

Written Contribution on Rural Women's Right to Livelihoods, Employment and Social Protection

Submitted by SAFA (South Asian Feminist Alliance for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)

**To the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
On its General Discussion on Rural Women**

56th Session, 7 October 2013

South Asia Feminist Alliance for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (SAFA)¹ welcomes and congratulates the CEDAW Committee's decision to draft a General Recommendation on Rural Women. SAFA especially welcomes CEDAW Committee's concern throughout the *Concept Note for the General Recommendation on Article 14 of CEDAW* regarding rural women's poverty, their role in agriculture, and other economic activities including productive and reproductive roles within families and communities, and need for rural infrastructure. We also appreciate the mention of rural women's sustainable livelihoods, their access and control of productive resources including land, essential goods and services, credit etc. and their needs for comprehensive social security. SAFA, through this written contribution aims to further provide information about the realities and challenges faced by rural women to realize their economic, social and cultural rights. We request the Committee to explicitly recognize these rights as central to the overall wellbeing of rural women belonging to all diversity with special provisions for dalit rural women. We hope that the Committee will consider the following issues and recommendations during its General Discussion.

Rural Women are the Poorest:

We draw the Committee's attention to the poverty amongst rural population in South Asia, especially of rural women. Poverty amongst rural women is the highest. Women in our region are food insecure, lack basic healthcare, access to education, employment opportunities, have no ownership and control over productive resources for livelihoods and have little or no access to social security. Women from social and economically marginalized groups in South Asia, continue to face multiple discrimination on grounds of caste, race, class, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, language, literacy, disability, marital status and age.

Recommendation:

- CEDAW Committee should demand states to address structural causes of poverty of rural women.

¹ SAFA, a coalition of feminists from South Asian countries that are actively pursuing the realization of women's human rights in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. SAFA recognizes that the concerns of South Asian women have failed to be adequately represented in national, regional and international economic growth policies and development agendas. Furthermore, it acknowledges that mainstream development as well as the feminist discourse have not integrated the living realities of South Asian women. SAFA reclaims the space for dialogue on the South Asian perspective by South Asian women themselves. It provides a much needed platform for sharing of information and resources to foster creation of knowledge, tools and learning to further a regional discussion on the advancement of a collective discourse and agenda, especially in the context of economic, social and cultural rights. SAFA is an effort not only to understand and respond to the crises of the area but to articulate a new vision which is embedded in well established and vibrant feminist traditions, knowledge and practices.

- States should recognise rural women as individual right holders and not just a member of a household or a dependent on male breadwinner. Entitlements to rural women should be received as an individual.
- States should demonstrate how their fiscal policies are pro-rural women. For instance, States can provide subsidies to employers that provide maternal benefits.
- Women should be engaged in decision-making processes at all levels that impact their lives. For marginalized people and for women in particular to build resilience, their collectivization needs to be strengthened such that ownership of resources also enables them to build social relations that challenge discriminations and denials. Their representation and leadership in decision making processes is imperative to enable them to demand and assert change towards gender equality. Towards this, substantial investments and support needs to be made for supporting rural women's organizing and organizations.

Rural Women and Livelihoods:

It is important to note the devastating impacts on rural women's lives and livelihoods in South Asia as a result of:

- the changing global economic situation;
- globalization, privatization, commercialization, militarization, fundamentalism, and religious extremism;
- conflicts and disasters, both manmade and natural;
- deeply entrenched feudal and patriarchal norms, values and practices.
- climatic unpredictability and other environmental destruction.

Dispossession of and change of use in resources have negative impacts on women's livelihoods. From a women's perspective land is a critical means to begin to assert autonomy over other realms of her lives. Hence land must be viewed as a basic and natural right across gender, class and caste categories for people of all denominations. Rural women's livelihoods are substantially dependent on their access, control, ownership, management and investments in land, forests and water bodies. Land reforms have not been substantially carried out in South Asia, resulting in land inequalities. This situation is further aggravated for rural women, who own a miniscule 9% of land in South Asia, while figures for their control over land will be even lower due to lack of decision making within households and communities.

The minor forest produce that women collect are disappearing as the preferred forest policies across South Asia is more timber oriented, which result in removal of all nutrition and livelihood needs of women in forests communities.

Recommendations:

- CEDAW Committee should recommend all States in all their development agenda and economic policies to recognize rural women as economic agents, as development agents – as workers, producers, gatherers.
- States should recognise, promote and protect rural women's right to livelihoods including opportunities for employment (paid work).
- Development agendas should recognize that rural women traditionally and historically have skills and knowledge for livelihoods that ensure food security for all.

