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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: Implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council include the Anglican Consultative Council, Church Women United, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Association of Presbyterian Women of Aotearoa, (New Zealand), Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, The Salvation Army, United Methodist Church General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Women.

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs and of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

Ecumenical Women (EW), a coalition of Christian organizations and denominations, and other NGOs, welcomes the seventeenth-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action (Platform) at the 56th Commission on the Status of Women at the United Nations (UN).

We uphold women and girls as created in the image of God as equal partners with our male counterparts. We oppose all forms of gender-based violence, discrimination, and oppression, and affirm the promotion of gender equality and justice.

We maintain that the empowerment of women and girls of all ages is fundamental to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and eradicating hunger and poverty in our world. Despite 17 years of national policies and international agreement to advance women's rights, the goals of the Platform and the MDGs remain only partially fulfilled.

EW and its global partners are working to eradicate poverty and hunger, care for the sick, promote peace, initiate income generating activities, and share resources and best practices. Women's potential to contribute to development and poverty eradication cannot be fully realized until the UN and national governments address the discrimination, oppression, and violence that women and girls face.

EW and its partners have recognized the following as current challenges to the empowerment of rural women and girls and their role in poverty and hunger eradication and development:

Climate Change, Farming and Food Security

Despite advances made through the MDGs, hunger and malnutrition persist. Communities that once had abundant resources now struggle to provide adequate food. Drought, uncertain rainfall, deforestation, rising sea levels which cause salinization of water supply, and the prevalence of natural disasters due to environmental degradation and climate change contribute greatly to global food insecurity. Resource wars over land, water, and fossil fuels have led to massive dislocation and violence against women.

Rural women play a critical role in agriculture. They produce food for both their families' consumption and income. Many women and girls engage in small-scale agriculture and food production but do not own or control arable land, seeds and sustainable fertilizer, fishing sites, more efficient farming equipment, markets and financial resources. Despite advancements made through global initiatives, access to clean water and effective irrigation continues to be problematic, contributing to global food insecurity. The policies of the World Bank, IMF, WTO and OECD have led to a concentration of land in corporate hands rather than in the hands of local farmers.

Member states should recognize and value those who work the land and produce food. With the rise of environmental degradation and urbanization, the value of rural communities is becoming more apparent. Rural women play a vital role in agriculture and the production of food, and must be supported in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, as they seek to expand agricultural production.

Access to Education

Education is a basic human right. Education increases girls' and women's participation in society, and impacts the welfare of their families and communities. Primary, secondary and tertiary education and training of rural women and girls is essential.

Reports from women around the world indicate that high rates of illiteracy persist, especially among rural women and girls. Women's lack of access to education hinders their ability to engage in development and income-generating activities for their families.

Due to gender-discrimination, cultural prejudices, and early marriages and pregnancies, women are prevented from taking full advantage of educational opportunities.

Basic education surrounding nutrition, health and hygiene, farming practices, and incoming-generating skills would lead to development not only for women but also for entire communities.

Transportation and Access to Resources

Rural areas around the world are characterized by inadequate infrastructure and public transportation, which hinders the exchange of goods and resources. Environmental conditions which make roads inaccessible during rainy seasons or following natural disasters also contribute to the problem.

The lack of adequate transportation affects food distribution and also prevents people from accessing medical and social services, which are concentrated in urban areas. Women and girls who lack access to safe and reliable means of transportation are often forced to walk long distances, making them vulnerable to sexual violence.

Public transportation is essential to the health and safety of rural communities. Improving infrastructure and access to safe public transportation would enable women to participate in local, regional, and international economies. It would also enable women, girls, and entire communities to access better medical care and social services.

Access to Medical Care

Rural communities lack access to adequate medical care. Lack of basic medical care and nutritional supplements, high rates of maternal and infant mortality, and the continued spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases mean that many women and girls serve as caregivers for their families and other members of the community without proper protection (especially with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and other contagious diseases).

Women's caregiving work is not valued or paid. Increasing access to trained medical care would provide women caregivers the opportunity to contribute other skills to their communities or to be paid adequately for the skills they provide.

Isolation and Exclusion from Decision-Making

Due to lack of support for agriculture and small business ventures, lack of access to education and resources, inadequate transportation and medical care, and continued violence against women, women and girls in rural areas often experience isolation. Although women contribute important skills to their communities, including farming the land, producing food, supporting families, and caring for the sick, they are often not acknowledged for their contributions. Because of gender prejudices, inadequate infrastructure and transportation, and the time spent caring for their families and the sick, women are hindered from participating in local, regional, and international economies and decision-making. Member states should recognize the contributions of women and the need for gender-based government assistance, and work towards the inclusion of women on an equal par in decision-making and governing structures.

Recommendations

EW encourages the United Nations to recognize the importance of those who farm the land and produce the world's food. EW recommends that member governments take action to empower women farmers in rural areas of the world, by addressing environmental degradation and climate change, increasing women's access to land, protecting small-scale farms and cooperatives, and creating access to finance for women farmers for the improvement of agriculture and better nutrition for women and their families.

EW also urges governments to increase women and girls' access to education, so that women might contribute their full potential and skills in their communities and be fairly compensated for those societal contributions. Increasing access to education will build women's confidence and enable them to face challenges arising from contact with well-established male dominated enterprises.

EW encourages the elimination of transportation constraints that prevent women in rural areas from accessing basic medical care and productive resources that would enable them to participate in local, regional, and international economies. EW encourages governments to support and create programs for gender based development assistance, recognizing the valuable contributions that women make to the health and well being of society and the global economy.

All people, regardless of their gender or location within a State, should have access to basic human rights such as nutritious food, education, transportation, and medical care. Creating and supporting programs that support these rights, especially for rural women and girls, will strengthen the global economy and promote the well being of all people.

EW encourages the UN and its member states to promote equality for women as active and equal decision-makers at all levels of society: within their families, locally, nationally, and internationally. EW asks the UN to work with its gender-based and other specialized agencies to develop awareness campaigns and reporting mechanisms so that gender equality in decision-making can be followed and monitored within member states.