of land to other States or to large private companies, as well as the patenting of seeds, tend to reduce the chances that women will be able to provide adequate food to themselves and their families. Rural women have a central role in combating these negative effects and must therefore be involved in all relevant programs aimed at addressing these challenges including in the preservation of natural environment and preserving the quality of food.

Conflict Situations

Rural women often bear the major burden in armed conflict and post-conflict situations. In addition to violations of basic human rights such as right to life, safety and freedom of movement, armed conflict violates rural women's rights to productivity, livelihood, access to food and healthcare. In addition, they face forced displacement, sexual violence and loss of family members and children. Despite some attention given to women in conflict, the situation of rural women in times of armed conflict and post-conflict is often ignored.

Violence, Trafficking, Sexual Exploitation and Forced Labor

Violence against women, trafficking in women and sexual exploitation and forced labor are often linked to poverty and lack of opportunities in rural areas. Such root causes of violence and trafficking should be addressed through targeted legislative and policy measures. Rural women, both in conflict and post-conflict situations are affected disproportionately. The special situation of these women needs focused attention.

Participatory Development

The Committee recognizes the importance of rural women's participation as critical agents of development such as agricultural producers, entrepreneurs, managers of natural resources. It also emphasizes the crucial role that rural women play with respect to enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating poverty. The Committee also underscores the right of rural women and women organizations to participate in decision-making processes which impact on their lives including through representation in parliaments and bodies of local governance and within the authorities entrusted with negotiating and implementing sales and leasing of national land to foreign States and/or private companies.

Recommendations

The Committee calls upon all Member States and the United Nations, its programmes, funds and agencies to contribute towards the achievement of gender equality in rural areas and stresses the importance and the need for coordinated action on a broad scale in partnership with civil society, as appropriate, to increase rural women's overall empowerment and their contributions to agricultural productivity and eradication of poverty and hunger in particular by:

- incorporating gender-sensitive perspectives when designing and implementing rural development strategies, policies and programs, and including the objective of "gender-equality" as an overarching goal of such strategies, policies and programs, and adopting and implementing temporary special measures in favor of rural women;
- renouncing policies that might limit the ability of rural women to provide for adequate food for themselves, their families and communities, such as purchasing seeds with genetic use restriction technology patents, which produce sterile plants so that farmers must buy seeds each planting season instead of using seeds produced by the plants themselves;
- involving rural women in all aspects of planning, implementation and evaluation of all policies and programs impacting on their lives;
- enhancing representation of rural women in parliaments and executive bodies, as well as in bodies of national and local governance, including in authorities responsible for planning, negotiating, selling or leasing national land;
- ensuring rural women's equal access to basic social services such as housing, education, healthcare services, including maternal, sexual and reproductive health care services, child care facilities and means of transportation;
- providing social safety networks to help rural women in developing countries face the impact of economic restructuring and food price volatility;
- promoting full employment and decent work for rural women, including income generating activities;
- reducing rural women's labor time and work effort with infrastructure and technological innovation;
- ensuring rural women's equal, easy and affordable access to productive resources, energy, water, land use and ownership and property, environmentally-sound technologies, financing and micro-credits, extension and agri-business services, vocational and non-vocational training programs and markets;
- integrally incorporating women's concerns and participation in the planning, implementation and monitoring of all development and environmental management programmes to ensure

women's involvement which is necessary for their benefit as well as for the achievement of sustainable development;

- adopting systematic measures to increase awareness of rural women about the scope of their rights and to undertake general awareness raising campaigns in educating the society about the roles, rights and status of rural women including through government programs, the media, civil society initiatives as well as through traditional leaders in order to combat traditions, stereotypes, customary laws and practices that discriminate against rural women;
- ensuring rural women's access to justice and the supporting institutional mechanisms necessary to fulfill their rights, so that rural women can realize their full potential in every respect; and
- developing strategies to address the special needs of older women as well as disabled women and the indigenous women living in rural areas who often suffer a severe lack of basic resources for subsistence, income security, access to health care, information on and enjoyment of their entitlements and rights.
