

**UN Women’s contribution to the general discussion on rural women of the Committee on
the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
(Geneva, 7 October 2013)**

UN Women welcomes the decision of the Committee on the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to issue a general recommendation on rural women. Such a general recommendation will provide necessary guidance on the implementation of Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the Convention) for States Parties’ reporting on rural women in their countries. Considering the vital role women play in the development of rural areas and national economies, and the continued obstacles to the realization of their human rights, a general recommendation will help to increase the capacities of Governments to develop and implement laws and policies that promote equal rights, equal opportunities and the equal participation and leadership of rural women.

The Convention is the international normative human rights framework that guides the work of UN Women, and the realization of women’s human rights is an essential part of UN Women’s mandate. Besides direct support to the CEDAW Committee, UN Women provides technical support to countries in every region to facilitate the implementation of the Convention and the concluding observations of the CEDAW Committee, including support to meet their reporting obligations.

Furthermore, within the broader mandate of UN Women to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the empowerment of rural women is an organizational priority. In addition to working to advance the status and human rights of rural women within the framework of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20),¹ UN Women supported the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2012 on the “Empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.”

UN Women is also partnering with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) to implement a 5-year joint programme on “Accelerating progress towards the economic empowerment of rural women.” Launched in 2012, the expected outcomes of the programme are to: improve rural women’s food and nutrition security; increase rural women’s income to sustain their livelihoods; enhance the leadership and participation of rural women in rural institutions and in shaping laws, policies and programmes; and to enable a more gender responsive policy environment for the economic empowerment of rural women. The programme is being implemented in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda. To date, the programme has led to multi-stakeholder policy dialogues at country level on issues facing rural women and development of country level joint programmes.

¹ See UN Women, 2012. “The Future Women Want: A vision of sustainable development for all”, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2012/6/the-future-women-want-a-vision-of-sustainable-development-for-all>.

UN Women acknowledges in its work that ‘rural women’ do not constitute a homogenous group, and that women who live in rural areas come from different socio-economic classes, belong to diverse ethnic and indigenous groups, and are in different stages of the life cycle. Given the diversity of rural women, all efforts to empower rural women must take into consideration that rural women have varying degrees of access to productive assets (land, water and other natural resources), food, housing, education, information, technologies, health and social services and judicial remedies. Measures to empower rural women and girls must also be based in the recognition that rural women and girls have different opportunities, capacities and livelihoods, including both agricultural and non-agricultural sources of income; moreover, some have special needs, such as women and girls with mental and physical disabilities, those living with HIV/AIDS, women heads of household and those living in conflict or post-conflict situations, among other circumstances.

Considering the volatile and complex global economic and social context, and the multiple, gendered impacts of the economic, financial and food crises – especially energy and food price fluctuations – and demographic and climate change on rural women, UN Women has sought to not only promote the implementation of the provisions of Article 14 of the Convention, but to expand its approach to meet these challenges.

UN Women, therefore, supports the comprehensive plan outlined in the concept note for the general recommendation on Article 14 of the Convention to elaborate on the obligations of States parties to realize the rights of rural women. The proposals contained in the Committee’s concept note, along with the suggested corresponding government actions, address many of the concerns to which UN Women has given priority in its work to advance the status of rural women with reference to: the creation of enabling environments; the impacts of macroeconomic policy measures on rural women; the provision of decent rural employment; and understanding and responding to the effects of climate change and large-scale land acquisitions and changes in land use.

In particular, UN Women would like to suggest that the following priority issues and recommended actions be considered by the Committee in the drafting of the general recommendation on rural women:

- In order to address the persistent gender inequalities and discrimination experienced by rural women, the **structural factors** that cause and reproduce these inequalities in the economic, social and political domains must be addressed.
- **Enabling legal and policy environments** must be created that support and mainstream gender perspectives and the rights and needs of rural women and girls at the local, national and international level. Specifically, gender dimensions must be integrated into all rural, agricultural and development policies, plans and budgets; and macroeconomic policies, including trade, fiscal and investment policies, must be gender-responsive and consider the specific impacts on rural women. Furthermore, all statutory laws that discriminate against rural women must be eliminated.

