



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Sixty-first session

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Rural Development Leadership Network, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### **Perspective of Grassroots Rural Women in the United States of America and Belize**

The Rural Development Leadership Network, a United States-based national multicultural social justice organization founded in 1983, supports community-based development in poor rural areas through hands-on projects, education and skills building, leadership development and networking. We urge that United Nations bodies work to ensure that poor rural women, including those from developing and developed countries, are able to participate in the deliberations of the United Nations and non-governmental organizational gatherings, including those of the Commission on the Status of Women.

In regard to this year's theme of Women's Economic Empowerment in a Changing World of Work, we note the need for greater attention to Rural Women and their issues, including girls and women of all ages, as well as families as a whole. Special attention is needed in regard to older women, for whom a lifetime of unequal pay often results in inadequate income in old age because their United States social security payments, if they have them, are geared to the wages and salaries they have received at a lower rate than men throughout their lives. As their income remains flat or depressed in their older years, their cost of living continues to rise with the rising price of food and utilities.

#### **Discrimination against older women remains a problem.**

Rural women make up more than one fourth of the world's population, according to the Women's World Summit Foundation, and they compose 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force. An estimated 76% of the world's extreme poor live in rural places. In the United States, rural poverty rates are higher than urban, and 95% of the persistently poor counties in the United States are in rural areas. The overall poverty rate for rural women in the U.S. is 18%; for rural people of colour the rate is significantly higher. For example, 45% of African American children in rural communities are estimated to live in poverty according to the Housing Assistance Council.

For low-income rural people, the World of Work does not customarily mean going out to a 9 to 5 job. It means surviving, however we can, including generating supplemental income in creative ways, through gardening, farming, and related activities, for example; perhaps through arts and crafts, perhaps through entrepreneurship. Manufacturing and other corporate jobs are not as available as they previously were. Continued employment in low-wage jobs or financial dependency on others are the available, unsatisfactory options.

Examples of creative enterprises developed by grassroots rural women past and present include formation of a local women's bank, formation of agricultural cooperatives, establishment of community kitchens and business incubators and food hubs, processing and/or packaging food for added value, for example.

Women in the United States and other countries are most often the backbone of their communities as well as the primary caretakers and food providers for their families. Even though they are in agricultural areas, the local crops may be

commodities for export out of the community (or the country), perhaps for animal feed or wholesale purchase, rather than crops for family consumption. Fresh, locally grown food may not be available. Families' diet and health may suffer as a result. In the United States, rural areas with high rates of poverty, the incidence of obesity, diabetes and related diseases is increasing.

People in developing parts of the United States can learn coping strategies from women in developing countries and vice versa. An international perspective is important.

Education at all levels, from pre-school to higher education, leading to both academic credentials and practical learning, is crucial in enabling girls and women to reach their full potential, increase their own economic empowerment, and add to that of other women and their communities, as well as to gain perspective on global issues that affect them and strategies for change.

Technology can provide new opportunities for people in rural areas because the Internet permits some kinds of work to be done anywhere. But many rural areas are under-served in terms of broadband availability, availability of low-cost equipment and service, and availability of opportunities for people to learn how to use technology.

**We make the following recommendations:**

- Every effort be made to provide funds to include more grassroots rural women in Commission on the Status of Women non-governmental organization meetings;
- Support be provided for women's access to land and resources, as well as technical assistance, credit, and infrastructure,
- Support be provided for women to add value to the resources they have, including land, food products and traditional knowledge,
- Education be provided to girls and women at all levels, from pre-school to graduate education,
- Decision-making for development efforts and the direction of such projects, including learning programs, remain primarily in the hands of the women involved,
- Advocacy go forward to advance laws and customs that support these measures,
- Strengthening be undertaken of the physical and economic infrastructure that supports rural productivity, such as roads, water, access to markets,
- Promotion of exchange be championed among women of different cultures and national backgrounds through in-person visits
- Promotion go forth of peer exchange among grassroots women through internet inclusion and interaction
- Strengthening take place of internet infrastructure for rural communities,

We recommend a holistic approach, with the goal of strengthening the whole woman, the whole family, the whole community, and the whole nexus of interconnections among these.