



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 December 2017

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

12–23 March 2018

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”

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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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Empowering Rural Mothers

Make Mothers Matter welcomes the focus of the Commission on the Status of Women on rural women and girls, as they are the “backbone” of the rural economy (World Bank 2017). Rural women represent 25 per cent of the world population and 43 per cent of the labour force in the agriculture sector. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Report for 2017 also notes that 80 per cent of the world’s poor live in rural areas and 64 per cent work in the agriculture sector. These women and girls represent a huge potential and sharply epitomize and cut across many of the SDG challenges: climate change, armed conflicts, food security, lack of basic public infrastructures and services — notably water, energy, health, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), access to education and training, financial services and property rights. Most rural women and girls are excruciatingly impacted by many of these issues and as a result, are clamped in poverty.

Make Mothers Matter wants to add a mother perspective to the attention of all the stakeholders. This statement therefore focuses on issues that relate to the role of rural women and girls as mothers and future mothers, and the particular challenges that they face.

All issues are interconnected: encompassing the implications of motherhood is crucial for the sustainable empowerment of rural women and girls and the realization of the SDGs.

Mothers as caregivers and unpaid workers

Mothers around the world continue to assume the biggest share of unpaid family care work. The time that they spend on unpaid household chores or caring for children and other dependent family members limits their time and opportunities to participate in the paid economy. And in many countries of Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has further added to women’s care workload.

The situation is exacerbated in rural areas, especially in developing countries, where women’s time and unpaid care work must often compensate for the lack of both basic public infrastructure and services (such as access to water, sanitation, energy, transports, childcare, ICT, health and social services), and time saving equipment and technologies (such as clean cooking stoves, water pumps, etc.).

In addition, rural mothers often work in family farms, as unpaid workers, or engage in subsistence farming to secure food for their families, all work that comes on top of their family care responsibilities. This double workload limits their ability to engage in income generating activities, which reduces their agency, i.e. their ability to make choices in life, as well as their bargaining power within the family.

Few and limited “time-use” surveys have been conducted to precisely measure the magnitude of women’s unpaid work in developing countries, notably in rural areas. Mothers’ contribution to the care economy, the rural economy and food security remains largely invisible and underestimated.

Rural mothers and children poverty

A direct consequence of the heavy share of unpaid work and its resulting time poverty is the high rate of poverty among rural mothers, with a direct impact on their

children. Globally, almost 385 million children live in extreme poverty, and over 4/5th of these live in rural areas. Further, 1/4th of children living in rural areas live in extremely poor households, compared to 9 per cent of children in urban areas (UNICEF 2016).

Maternal and Child Health: the urban-rural divide

Access to maternal health services remains one of the main challenges faced by rural mothers around the world, especially in developing countries: in rural areas only 56 per cent of births are attended by qualified professionals, compared to 87 per cent in urban areas. Only 1/3 of rural women receive prenatal care compared to 50 per cent in developing regions globally. This results in shocking statistics on maternal mortality and morbidity: 300'000 mothers still die each year in relation to pregnancy or childbirth, and most of these deaths are preventable. It is also estimated that worldwide 2 million mothers live with Obstetric Fistula, a 100 per cent preventable childbirth injury, mostly in rural areas, with devastating social and economic consequences.

Even in developed countries, governments have closed many health centers and hospitals that they deemed “not profitable”, putting at risk the health of many mothers (and babies) who must now travel long distances to give birth and more generally have access to health services for them and their children.

In addition, the lack of public infrastructure and services, notably the lack of clean water and the use of charcoal stoves in households have disastrous consequences on maternal and child health. According to the WHO:

- In 2015 only 55 per cent of the rural population had access to clean water vs. 85 per cent in urban areas — with dire consequences on maternal and child health
- Around 3 billion people still cook and heat their homes using open fires and simple stoves burning biomass and coal, which generates high levels of household pollution first impacting mothers and their children
- 1.2 billion people still lack electricity, relying instead on kerosene, which is also a household pollutant.

Food security and nutrition: the key role of rural mothers

Women make major contributions to the agricultural and rural economies in all countries, especially developing countries. According to the FAO, women account for an estimated 2/3 of the world’s 600 million poor livestock farmers. Many of them actually depend on agriculture as a primary source of income and food: in the least developed countries 79 per cent of economically active women report agriculture as their primary source of livelihood.

