

Opening Statement CSW56
27 February 2012

Deputy Secretary-General's opening remarks to the Commission on the Status of Women

The Commission on the Status of Women is at the heart of the global efforts of the United Nations to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

You are all aware of the emphasis that the Secretary-General has given this issue. Just last month, in outlining his imperatives for his second term – five generational opportunities to creatively deliver on our core mission – the Secretary-General placed gender equality and women's empowerment among the priorities of his five-year Action Agenda.

His commitment is shared by an increasing number of global decision-makers who understand that this is a time of real opportunity to end gender-based discrimination and place women at the centre of sustainable development.

The theme of this year's Commission could not be more appropriate. Rural women and girls constitute one-fourth of the world's population. They are leaders and decision-makers, producers and providers, workers and entrepreneurs. They account for a great proportion of the agricultural labour force, grow the majority of the world's food and perform the most unpaid care work. Their contributions are vital to the well-being of families and communities, local and national economies, and to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Yet their contributions and priorities have been largely overlooked.

Rural women have been hit hard by the economic and financial crisis, volatile food prices and the impacts of climate change. They are also disproportionately represented among those facing discrimination and disadvantage. We must therefore focus greater attention both on protecting and empowering rural women. Unleashing their potential will make a major contribution to ending poverty and hunger and achieving sustainable development.

I would like to share with you four ways I believe this can be achieved.

First, we must recognize rural women as key agents of change. Their voices need to be heard, thereby helping to shape responses to development challenges and crises. Participatory approaches, stakeholder consultations, and support for rural and women's organizations can help ensure that rural women's priorities are reflected in macroeconomic policies and rural development and agricultural programmes. Temporary special measures, such as quotas and benchmarks, can quickly increase rural women's leadership in national and local governance.

Second, we must accelerate rural women's economic empowerment. If rural women had equal access to productive resources, agricultural yields would rise and hunger would decline. Yet the reality is that rural women and girls have restricted access to land, agricultural inputs, finance, extension services and technology. Rural women also face more difficulty in gaining access to public services, social protection, employment, and markets. Unpaid care work further hampers rural women's ability to take advantage of on- and off-farm employment, as well as, new market opportunities in the agricultural sector. We must build the asset base of women smallholder farmers, improve their access to resources and services, expand their opportunities to diversify production, increase their productivity, and facilitate their access to high-value product markets.

Third, we must re-examine financing for rural development, agriculture and climate change mitigation and adaptation and we must make sure that it prioritizes rural women and girls. We need to give greater attention to infrastructure projects, water schemes, renewable energy sources and biodiversity protection. Only 5 per cent of agricultural extension services go to women farmers. And only 3 per cent of the official development assistance designated for the agricultural sector in 2008 and 2009 went to programmes in which gender equality was a principal objective, and just 32 per cent to those in which gender equality was a secondary objective. We must do better.

Fourth, we must acknowledge that ad-hoc interventions are insufficient. The broader policy environment must be responsive to the rights and needs of rural women and girls instead of sporadic and limited. Empowering rural women demands systematic and comprehensive strategies. We need strong action and accountability to advance the rights, opportunities and participation of rural women. States must abolish discriminatory laws and policies, such as those that limit women's rights to land, property and inheritance, or that restrict their legal capacity.

Ladies and gentlemen, This session of the Commission on the Status of Women is an opportunity to solidify consensus among Governments and civil society on those actions needed to make a real difference in the lives of rural women. Your policy recommendations should feed into other key processes, above all the upcoming Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. Commitment at the international level must be followed by comprehensive action on the ground, with effective accountability mechanisms in place – including the watch-dog role of non-governmental and grassroots women's organizations. If given the chance, and an equal playing field, rural women can be the life-force that will infuse a sustainable, equitable future for all humankind.

I wish you a successful Commission on the Status of Women.

Thank you.