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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 Armenian International Women’s Association, 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

Over a span of 20 years, the Armenian International Women's Association has established relationships with women's organizations throughout the United States of America, Armenia and the world. By organizing conferences, sponsoring programmes and publishing literature, the Association has provided forums for dialogue on issues of interest to Armenian women in the fields of education, social welfare, domestic violence, culture and business.

The Association welcomes the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges". We support the Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Association reaffirms the Beijing Declaration's assertion that "Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace". As article 16 of the Beijing Declaration as well as the 2004-2010 Republic of Armenia National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing their Role in Society confirm, the eradication of poverty requires the achievement of gender equality. As such, the Association submits that the eradication of poverty and hunger in Armenia is dependent on women's empowerment. The fulfilment of Millennium Development Goals 1, 3, 4 and 5 also hinges on women's empowerment — the need for which is greater in Armenia's rural areas than in its urban centres. Empowering women requires a shift in Armenian society's perceptions of gender roles and the dismantling of stereotypes.

Manifestations of gender inequality in Armenia

While there have been improvements in the status of women in large cities, rural areas continue to lag behind. Patriarchal values are upheld not only by men, but also by women who are raised in a culture that teaches female submissiveness. With rising food prices and growing poverty in villages, the need for women's empowerment is ever more imperative.

The manifestations of gender inequality in Armenia are many. For example, although the vast majority of rural girls and boys attend high school, rural women are discouraged from pursuing higher education. In contrast, higher education for men is believed to enhance their abilities to provide for their families. Furthermore, since most rural women are not permitted to live away from home, they cannot attend universities, most of which are located in large cities. This leaves rural women with, at least, two daunting obstacles: (a) move away from home to seek higher education, and (b) not succumb to societal demands and pursue doctoral degrees. The situation in large cities differs. Although more urban women than men are enrolled in universities, there are more men in doctoral programmes because societal pressures to get married and bear children inhibit women's graduate education. Despite these differences, stereotypes about women's roles in both rural and urban communities inhibit their intellectual and, subsequently, professional development.

Similar to the problems in education, rural women have less access to health care than women in large cities. The two leading explanations are the dearth of

medical centres in rural areas and the high cost of transportation to large cities. According to the *Republic of Armenia: poverty reduction strategy paper — progress report* of the International Monetary Fund in 2010, 36.2 per cent of the sick in the capital city applied for medical help, while only 22.2 per cent of the rural sick did so. The lack of gynaecological/obstetric care leads to higher rates of home births and, consequently, complications during childbirth. After drops in maternal and infant mortality rates in 2008 and 2009, 2010 saw an increase — a significant setback for Armenia in trying to achieve Goals 4 and 5.

Limited access to health care and an education system that does not promote women's rights deprive women of choices about their fertility — which, according to article 17 of the Beijing Declaration, is crucial for their empowerment. This, coupled with the rare use of contraception, leaves abortion as many women's only resort to preventing unwanted births. In undergoing multiple abortions, women in Armenia face the risk of death, whereas education about their bodies and choices would not only psychologically empower them but also prevent unsafe practices.

Throughout Armenia, unemployment rates are higher for women than men. The home is considered a woman's "place", beyond which she does not have much decision-making power. While women make up the majority of social service workers, they have significantly fewer managerial positions and earn lower salaries than men. Thus, the possibilities of social advancement and participation in decision-making bodies are stymied. Although they bear the daily burdens of poverty, they have little influence in decisions about local problems.

Lastly, violence against women is a widespread crisis, with one in three Armenian women having been subjected to some type of gender-based violence. Gender stereotypes are so embedded within the culture that many women even justify men's violent behaviour. Rarely are cases of domestic violence brought to court, as women either hide the problem for fear of repercussions or have no hope in the justice system. In the event that perpetrators are brought to court, women often downplay the violence in order to maintain their families' "good reputation". The Association, in collaboration with the Tukenkian Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development, runs the Women's Support Center in Armenia, which provides psychological and legal aid to abused women. This coalition is now working towards the construction of a shelter for these women.

Progress and challenges

The Association applauds the steps taken by Armenia towards gender equality, particularly the National Action Plan on Improving the Status of Women and Enhancing their Role in Society (2004-2010). In fact, Armenia upholds international human rights conventions — including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women — above its national laws. Its creation of the "Gender policy implementation strategy" in 2010 was a step in the right direction. The establishment of the National Interagency Committee to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Armenia and the subsequent plans of action also highlight Armenia's commitment to the prevention of gender-based violence.

The challenge, however, is the successful implementation of gender equality legislation and action plans. Furthermore, neither do these plans of action streamline gender equality into other areas of the law (health care, labour, education, etc.), nor has Parliament passed legislation specifically addressing gender-based violence.

Recommendations

To help rural women eradicate poverty and hunger, and the other challenges described in the present statement, the Association makes recommendations based on three principles:

A. Streamlining gender equality

Documents agreed with United Nations agencies or other international bodies on Armenia's social, economic and political development should always include a gender equality component. In addition, gender equality should be codified in any relevant areas of national law (education, labour, etc.). As outlined in Armenia's "Gender policy concept paper (2010)", training social service professionals about gender equality can have a positive long-term effect on all of society. Additionally, the needs of rural women must be specifically addressed in these documents.

B. Helping women help themselves: education and health care

Rural women should be empowered to participate in the planning and execution of development programmes. Sometimes, the necessary assistance is as simple as subsidizing transportation to workshops held in large cities. Women should not be treated as objects requiring assistance, but as agents of change who, with the right tools, can transform their lives and communities.

The Association urges the implementation of gender equality curricula at all grade levels, including workshops on this topic for parents. Moreover, taking one's health into one's own hands and breaking taboos about contraception and safe sex are necessary components of women's empowerment. The United Nations should support education about women's reproductive health, especially in villages, where local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are already involved in this effort.

C. Coordination and cooperation with local non-governmental organizations

The implementation of the various action plans of the Government of Armenia is not a task that it can undertake alone. Furthermore, goals cannot be met without a significant shift in societal perceptions of gender roles. For example, despite the increase in the quota of women parliamentarians to 15 per cent, women still make up only 9.2 per cent of this legislative body. Through years of experience, local NGOs have recorded best practices and built relationships with rural communities. To effectively implement action plans, the Association urges United Nations bodies, the national Government, and local governments to work closely with NGOs. Civil society, religious institutions and businesses should also become partners in the empowerment of rural women.