- Women in rural areas are mostly involved in agriculture. States should recognize women as farmers and ensure all benefits including subsidies are received by women equally too. Women have indigenous knowledge regarding biodiversity and genes. They play a crucial role in keeping role in seeds. Genetically modified seeds, not only destroy biodiversity but also alienates women as knowledge holders of seeds.
- Rural women should have *individual rights* over productive resources including natural resources for sustainable livelihoods irrespective of who they are and where they come from. States should ensure access, ownership, control and management including decision-making power of productive resources and its outputs. This includes land, water, forests, livestock, credit, energy, technology, knowledge, education, skills. The existing gender differentials in access, ownership and control of land, water and forests requires that States ensure that women's equal legal rights to inheritance are legislated and protected. Further, States take affirmative action in all public distribution/ lease of land, water bodies, forest produce and investments in development of natural resources in rural areas are specifically targeted to women or their collectives to protect and promote women's livelihoods and reach the goals of substantive equality. Land may also be purchased by the state from the market to distribute to landless rural women.
- All state programmes and schemes that have provisions for livelihoods should engage rural women's collectives in this process. For example, the right to education in India provides free, compulsory primary education to all. Under this India provides free school uniform and midday meals to all kids. Making of these school uniform and preparation of midday meals should be given to rural women's collectives. This will promote rural women's livelihoods.
- Mobility is a challenge for rural women. For instance, unless there is a transportation subsidy, rural women cannot travel to access basic goods and services including education, health, employment, bank etc.

Rural Women and Markets:

Rural women are involved in subsistence forms of food production but they also need access to markets. Women are not just producing for themselves and their families. They also are producing for the markets. Rural women artisans need skill development opportunities, access to credit, and markets.

Recommendations:

- States should ensure equal access and participation in markets– both for labour and goods. Rural women should have opportunities to gain better skills and knowledge to participate in markets equally and for their upward mobility in markets.
- State should monitor and regulate markets to ensure rural women receive fair price for their products.
- Financial inclusion of rural women is very important. Concept of women friendly bank with easy administrative processes, mobile banking to ensure banking facilities are available to women in remote areas. Access to credit, loans, subsidies.

Women and Unpaid Work including Care:

All women work whether paid or unpaid. Women, especially rural women do a lot of unpaid work within the household and in family farms and enterprises. Despite its obvious economic

and social worth, much of the work that women do remains invisible, undervalued, and under-appreciated and is not included in GDP. Women do most of household and care work. They spend hours in collecting water, fuel and fodder, cooking, cleaning, domestic chores, repair and maintenance of house. This work is backbreaking, time consuming and is not shared by men. It puts an unequal burden on women and prevents them from participating in productive work in labour market. Lack of infrastructure and poor energy, and technology options add to this burden.

Recommendation:

- States should recognize, address and redistribute this unpaid work. Some recommendations include: To reduce women's time burden states should provide basic services at the door-step – water, sanitation, education, health, fodder, energy, housing, institutionalized child care facilities, awareness raising campaign to share care work with men. Provide paternal leave to encourage men to take child care responsibilities.
- States should ensure better infrastructure support for rural women's needs to reduce the day to day drudgery and time burden they face to provide for basic rights for themselves and their families. This should include access to markets (both, labour and goods), internal roads, transport subsidies to support rural women's mobility, drinking water, sanitation, energy (including domestic energy for fuel and fodder) and better technology options.

Rural Women and Social Security:

Recognising the multiple forms of vulnerability that rural women face, state should provide comprehensive universal social security to all rural women. This should ensure realisation of adequate standard of living by ensuring basic rights (food, health, housing, education, water and sanitation) at minimum levels. Loss of livelihoods and all forms of violence including domestic violence, sexual violence and conflict should be a criteria to receive social security.

Recommendations:

- States should provide comprehensive universal social security to all women. This includes non contribution based social assistance to ensure social and economic inclusion of marginalised women with special provision for Dalit women.
- Social security benefits should be received by rural women as individual rights holders and not just as a member of a family, household or group. Their marital status should not have an impact on their entitlements.
- Social Security policies should be based on the human rights framework, on ILO's social protection floor framework and should ensure 'Prevention, Protection, Promotion and Transformation by incorporating substantive equality framework of empowerment.
- Social security should be universal, but not uniform, ensuring specific and multiple vulnerabilities; and special temporary measures for social and economically excluded groups including single women, female headed households, migrants and migrant workers; Dalit, tribal; sexual and gender minorities; women with occupational stigma and women in conflict areas.
- Social Security should provide protection from the following risks: old age; disability; illness; accident; maternity and unpaid care work; death; all forms of violence and threat of violence including conflict; loss of livelihood and unemployment. States should frame

the reproductive and care role that women have as work, and if a woman cannot do that work (ill, disabled, etc.) she should get unemployment benefits.

