



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 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”

Statement submitted by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being
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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

In a world of increasing instability and continued migration due to violent conflict, natural disasters, stagnate economic growth and unsustainable agricultural practices, according to a report by UN Women, (2017) an estimated one billion people are living in unacceptable conditions of poverty, heavily concentrated in rural areas and are predominantly smallholder farmers and agricultural workers. This is generating new and increased risks for rural women and men.

Women and girls particularly continue to face many challenges and systemic obstacles. They are often the ones who bear the brunt of these unstable times. Achieving women's economic well-being and rights-based sustainable development will require a transformation based on empowerment.

We will be focusing on empowerment based on:

- the recognition and development of self-worth by connecting to inner resources and innate dignity, thus contributing to the inner security needed to transform the self and situations.
- the recognition that solutions come from equal participation of women in leadership roles. It has been seen especially during times of crisis communities improve and networks are strengthened when based on love and compassion which are part of feminine principles.

Dignity and self-worth

In examining the role of rural women and girls, there is a fundamental need for the self-recognition of inner-worth and value. Once inner worth is recognized outer resources tend to increase and flourish; opportunities are seen, better decisions are made for the self and families; vision is expanded and will be strengthened which in turn sustains and increases outer resources. However discriminatory treatment, sexism and gender stereotypes have led to the underrepresentation of the role of women in society, creating difficulties in different areas, such as; unpaid caregivers, migrant workers who endure high levels of abuse and violence, or a girl child being forced to work, rather than go to school.

Equal participation of women

Rarely has the world resourced women as active participants in the resolution of problems faced worldwide, which has been a significant mistake, since women have diverse strengths that could enrich the work developed, both by communities and political entities.

In developing countries there are a higher percentage of women involved in agricultural activities and they are the ones who mostly suffer the consequences of environmental problems such as drought and flood, as well as the sociocultural problems due to gender discrimination, and yet they are not included in institutional structures that make decisions.

In Costa Rica, for example, as in many countries, only owners of land are able to participate in community associations that oversee the care of water and the prevention of its pollution. Men own 70% of land and therefore most women are not able to participate in decisions made. In this case the democratic development of fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is not being met.

Achieving gender equality in every sphere of life brings empowerment and the freedom and the right to make decisions thus contributing to releasing women's spiritual, social, and economic potential. The importance of gender equality is fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals as is highlighted by Goal 5 and is also recognized as a key issue to achieve the other sixteen.

Strengthening the role of the rural women

Empowering rural women and girls implies breaking social conventions of discrimination by acknowledging that biological differences have become social inequalities, when in essence all human beings are equal in value, capabilities and potentialities. Empowered women contribute in every sphere of life, such as improving the health and productivity of families and communities, caring for natural resources, improving the economy, and, in general terms, to society's holistic development. In addition, empowered women because they understand and experience their own value and self-worth will be more inclined to participate politically and have an equal voice within the family when making decisions, financial or otherwise.

True empowerment is not simply a question of redressing age-old wrongs or strengthening survival skills. It involves inner growth and development — changing our state of mind, more than our state of affairs — since the greatest limitations are the ones we put on ourselves through learned experiences of discrimination. Every human being possesses a set of 'inner resources', which are inherent, unlimited and highly enabling. It is this part of us which must serve as the foundation of identity, thus facilitating self-respect, respect for others and, ultimately, equality.

Rural development models should take into account women as contributors of an ethic of life in which non-violent relationships are promoted; equitable distribution of resources are encouraged; investment in the well-being of their communities and families are included in policies and action plans of government institutions.

In times of natural disasters, it has been seen that when women are involved in the distribution of food, water, and hygienic products, it is more likely that every family in the community receives these essential resources equally, rather than using these items for economic gain, which can sometimes occur. A strategic action would be to promote leadership positions for women in these contexts, and in the coordination of shelters.

When women are the owners of land, they are more invested in its use and take more responsibility for the care of its natural resources. The land is used for the nutrition of the family, as well as for providing for the family economically. Studies have shown that child nutrition improves when women own the land. According to statistics compiled by Landesa Rural Development Institute, (ND), children whose mothers own land are up to 33% less likely to be severely underweight, and are 10% less likely to be sick. Families where women own land devote more of their budget to education.

There are projects in rural areas, which are trying to empower young girls by teaching them economic activities such as producing food in their own yards, which are then sold in the market thus contributing to the families' economic benefit. Projects like these can benefit young girls by their understanding their value in the family dynamic as contributors, but also it is important because it becomes an entry point into recognizing their own value; they put bread on the table and can avoid becoming victims of abuse such as sexual exploitation or child marriage. They have used their inner values such as determination, love, and caring giving them a sense of inner security, as well as outer security.

BK Jaki, Head of the Brahma Kumaris, reconfirmed her commitment to values by stating that in times of crisis, such as the current ones, acknowledging the importance of values as building blocks for a more peaceful and equalitarian world is essential. Human beings sustain themselves based on their values, since values provide them with independence and freedom, increase their capacity to be self-sufficient, and release them from external influences, which prevent them from following their own path.

Women and men working together for sustainable solutions

The Rural Development Wing of the Brahma Kumaris created a project involving both women and men farmers, called Sustainable Yogic Agriculture. Sustainable Yogic Agriculture uses a systems-wide holistic approach. It integrates thought-based meditative practices with methods of traditional and organic farming. Two young women from farming communities in India founded this sustainable system of farming. They believed that if each farmer understood how to use their inner resources and made decisions based on that, each farmer could bring positive change into their lives, their families' lives, and their community.

In the early days of the initiative, the farmers faced difficulties transferring from chemical to organic systems of farming. However, the two women who founded the project believed in the initiative, particularly in how changing one's awareness and self-view could impact farmers' work and family lives. The farmers, empowered, were encouraged to apply their inner resources developed through meditation to their farm, just as they would apply any other organic input. Meditation became an integrated part of farmers' crop management systems. Approximately 1,000 farmers in more than five states of India are now practicing sustainable Yogic Agriculture.

Meditative practices have demonstrated tangible benefits in the lives of female and male farmers. Along with economic benefits and positive quantitative results in crop yield, there have also been positive qualitative effects. Sustainable Yogic Agriculture has increased farmers' self-esteem and therefore reduced the frequency of suicide and violence. Farmers have a renewed sense of purpose and pride in their lives as farmers. In the case of women married to farmers, the positive impact on their relationships has been substantial, with far less anger and associated violence in their homes. All of these positive results are rooted in a renewed understanding and respect amongst female and male farmers of each other's value as contributors to their community and family, their own self-worth, and dignity.

Conclusion

The knowledge base of the Brahma Kumaris emerges from the understanding of the spiritual dimension of humanity that can be of great support in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. We can address root causes of gender inequality by designing and implementing holistic interventions to improve women's lives. At the root of gender equality lies the subject of human dignity of both women and men. True dignity emerges from an understanding of the intrinsic worth of each person. Dignity is such that in order to recognize it in others, we must each recognize our own self-worth first. Then, drawing on our inner resources, with a sense of personal integrity, the vision of dignity we hold towards others can have the power to uplift them and enable them to bring change in their own lives.

Based on this understanding of the intrinsic value of the human being, it is necessary to strengthen the leadership role of women in rural development, both in the participation of decision-making and in the strategies implemented to overcome the consequences caused by natural disasters and social conflicts. There can be no

sustainable democratic development without the equal participation of women in spaces of power.

The Brahma Kumaris have a continued commitment to exploring, and creating initiatives that empower women, and in participating in public conversations regarding the dignity of women with a focus on the transformative nature of the 2030 development agenda.