- The full spectrum of **rural women’s paid and unpaid contributions** to local and national economies, the achievement of development goals and the well-being of their families and communities must be acknowledged in order to promote and achieve women’s economic and social empowerment and inclusive and sustainable economic growth.
- Measures must be taken to ensure the **participation of rural women and their organizations in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and activities that affect their lives**, particularly those related to poverty reduction and sustainable rural development, the economy and trade, climate change and natural disasters, use of productive resources and the provision of public services.
- **Financing for sustainable development** and for eradicating poverty and hunger should give priority to rural development issues, and ensure that all investments equally benefit rural women and take their needs into consideration. Rural women should be involved in the budgeting and allocation of financial and natural resources, as well as in the planning and implementation of infrastructure projects such as roads and transportation, and community-based water and renewable energy schemes.
- The post-2008 **food price rises and volatilities** are a source of serious concern. In rural areas, most smallholder households, as well as all landless households, are net food buyers and thus obliged to reduce the quantity and quality of food purchased in the face of escalating prices. Higher food prices exacerbate the burdens on women, as household food managers, who must stretch limited food budgets further, and may end up reducing their own consumption to leave more food for family members. Food price volatility, market intermediation, as well as constrained access to land, irrigation and other agricultural inputs make it difficult for smallholder producers – of which women are the majority – to actually benefit from the rising prices of food.
- Rural women, including women smallholder farmers, must be guaranteed **equal access, use and control of productive resources** such as land, water, agricultural inputs, infrastructure, technology, extension services and finance and credit. Efforts should also be taken to increase rural women’s access to information and communications technology.
- Women’s **access to land** has been linked to improved household welfare, food security, income generation, and prevention and response to gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. Nevertheless, current statistics reveal that just 1 per cent of the world’s women own land,² and women continue to suffer from forced eviction, disinheritance and property-grabbing, as well as the consequences of large-scale land acquisitions. The obstacles to promoting women’s rights to land must be addressed, including inadequate legal standards and/or their ineffective implementation and enforcement, as well as discriminatory cultural attitudes and practices at the local and institutional levels about women’s ownership and control of land. A UN Women – OHCHR joint publication on “Realizing Women’s Rights to Land and Other Productive Resources” is being finalized and is expected to be available within the next

² International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), “The issue: Women’s assets and property”. Available from www.icrw.org/what-we-do/property-rights, as cited in UN Women and OHCHR, 2013, “Realizing Women’s Rights to Land and Other Productive Resources,” New York and Geneva.

couple of months. The purpose of the publication is to provide detailed guidance for lawmakers, policymakers, civil society organizations and other stakeholders, to support the adoption and effective implementation of laws, policies and programmes to respect, protect and fulfill women's rights to land and other productive resources. The publication will present recommendations and good practice examples from various countries.

- Efforts must be made to achieve **full employment and decent work** for rural women in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. This means expanding opportunities for rural women in micro-enterprises, sustainable social cooperatives and agro-processing; promoting the development of innovative partnerships to increase their role in value chains; and ensuring their equal access to higher value markets and better market information.
- Obstacles to the **livelihood diversification** of rural women should be addressed by increasing opportunities for technical, agricultural, and vocational education and training.
- States must take steps to enable rural women to contribute to and benefit from rural and sustainable development by **guaranteeing universal access to essential services**, such as safe drinking water, basic sanitation and hygiene, energy, education and health, including reproductive and sexual health. The adoption of the social protection floor approach with a gender perspective will help to ensure basic social protection for rural women in both formal and informal employment.
- **Public investments in infrastructure and social services** can play a critical role in reducing and redistributing the burden of unpaid care work that falls disproportionately on poorer rural women. This could facilitate their engagement with a wide range of rights (including the right to work and rights at work, the right to education, the right to healthcare, and the right to political participation).³ In addition to improved access for rural women to time- and labour-saving technologies, an increase in services for persons in need of care would help mitigate this burden, as would the greater participation of men and boys in care work.
- Measures must be taken to address unequal power relations between men and women that limit the **participation and voice** of rural women and girls in household and community decision-making and in political processes.
- **Violence against women** violates and infringes upon women's and girls' human rights, fundamental freedoms and bodily integrity. Many rural women and girls are at increased risk of violence because of their poverty, lack of education and empowerment, and exclusion from social and economic policy benefits. The preservation of traditional gender norms and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors also perpetuate gender stereotypes and gender-based violence. Measures should be taken to eliminate and prevent all forms of violence against rural women and girls, and to increase their awareness of their rights and access to justice and support and protective services, such as shelters for survivors of violence.

³ See the report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (GA A/68/293).

- Rural **men and boys have the potential to be important partners** in promoting gender equality and rural women's empowerment. However, there is an urgent need for greater awareness and dialogue with rural men and boys on ideas of masculinity and discriminatory gender norms in order to increase their involvement in ending violence against women and girls, and promoting gender equitable attitudes and behaviours.
- The capacities of national statistics offices must be strengthened to collect, analyze and disseminate **gender-sensitive statistics**, including sex- and age-disaggregated data from rural areas. Relevant gender-sensitive indicators should be developed to inform the design of legislation, policies and strategies for rural areas, and time use surveys should be implemented to increase understanding of the paid and unpaid economic and social contributions of rural women. Furthermore, there is a clear need for better data on women's (and men's) access to land and other productive assets so that changes in these domains can be tracked and monitored. The statistical work being undertaken to develop a solid methodology for measuring women's and men's access to land and piloting it at the country level under the Evidence and Data for Gender Equality (EDGE) programme constitutes an important step in the right direction.
- Finally, future **global development frameworks**, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the post-2015 development agenda, must take into account the priorities and empowerment of the diversity of rural women and girls, and rural women and their organizations must be included in the development processes of these frameworks.