Rural mothers are often engaged in subsistence farming and dedicate a huge amount of time and energy in ensuring nutrition and food security to their family. Like every mother in the world, rural mothers are usually responsible for the nutrition of their children, which is fundamental for child development and good health, especially during the early years of life, including pregnancy.

But in their role as farmers, rural women remain discriminated in terms of access to land, credit, and other productive resources such as seeds, fertilizers, information, training, etc. According to UN Women, if these women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 per

cent. This would in turn increase total output and could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by around 12 to 17 per cent. This is especially critical in the current context of Climate Change and necessary adaptation.

Education: mothers' education and their role as children's primary educators

Rural girls are twice as likely as urban girls to be out of primary school; and only 39 per cent of rural girls attend secondary school (vs. 45 per cent for rural boys, and 5 per cent and 60 per cent for urban boys and girls respectively). As a result, women still represent 2/3 of the world's 796 million illiterate people, including among the younger generation.

Rural mothers' access to education and training not only has an impact on their potential to access and benefit from jobs or income-generating opportunities; It encourages them to marry later and have fewer children, and leaves them less vulnerable to violence.

Mothers' education also has long-term implications for their family's health and overall wellbeing. As promoted by UNESCO, "Education transforms lives", and this is especially true for mothers: maternal education improves child nutrition and health outcomes. Data shows in particular that it is a key factor in determining a child's survival. It also improves their children's level of education.

Mothers' education plays a key role in Early Childhood Development, with long term implications for their children and their community: recent advances in Neurosciences have confirmed that, more than Genetics, the earliest experiences shape a baby's brain development, and have a lifelong impact on their mental and emotional health, as well as their physical, intellectual and social development — including during pregnancy.

Migration and urban schooling — the isolation of rural mothers left behind

The number of female-headed households is also on the rise as men migrate to cities or abroad in search of better economic opportunities. Rural mothers who are left behind can become dependent on remittances. This can make them particularly vulnerable to poverty and emotionally distressed, especially when remittances are sent less regularly or cease altogether.

Children also often leave home at an early age in order to pursue secondary or tertiary education, which also adds up to mothers' geographic isolation in rural areas.

Opportunities: Make Mothers Matter's recommendations to empower rural mothers as change makers

The challenges are big, but change is possible. The 2030 agenda provides an opportunity to address globally each of these interconnected challenges. Rural mothers are not only the victims of multiple human rights violations, they are also change makers and can contribute to the realization of the SDGs in many ways — if only they are properly equipped and supported.

- Recognize the differentiated constraints, roles and responsibilities of rural women compared to men, as mothers and caregivers, as food producers and economic agents: Develop interventions that specifically target women in their different roles.
- Recognize the value of women's unpaid work in rural areas, which includes domestic and care work, but also often unremunerated agricultural work

(whether for subsistence farming or as unpaid labourers). Make it visible by conducting time-use surveys, that will support the development of policies to reduce and distribute the workload more equitably.

- Provide accessible, affordable and high-quality public services and infrastructures, in particular in the most disadvantaged and remote areas, with a focus on addressing women's "time poverty" and improving health outcomes. Water and sanitation, electricity, energy, ICT, transportation, proximity to social and healthcare services are needed to relieve mothers from their unpaid domestic and care workloads, and free up time for remunerated activities. Access to clean water and sanitation is a condition of life and health, and a human right since 2010: it should have the highest priority.
- Deploy and harness the potential of mobile communication services and Internet access: ICT is critical to reduce isolation of rural mothers, increase their access to information, education, financial services, and to ensure the viability of self-employment. Many projects around the globe show how mobile banking, access to weather, market and other agricultural information, online education, telemedicine and access to health information can make a huge difference for rural mothers, their children and rural communities. Rural mothers must be supported also in acquiring the necessary skills to make the best use of ICT so that they do not become marginalized.
- Redress Laws that discriminate against women, especially regarding inheritance and property, and ensure that the default marital property regime is a community property (joint property) regime — this is especially important for rural women.
- Educate rural girls, the mothers of tomorrow, beyond primary education: the benefits are many and will extend to their future family and the community at large.
- Involve men as partners and promote more equal sharing of care responsibilities between men and women, between mothers and fathers. A major social and cultural shift is required — and mothers themselves have a role to play both through the education they give to boys and girls, and their ability to make room for men.

Leave no rural mother behind: they are key to the realization of the SDGs!
