

Opening Statement CSW56
27 February 2012

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

Madam Deputy Secretary-General,
President of the Economic and Social Council,
Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Sisters from Civil Society,
Colleagues and Friends,

Good morning everyone. It is truly a pleasure to see all of you here today and to join you to talk about our priority theme, empowering rural women.

I would like to thank our Chair, Ambassador Marjon Kamara of Liberia, and the President of ECOSOC, Ambassador Miloš Koterec, and UN Deputy Secretary-General, Asha Rose Migiros, thank you.

To all of our speakers, representatives of governments, UN system colleagues, and the thousands of representatives of the women's movement and civil society that are here. Thank you!

I express my own and my colleagues' gratitude to all of you — and to people around the world, for all that you do to advance gender equality and women's empowerment — and for all that you have done to make our first year a successful one at UN Women. Thank you.

I am pleased to announce that UN Women is in the process of establishing advisory councils with civil society at the national, regional and the global levels. Engagement with civil society is fundamental to progress and we look forward to very strong collaboration.

During this 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we will discuss a wide range of matters. I would like to draw your attention to a number of important reports before us. Attention is drawn to the situation of and assistance to Palestinian women and the separate report on the release of women and children taken hostage including those subsequently imprisoned, in armed conflicts.

Also before us is the report on the Joint work plan of UN Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Our collaboration is vital. I also point to the report on women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS. And we will examine actions to strengthen linkages among programmes, initiatives and activities throughout the United Nations system for gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, protection of all of their human rights and elimination of preventable maternal mortality and morbidity. This brings me to an important point: The right to sexual and reproductive health is fundamental to women's empowerment and gender equality.

Madame Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,

Now I would like to draw your attention to our priority theme. During the next two weeks at this 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, each of us, and the governments, institutions and organizations that we represent, will agree on concrete actions for empowering rural women.

This is a matter of human rights, equality and justice on behalf of women. And it is even more. Rural women and girls comprise one in four people worldwide and they constitute a large share of the agricultural workforce. Listening to and supporting rural women is fundamental to ending poverty and hunger and achieving peace and development that is sustainable.

The reports before this Commission on our priority theme of rural women as well as the report on women's economic empowerment, make a strong case for listening to, and investing in, rural women and girls.

Research shows that empowering women is not just good for women. It is good for all of us — for peace, the growth of our economies, for food security, for human security — in short, for the well-being of current and future generations.

Everything that I have witnessed during the past year, with the uprisings in the Arab world and elsewhere, confirms my belief that we need to urgently and systematically open up participation, opportunity and choices for all human beings, women and men, young and old. We need to reduce inequality. And this is particularly important for rural women and girls who face such high disparities in access to education and other services and cannot reach their potential.

Every human being should be able to shape their own futures and the futures of their countries, enjoy a decent standard of living, and live in peace and dignity.

That is a simple vision to state but to make it real, to achieve the equality, human rights and inclusive growth that we all want, requires us to unlock and unleash the potential of the world's women, including rural women.

Rural women are on the frontline of climate change. They are managers of natural resources. They are leaders. They know about peace and security. And none of us can afford to perpetuate the barriers facing rural women or to leave them out of decision-making.

By expanding rural women's rights, participation, opportunity and choices, we can bring about healthier economies and societies.

But that dream cannot be realized by taking incremental measures.

It requires a response that engages all of us, a transformation in how governments devise budgets and make and enforce laws and policies, including trade and agricultural policies, in how businesses invest and operate, and how people make choices and relate to one another.

This transformation is under way in countries. But progress remains slow and uneven. So if we are serious about this mission, this responsibility, if we are serious about empowering rural women and unleashing their potential, then we have to remove the barriers that stand in their way. We have to remove the structural, cultural, social and economic barriers that prevent rural women from participating fully in the economic and political life of their countries.

We continue to fail rural women when only 5 percent of agricultural extension services are provided for women farmers.

We continue to fail rural girls when they are twice as likely as urban girls to be out of school and married as child brides.

And we continue to fail rural women when they die during childbirth, are shut out of decision-making, and cannot lead healthy and productive lives free of violence and discrimination.

Let us be clear. This is not just hurting the women. It is hurting all of us!

This year UN Women will use our global voice and work with you to expand economic opportunities and the political participation and leadership of women. These two fundamental drivers go hand-in-hand for women's empowerment and gender equality.

Our vision is clear. Rural women need to have their voices heard. And we need to listen to them. When women are engaged in producers' and traders' associations, cooperatives, labour councils, and finance institutions, they can lobby for their views to be heard, for their needs to be met, and for their rights to be respected.

Rural women should participate at all levels — from the village council to voting in national elections, from the trade union hall to trade negotiations, from being a mother to becoming a Minister and, why not, President.

In Egypt, rural women are receiving identity cards so they can obtain social services, and are able to vote and can have a say in shaping the future of their country.

