



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
7 December 2017

Original: English

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### 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”

### Statement submitted by International Council of Women/Conseil International des Femmes, 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

The International Council of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, has devoted its activities on advancing women's equal rights and empowerment since its establishment in 1888. Furthermore, we adhere to the United Nations' target to fully implement the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. In our view, attainments of gender equality and the empowerment of women are indispensable keys to facilitating progress toward sustainable development for the world.

Recognizing that gender equality cannot be achieved without the empowerment of rural women, the International Council of Women welcomes the focus of the Sixty-second United Nations Commission on the Status of Women agenda on the Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls.

According to the World Bank, the world's rural population totalled 3.39 billion in 2016, or about 45% of total world population. Rural women make up roughly half of the rural population in the world or 22% of the world's population. Moreover, 78% of the world's poor live in rural areas and rural women and girls suffer disproportionately from poverty. Rural women and girls help to provide the world with sustenance, yet they are the face of poverty, have high rates of unemployment, spend most of their time providing water and fuel for the family, work as unpaid agricultural workers, commute via long dusty roads, care for elderly and young, suffer from domestic and gender-based violence and lack access to critical services such as quality education and health care. They are, in essence, the disadvantaged of the disadvantaged.

Therefore, governments, as well as international, regional, and local organizations should adopt extra measures to allocate resources for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. The International Council of Women strongly contends that each Member State should create some form of national government agency solely charged with achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. It is essential that these agencies are endowed with sufficient resources to help bring about the transformative changes necessary for the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Empowerment of rural women, through literacy, education, and skills, is indispensable to advancing the equal rights of rural women and leads to a better life for their families, for their rural communities, for the country and for the world. We urge Member States to recognize the importance of adopting policies that would redress the great divide between urban and rural women including the provision of infrastructures and institutions such as quality schools, hospitals, and transportation systems. More resources and efforts should be channelled to providing quality education and training for rural women and girls to develop skills that increase their productivity and earnings.

Education should include training in science, technology, engineering and math subjects, including computers and information technology. This will allow young women and girls from rural areas to compete in the changing workplace of automation and new technological challenges. Also essential is the practical education for rural women which should lead to increased income and a more secure livelihood, supporting women-led entrepreneurship and promoting the linkage to high value markets. It is imperative that the educational process associated with such capacity building helps rural women and girls see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as the driving force of an ongoing effort to apply knowledge

to improve their own material and spiritual condition and to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

In order to achieve the economic empowerment of rural women and girls, Member States, who have not already done so, should enact laws and regulations to ensure that these women enjoy equal rights of ownership of productive resources and that they receive equal pay for equal work. Furthermore, Member States must devote resources to special measures such as establishing child care centres in rural areas. This is especially needed during the busy farming season to alleviate the excessive burdens rural women face from both agricultural and household care work during such periods. The special measures should also include improving rural women's access to time and labour saving technologies that are essential in reducing their workloads.

The International Council of Women, through its affiliates around the world, has provided training for rural women and girls with a many-pronged goal. At the heart of this training has been development of skills necessary to expand participation in decision making in their local communities. It is believed that this, in turn, leads to their forming action groups to more effectively advocate for their rights and needs. Access to land ownership, raising awareness within the local communities regarding equal rights, teaching good health and good sanitation practices are among the more common goals that can emerge from greater participation in decision making bodies. We urge Member States to appropriate necessary funds and encourage greater partnership between governments and civil society organizations to establish programs that train leadership skills for rural women — better for women, better for the community.

Gender equality of rural women and girls starts from home. It is important to keep in mind that traditional patterns of rural life heap upon women and girls the dual responsibility of unpaid domestic chores and family care work. Governments should allocate sufficient resources to educate the rural population to share domestic chores and care work fairly between men and women. Governments and civil society should use information technology such as social and mass media to change traditional practices and thinking which form the roots of gender discrimination.

A serious obstacle to achieving gender equality and empowerment of rural women and girls is their lack of access to reproductive rights. It is the human right of women and girls to have control over matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. As recommended by the Cairo Programme of Action adopted in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, family planning services should be provided in the context of other reproductive health services, including services for healthy and safe childbirth, care for sexually transmitted infections, and post-abortion care.

We urge the international community, civil society and nation states to recognize the reproductive rights of rural women and girls and take positive measures to protect and promote their rights. Governments should allocate resources to provide sex education and information on family planning methods as well as pre- and post-natal health care to rural women and girls at schools and local health facilities.

Rural women and girls are not immune from violence against women in all its forms, including trafficking of girls and women, child marriage, genital mutilation, domestic violence and exploitation in the workforce, to name a few. Some of the forms of violence, in particular, female genital mutilation and child marriage, result from customary law and practices.

The International Council of Women calls on the United Nations Member States to adopt strong measures to prevent all gender-based violence. Such measures should include establishment of penalties for offenders, ease of legal access and redress for victims, adoption and enforcement of child-protection laws, abolition of all customary law and practices that lead to violence against women and girls, establishment of support and rehabilitation programs, allocation of funding for the collection of data on violence against women, and provision of early, broad-based education against violence.

The empowerment of rural women is necessary if the world is to achieve the sustainable development goals. In particular, it will help to end poverty (Goal 1). Studies have shown that rural women having equal access to productive resources would lead to an increase in agricultural output of their countries by 2.5 to 4 per cent and reduce hunger (Goal 2) in the world by 12 to 17%. Building a solid infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, transportation systems and more (Goal 9) will help the world attain good health and well-being for rural communities (Goal 3) and the provision of quality education (Goal 4). It would also have an impact on clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), promote employment and decent work (Goal 8), which in turn will likely lead to reduction in inequalities among nations (Goal 10), make the rural community sustainable, safe and resilient (Goal 11), and ensure sustainable production methods by reducing food production losses (Goal 12). Bringing rural women into leadership positions and having equal rights with men certainly affects the achievement of Goal 5, gender equality and empowerment of women.

Rural women and girls are vital agents for achieving the transformative economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. Empowering rural women and girls is essential not only for the well-being of individuals, families and rural communities, but also for overall economic productivity. The International Council of Women remains steadfastly committed to the goal of the United Nations in The Agenda for Sustainable Development to ensure that all human beings, including rural women and girls, will be able to reach their full potential in dignity, equality and to do so in a healthy environment.