



Enabling poor rural people  
to overcome poverty

Fifty-sixth session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,  
General discussion on rural women

Statement on behalf of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD),  
delivered by Maria Hartl, Policy and Technical Advisory Division

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Madam Chairperson,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to address the 56th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on behalf of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) at this general discussion, which marks the start of the process to elaborate a "General Recommendation on rural women."

As this is the first opportunity for IFAD to address this Committee, please allow me to begin by offering to you, Madam Chairperson, and to all members of the Committee IFAD's appreciation for your work, your commitment and your efforts to monitor the progress made worldwide on women's human rights.

IFAD, an international financial institution and United Nations agency, can look back at 35 years of exclusive focus on rural and agricultural development, which are central to eliminating hunger, eradicating poverty and managing the world's natural resources in a sustainable way. This focus cuts across all Millennium Development Goals and should form a foundation of the post-2015 agenda.

Today, agriculture is on the brink of a new era. With the world population expected to pass 9 billion by 2050, the demand for food will only rise. And there are also new demands emerging for the environmental and other services that agriculture can provide.

The face of rural poverty is changing. Today the majority of the poor people in the world live in countries categorized as middle-income countries. Inequalities in rural areas are felt not only in terms of lower incomes, but also in relation to reduced access to services and a need to increase the focus on social protection programmes and on labour productivity. Many low income countries are also classified as fragile and conflict-affected States. Climate change is another threat looming on the horizon for some, but sadly already a reality for others.

In addition, the demographics of rural poverty are changing, with young people representing 25 per cent or more of the rural population, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many are leaving rural areas in search for better opportunities. Agriculture has become feminized in many places, with older women the last ones left behind to take care of farms and grandchildren.

Rural women need to play an important role in this new era but still face many obstacles. Rural women need infrastructure and services, to get to markets and to hospitals, to reach banks, or skilled health providers when giving birth. Rural women need land and water, to irrigate their fields, process agricultural products, prepare food and care for their family. Rural women need credit and other financial services such as insurance to enable their businesses grow. Rural women need knowledge and skills, literacy courses, vocational training and opportunities for continuous learning, and much more.

In its gender policy, IFAD set three Strategic Objectives. First, promote economic empowerment of rural women. Second, enable women to have an equal voice to men in rural institutions and organizations; and third, reduce their workload. These three objectives – resources, voice and drudgery reduction – encapsulate the status of rural women and the discrimination many still face despite the dramatic changes and developments since the CEDAW Convention was adopted in 1979.

This general discussion of the CEDAW Committee on rural women cannot be limited to Article 14 of the Convention. Many articles come into play when looking at the empowerment of rural women in the 21st century, including Articles 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 16.

We welcome the decision of the Committee to prepare a "General Recommendation on rural women" which should focus on actions to be taken by State Parties to the Convention. At the core of the Recommendation should be a request to introduce legal frameworks, national and local policies, and to allocate adequate budgets to implement them.

For IFAD, the Convention is the guiding principle for our work. In the operations we support, we advocate for equal participation of women, equal access to land and rural finance. We also work with women and men to prevent and eliminate harmful traditional practices affecting the health of women and children that are often more engrained in rural areas. We might not be directly involved in the work of the Committee, yet the preparation of periodic reports by State Parties is an important exercise that we support. We also support the efforts of the International Land Coalition to use the Convention for promoting women's access to land and prepare "shadow reports" on this topic.

For IFAD, the process of drafting the General Recommendation can also be an opportunity to reflect upon collaboration with the Committee and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and "how to bring CEDAW home" to rural women.

Thank you.