In India, more than a million women are now members of local village councils, panchayats. This has changed their lives for the better, and also the lives around them.

From India to Costa Rica to Rwanda, where quotas have been used, more women are in positions of decision-making. They are using their voices to secure land rights, to understand political processes, to engage with governance and policy issues, to tackle domestic violence, to improve healthcare and employment, and to demand accountability. This is democracy in action.

Here in the United Nations, we must lead by example. This means leadership from the highest levels, championship from the senior levels, and attaining and sustaining gender parity at all levels.

From 2007 through 2010, the UN experienced an unprecedented increase in women at the most senior levels — from 17 percent to 29 percent at the Under-Secretary-General level, and from 20 percent to 25 percent in the Secretariat at the Assistant Secretary General level. Now the Secretary-General has instructed managers to accelerate progress at the P-4 to D-1 levels, much as he has already done for the most senior levels.

Madame Chair,

When women have voice and representation, change follows.

We now have an opportunity to make more change happen by advancing the resolution that was adopted last December by the United Nations General Assembly. The resolution calls on UN Member States to take concrete steps to increase the political participation and leadership of women, including rural women.

While women's participation in politics is one side of the coin, the other side is economic empowerment. When women have an income, they have more independence, and this makes other rights possible.

We need to urgently open up economic opportunities for women. With the right policies, change can happen quickly.

Policymakers need to establish mechanisms to ensure fair wages, labour rights and decent working conditions for rural women and men. This includes policies that promote fair trade, and fair and stable prices for food and agricultural goods.

Compared to men, women farmers and entrepreneurs face a number of disadvantages, including lower mobility, less access to training, less access to market information, and less access to productive resources.

We need to remove discriminatory practices and laws. Women need equal rights and access to land, inheritance, and property. As one rural woman said, "When the land is in my husband's name, I'm only a worker. When it is in my name, I have some position in society."

If rural women had equal access to productive resources such as seeds, tools, and fertilizer, agricultural yields would rise by up to 4 percent and there would be 100 million to 150 million fewer hungry people. So the benefits are enormous.

To expand economic opportunities, women need access to renewable energy and other basic infrastructure such as roads and technology. Being connected is empowering.

And here I want to talk about mobile phones because they are changing lives and strengthening economic enterprises. Whether it's information about credit, markets, weather updates, transportation or health services, mobile phones are changing the way rural women and men obtain services and conduct business.

And just listen to what women are saying. In a recent global survey, 93 percent of women reported feeling safer because of their mobile phone, 85 percent reported feeling more independent, and 41 percent reported having increased income and professional opportunities.

While we advance access to infrastructure and technology, it is also important to focus on reducing rural women's heavy burden of unpaid work. In West Africa, where some 2,000 rural villages are generating their own energy services, women's daily work has been reduced by two to four hours, women's incomes have increased and so have rates of education and literacy.

And here social protection and social services are important. Evidence from South Africa to Brazil shows that providing basic services such as pre-schools and childcare both empowers women and grows the economy.

We also need to knock on the door of the private sector. By developing regulatory frameworks and incentives for private sector engagement, we can make sure that partnerships open opportunities for rural women, along the value chain, along with access to national and international markets.

In moving forward, we need to make full use of the treaties and tools that many people have worked hard to create, and which UN Women is proud to advance through our work with all of you, as indicated in my report before this Commission.

These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Labour Organization conventions, including the one adopted last year to protect the rights of domestic workers, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the report on the Social Protection Floor, that I launched last year. Using these as our guides, we can make real and lasting progress.

Together we need to make more progress to end violence and discrimination against rural women and girls. During this session, we will take up the important cause of ending female genital mutilation. All of us at UN Women look forward to the preview panel during this session next year's priority theme on Eliminating and Preventing Violence against Women. Let us never forget that this dream is possible. I encourage you to read, if you have not already done so, the inspiring and innovative practices pioneered by women's and civil society organizations. These are found in the report on Activities of the United Nations Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence against Women .

Distinguished Delegates,

As we get closer to Rio+20, UN Women is working to ensure that women's voices are heard and gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development and its outcome document.

I am pleased to announce that on the eve of the Rio Summit, UN Women will join the Government of Brazil in convening a high-level meeting on women and sustainable development.

This 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women paves the way for Rio+20. I know that empowering rural women will reduce poverty and hunger and advance sustainable development and democracy. But our agreement from this Commission will mean little if we don't put our will, energy and dedication behind it.

This requires efforts on all fronts, including better data to track and measure progress, and stronger financing for gender equality, which we will examine more closely in our special review panel. It also requires stronger UN coherence, coordination, and accountability. For this the new System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women points the way forward.

As I look out and see all of you from regions across the world representing countries and organizations that have made amazing progress, I know that equality is possible. It will take time. It will take our concerted and collective effort. But I am convinced that if we put our energies into empowering women and advancing gender equality, we will create a new and better future.

That is why I am honoured to be here representing UN Women. Thank you.