



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
29 November 2011

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-sixth session

27 February-9 March 2012

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic
objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and
further actions and initiatives; priority theme: “The
empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty
and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”**

Statement submitted by International Health Awareness 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.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.



Statement

International Health Awareness Network (IHAN), a non-governmental organization affiliated with the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information, supports the theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women on the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. In developing countries, women are at the forefront of agriculture. IHAN is committed to promoting this theme through education, advocacy and partnerships with rural women and other organizations to establish centres that will provide specific tools needed to enable the advancement of women.

The role of rural women is not solely limited to the normatively accepted generic position in society. Rural women today not only uphold the position as household labourers but also take on responsibilities outside family life. Women in the rural sphere partake in paid and unpaid agricultural and agro-industrial work. These women carry out different tasks in their communities, such as those of entrepreneurs, traders and providers of services. Women in some communities become leaders through advocacy work and awareness-raising on the issues affecting them. This affirms the fact that rural women extend their work beyond raising a family. Bearing in mind the myriad tasks encountered by rural women, their access to work and education is crucial for sustainable development. Addressing their needs can bring many benefits to the community.

Many of the challenges that women face are directly linked to the economic, social, financial and trade-based trends that result from Government policy at the national and international levels. Yet policy is not the only barrier; living in remote areas also limits women. Demographic surroundings determine the accessibility that inhabitants will have. Therefore, the immediate environment plays an uncontrollable and mostly unfortunate restrictive role which decreases rural women's access to technology, health care and the market. Traditional and cultural practices can also hinder the promotion and advancement of women. Certain practices prevent women from seeking greater freedoms and social interactions. The lack of education reaffirms that women are excluded from enhancing their social and economic contributions. Illiteracy decreases women's ability in decision-making processes, thereby hindering their full and equal participation in society.

IHAN deplors the fact that a lack of education may lead women into a poverty trap. Research shows that the alleviation of poverty serves to help the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. Rural women, who cultivate about half of the world's food, do not own the land on which they work. Their lack of participation in the economic sphere makes it increasingly difficult to obtain financial credit and loans. Women are underemployed and underpaid everywhere. IHAN calls upon Governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations to be the agents for empowering rural women.

For the past 25 years, IHAN has been working with rural women through field projects on health and education. Empowering these women is the means to preserve values, traditions, entire cultures, our planet and its resources. IHAN believes that the creation of resource centres, specifically designed to address local needs, would strengthen women's involvement in the community.

The local resource centres could provide education through donated books, the Internet and interactions with others. They would also be used to teach art, music, storytelling and culture. IHAN recommends the creation of a college credit programme in which student volunteers would assist those with literacy needs by familiarizing rural women with the devices provided in the centre. This translates into further education, because by teaching women how to use tools such as the Internet, women can be empowered to continue learning on their own.

Technology would not be limited to computers and the Internet. Recycled cellular phones would facilitate transportation and communication and would provide women with access to mobility. Access to cellular devices would save time, money and energy. Women would be able to call for transportation to go to cities or places where they need to find things for household work. Calls could be made to ensure that routes to these places are working as expected and are safe. With the Internet and cellular devices, women who work on the farms are able to know when a change in the weather will affect crops, as well as take preventive action in communicating with others or preparing alone.

Recognizing that not all women participate in paid work and that many communities raise a child collectively, the resource centres could create a day-care programme. Mothers along with their children could spend time at the centre. The programme would directly help mothers, as well as the community.

Coping with hardships could also be a result of interaction within these centres. Many women face tragic experiences due to unfortunate living conditions and never receive physical or, more importantly, emotional support. These centres would unite women from neighbouring areas, who are most likely to share similar experiences. Conversation and interaction could also lead to women becoming empowered to speak out on the issues of the community.

Women face multiple challenges, ranging from those related to supporting the household and providing child care to fear of violence both near to and far from the home. Cultural, societal and national reasons can be tied to violence, but securing its end is more difficult to determine. An environment that is secure allows for growth and prosperity. These local centres will provide women with support and strength to realize their potential and be agents of change. Realizing their potential will spark feelings of self-sufficiency and thus allow for empowerment.