- Poor rural women don't have documents that are generally required to apply for state benefits. Therefore, social security schemes should not require bureaucratic administrative processes that alienate women and strive to be women friendly in design.
- Information about various schemes and benefits should be given a clear, simple, women-friendly way.
- There must be a State obligation to provide: financial backing for social security as an investment, not a burden; mechanisms for awareness raising and promotion for the organization of women's collectives; gender sensitization training of policy makers, bureaucrats and staff at all levels; institutionalised mechanisms for a greater role for women in planning and designing policies; an established, gender sensitive grievance redressal mechanism to take penal action at a local level

Rural Women and Right to Food:

Majority of rural women in South Asia are severely malnourished. Women's health, wellbeing and nutrition is not given due importance by government, society, and families. Due to neoliberal policies privatisation and commercialisation, the food prices are increasing considerably in the South Asian region and women traditionally have less access to food in the family. This denial results in severe malnutrition, stunted growth and anemia which also affect their off springs as they give birth to underweight and weak babies who are susceptible to infection and diseases. There starts a vicious circle of poverty, deprivation and diseases.

Rural women lack access to sexual and reproductive health care services and information. From the early childhood, they are denied nutritious food and leisure activities which are vital for health and robust growth due to the prevalent son preference syndrome. They are married early and due to repeated pregnancies, and short birth spacing they are faced to chronic malnutrition and don't have access to antenatal and post natal care leading to maternal mortality and morbidity like pelvic organ prolapse, obstetric fistula and reproductive tract infections. Lack of women friendly health services, skill birth attendance, medical, female medical practitioners in rural area limit access to contraceptives. Unregulated healthcare services lead to lack of accountability of health care providers.

Rural Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights:

Rural women's sexual and reproductive health and rights are not recognised. Hence, women lack control over their bodies including their sexuality, decision making in their marriage (age of marriage, choice of partner), when and whether to have or not to have children. Social and cultural norms prescribed by patriarchy control over rural women's bodies and sexuality resulting in limited mobility, brutal violence including honour killing, witch hunting, sex selective abortion, marital rape, domestic violence, child marriage, exchange marriage, dowry, and sexual violence. Honor killing is one of the most harmful patriarchal practices in South Asian countries. More importantly the government's lack of accountability and lack of serious measures to eliminate honor killing is a concern.

Women continue to be considered to be a property belonging to men and are given away in marriage, exchanged to settle disputed. Patrilocal culture of marriage, forces most women to migrate to their marital home which results in their dispossession from productive resources. One important thing to include as well is access to contraceptives and abortion; women's control over their own body. There are hazards to women due to no accessibility of contraceptive and safe abortions.

Rural Women and Migration:

Migration of women in South Asia is mainly attributed to marriage and the *patrilocal* form of residence. Integration into their new family and community can be difficult due to linguistic and cultural barriers, economic hardship, different gender norms, weakening of social network and erosion of social capital.

Women are often forced to deal with migration issues due to conflicts or environment-related circumstances. Women in rural areas, whether migrate or stay behind as family members of male migrants, are confronted with very specific hardships. They are vulnerable to social and physical aggression, including gender-based violence.

Women migration is often restrained in their movement by their caring and reproductive responsibilities. Cultural norms, which is also particularly stringent in rural areas, also dictates that it is not acceptable for women to travel on their own.

For those living in remote and isolated areas, other obstacles include the lack of proper identity documents and difficulties in accessing transport or information on possibilities of legal and safe migration channels. Since women have less agency to manage their own journey as well as when legal channels of migration are scarce, the potential for exploitation by unscrupulous actors is high

Rural women migrants, depending on the context of their migration, may gain more autonomy by improving their social and economic situation. Also, they can send remittances back home, which significantly contribute to the welfare of the families they left behind.

