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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**Statement submitted by Institute for Multicultural Counselling and Education Services, Inc., International Association of Applied Psychology, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, International Council of Psychologists, International Humanist and Ethical Union, National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, Inc., Salvation Army, Soroptimist International, non-governmental organizations 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**

### **Psychological perspectives on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls**

The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was the first human rights treaty to recognize rural women as a vulnerable group and to enumerate their human rights explicitly. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child protects the human rights of children, including that of girls. Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action call upon governments to ensure that all women and girls, including those in rural areas, participate in and benefit from all aspects of development planning. In spite of these international norms and the development of practices and programs to implement them, gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls remain major challenges.

This statement offers recommendations based on psychological and social science research to address these challenges.

## **Relevant Psychosocial Research**

### **Access to Psychosocial Empowerment**

Empowerment is essential to progress and stability in human and societal development. Empowerment is a multidimensional psychological and social process, centred in the local community, through which people gain greater access to and control over resources, enabling them to improve their lives (Seidman, Rappaport, & Zimmerman, 2000).

Gender inequality among rural women and girls is due to a variety of lifespan factors, including limited access to essential human development resources. Enabling the empowerment of rural women and girls is essential to eradicating poverty and fulfilling their participation in the full vision of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Psychosocial empowerment approaches can promote rural women's and girls' efficacy and human rights and help develop their strengths, skills and resources. Although they may live in poverty and suffer gender disparities and traditional role restrictions, rural women and girls play a critical role in the food security and survival of their families and contribute to enhancing agricultural and rural development (Resolution of the General Assembly, 18 February 2010).

### **Access to Physical and Mental Health Care and Social Services**

Health care and social services are often inaccessible to rural women (Baffour, 2009). Mental health symptoms result from and may lead to poverty, creating a vicious cycle for rural women and girls.

Significant barriers to mental health and psychosocial services include social isolation, lack of education, fear of stigma, lack of transportation, and lack of health insurance (NAC Rural Health and Human Services Report, 2006). Rural women are more likely to suffer high levels of psychological distress and depressive symptoms

and are less likely to receive treatment than urban women (Hays & Zouari, 1995). Fewer trained psychologists, social workers and other healthcare professions are available to rural populations. This lack of access is of particular concern given the strong association between poverty and depression (Simmons et al., 2008), both prevalent risk factors for rural populations.

Rural women and girls are subjected to violence, rape, early marriage, high fertility rates, and chronic illnesses compared to urban women. When working outside their homes, they are poorly paid in low level jobs and burdened at home with unpaid care work. These multiple, interacting stressors cause anxiety and depression, which have a deleterious impact on women's ability to cope, resulting in the persistence of poverty (e.g., Smalley, et al., 2010).

### **Access to Employment**

Employment and access to community markets is key to the empowerment of rural women (Jejeebhoy, 2000). Employed rural single mothers report lower levels of chronic stress than do unemployed single mothers (Turner, 2007). A lack of access to employment and employment services can be a major cause of psychological distress among rural women (Taylor, 2001). Employment in decent work with liveable wages is crucial to creating the community engagement and accrual of personal economic resources that increase empowerment and well-being.

Entrepreneurial development through cooperative business models are particularly promising for rural women such as Massai women (Dutt, Grabe & Castro, 2016). Rural women who are landowners in Nicaragua — for example — have more equitable marital relationships and are at lower risk of domestic violence (Grabe, 2012).

### **Water Security, Climate Change and Environmental Disasters**

Water insecurity increases the psychological burden for rural women (Stevenson, Ambelu, Caruso, Tesfaye & Freeman, 2016). These conditions experienced by rural women are worsened by climate change, which has increased the number of droughts worldwide (Fritze, Blashki, Burke & Wiseman, 2008). By providing both access to water in rural regions and establishing water distribution regulations, psychological distress due to water insecurity may be reduced.

### **Intergroup Conflict and Migration**

Rural women and girls are more greatly impacted by intergroup conflict than are men. In post-conflict Uganda, incidents of suicide among rural women as well as continued trauma and psychological distress due to perceived loss of control, lack of access to healthcare, and shifts in traditional gender roles, resulting in subsequent tension between the sexes (Kizza et al., 2012).

Migration impacts the mental well-being of rural women, particularly those left behind as their family members seek employment elsewhere (Wilkerson, Yamawaki & Downs, 2009). During their lifetime, these women may also migrate for work during their youth, but often find themselves in split households, consequently, experiencing poor mental well-being (Jacka, 2012).

## **Recommendations**

We urge Governments, United Nations Agencies and Programs, and Civil Society Actors to invest funding and other resources to speed up the achievement of gender equality and empowerment among rural women and girls, including those of indigenous and African descent.

### **Psychosocial Empowerment**

- Provide opportunities for quality formal and education and training, including primary, secondary, and higher education.
- Educate them in their human rights and in the recognition of their personal strengths, skills, and resources.
- Engage them as active participants in decision-making at all levels of the formulation and implementation of policies and programs.
- Encourage their development of personal efficacy and ownership through entrepreneurial, social and other development activities.
- Strengthen capacity-building community networks for sharing information and entrepreneurial skills, and developing collective empowerment.

### **Quality Physical and Mental Health Care and Social Services**

- Encourage the development of women's health councils to identify urgent local needs and to advocate for resources to meet these needs.
- Develop new programs or the delivery of prevention and treatment for physical and mental health issues.
- Build multidisciplinary integrated, accessible service centres to provide one-stop psychosocial and mental health services and primary health care. Train community women as peer coaches to recognize mental health symptoms and to teach coping skills.
- Increase visits by medical and mental health specialists to rural areas, training them to recognize that some presenting physical symptoms may be mental health symptoms.
- Offer low-cost insurance or government grants to provide health and mental health services in rural areas.

### **Decent Employment, Benefits and Resources**

- Encourage participation in cooperative businesses.
- Increase availability of and access to micro-credit targeted to female-owned businesses, particularly cooperatives and other collaborative arrangements.
- Facilitate rural women's access to local and regional markets.

- Provide equal access to decent employment and other economic opportunities and resources like equal pay.
- Identify strategies for providing child and elder care to employed women through local cooperatives, local governments, NGOs, and faith-based organizations.
- Reduce the stigma of women working and reduce the stigma of men providing child and elder care and other unpaid domestic work.
- Provide and protect equal access to inheritance, land ownership, property and other resources.

### **Water Security, Climate Change, and the Environment**

- Increase rural access to clean and sustainable water resources.
- Educate rural populations about how to protect against climate change and lessen the effects of environmental disasters.
- Identify and create opportunities to influence local and regional water policies through planning and decision-making.

### **Intergroup Conflict and Migration**

- Provide role-models, training, and skills-building in conflict resolution.
  - Increase involvement at all levels in negotiation and dialogue between conflicting groups.
  - Implement laws, policies and programs that protect them against traditional and new forms of gender-based violence and racial/ethnic discrimination.
  - Encourage the development of local resources for women who experience greater domestic and economic burdens due to migration of household members.
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