Education:

Rural women have less access to formal schooling and education systems due to various reasons which affects their access to job market and employment opportunities later in life. They usually dropout from the school at the secondary level when they are needed at home to do chores or are thought to be of marriageable age. Attacks on girls schools by extremists also force parents to take them out of schools. School curriculum are not gender sensitive and further perpetuate patriarchy. Lack of sanitary facilities and toilets also hinder girl's education. Sexual harassment is also a very important factor that prevents girls from accessing education.

Informal Education

Informal education specially vocational educations such as; short training, farmer field, technical training etc strengthen rural women's potentials to access productive, income generating opportunity. Its help them enhance their confidence and skills and enable them to negotiate for better organize with other to do so. Due to social, religious, economic restrictions women's are

not accessing the informal education. These include restrictions in mobility and preferential schooling of boys over girls among others.

Rural Women the Right to Work:

Lack of skill in work women have to compromise with the quality of work and wages being exploited by the employer. Lack of government's proper scheme, women works are not be recognised, are not socially protected including pension, security, health insurance, child care and sharing responsibility within the household. Similarly, the products manufactured by the women from rural community have no market and government have no promotive scheme to increase their work and skills. Women are forced to move to cities in search of decent work and then get forced to work in the informal sector including forceful sex work.

Rural Women and Conditions of Work:

There is worldwide recognition that agriculture is a particularly hazardous sector together with mining and construction. Women are exposed to serious risks while engaging with agricultural activities due to exposure to pesticides and other agrochemicals causing poisoning and death and in certain cases work-related cancer. The nature of their work – examples include rice transplanting, prawn peeling, etc also places them at greater health risks.

Other hazards are due to the multiple contact with animals, plants, poisonous animals which may give raise to allergies, respiratory disorders, infections etc.

With growing industrialisation there has been an increase in the dumping of toxic and hazardous waste into landfills, water bodies etc. Women are more vulnerable to being exposed to contaminated water, adverse effects of the food chain, air pollution, or household products.

The smoke from burning the biomass in the home is one of the fourth leading causes of death and disease in the world's poorest countries (WHO, 2002). Indoor air pollution (IAP) is linked to the deaths of over 1.6 million people, predominately women and children, each year.

In many instances, indoor smoke is responsible for acute respiratory infection (ARI), tuberculosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD), child birth complications and vector borne diseases.

Indoor air pollution is strongly related to poverty, and it is the poor who rely on the low grade fuel and have the least access to cleaner technologies. Moreover, in case of South Asia health hazards caused by excessive use of biomass fuel in poorly ventilated kitchen and inefficient stoves for cooking and heating rooms prove fatal.

Political Participation

Women in South Asia lack political participation in local self government , customary councils and state institutions due to patriarchy, lack of mobility restrictions , lack of transport, security concerns, childcare and other care giving responsibilities. They also face lack of familiarity with policies and rules (due to limited access to formal and informal education, technology. In South Asia, women also face cultural constraints on their mobility. As politics requires women's exposure to interact with male and female constituents and address public meeting, the

mechanisms of sex segregation and *purdah* are used to restrict their mobility and further political participation.

Women's Access to justice:

Rural women lack access to justice. This is one of the most important form of violating the enjoyment of women's human rights for different reasons including the existence of informal justice systems, and unavailability and inefficiency of judicial protection and legal aid. Limited number of women working in judicial and justice institutions particularly on decision making. Lack of efficient protection mechanisms for victims and as well as literacy. States should ensure women friendly grievance mechanisms and redressal procedures. Rural women should have access to justice. State should ensure those who violate right of rural women are punished. There should not be a culture of impunity but a culture of accountability.

Few More Recommendations:

- Rural women face **digital divide** as they have little or no access to new forms of communications including mobile services, web services, internet services etc. This restricts their access to critical information and women are made invisible in setting agenda. Information regarding all state schemes, entitlements should be available to rural women in a gender friendly manner.
- States should build capacity of rural women to participate in an informed way in all aspects of local governance. Women should be part of all decision making processes.
- States should provide infrastructure for proper sanitation for rural women. This should include sanitary pads, toilets, etc.
- States should ensure maximum available resources to provide for basic rights for rural women. Budget analysis should be used via a tool to monitor the process. States should ensure gender responsive budgeting in planning, implementation and reporting on the national and sub-national level in spheres of rural women's rights empowerment.
- Accountability and monitoring mechanisms (including desegregated data) with women friendly grievance redressal system should be put in place.
- States should ensure that, policy-makers at the national and local level have access to necessary expertise to ensure gender responsiveness in state legislations and policies. As well as to ensure that local non-political leaders support the promotion of women's economic rights.