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**Statement by
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63rd UNGA
of
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Food scarcity and rising food prices endanger the position of women

Mr Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

Women around the world, including in the Netherlands, are concerned about rising food prices and food scarcity. They are concerned about the effect on their standard of living and well-being. They are concerned about the effect on their immediate environment. And they are concerned about the effect on their own economic and social position.

The causes of rising food prices are being extensively discussed at local, national, and international level. We all know that the causes are complex. They include climate change, plant diseases, the neglect of agriculture, high energy prices, and demand for biofuel. And while the world's food stocks have been shrinking, food consumption has been growing and food consumption patterns have been changing – especially in countries with emerging economies.

Population growth is another key consideration. The world's population currently stands at six billion. By 2050, it will be nine billion. Yet one billion people are already going hungry because of the food security crisis. In the future, more people will lack food security. Food scarcity will push prices up. There will be more poverty. Economic growth will slow down. And one result will be political unrest.

The majority of poor and excluded people are women so the food crisis is impacting disproportionately women by pushing more of them below the poverty line. In many parts of the world, especially Africa and Southeast Asia, women are responsible for eighty to ninety per cent of food production. And since women also buy and cook food, they directly experience the effects of high food prices and growing food scarcity.

Hunger and poverty have a serious impact on the position of women. If we don't tackle the food crisis, we won't achieve MDG3, which seeks to eliminate discrimination against women. Let me address two examples.

1. Since October of last year, there have been food riots in forty countries, causing instability and increasing the likelihood of political unrest and migration. Kofi Annan warned that food scarcity and hunger could cause serious social instability. He said that governments would be deposed, and that the crisis would affect us all.

Mr Chairperson,

When food scarcity causes instability, unrest and migration, women are the first to suffer. An important basis for achieving equal rights for women is a stable infrastructure: good governance, including protection of human rights, a stable economy, and access to basic amenities. The food crisis has destabilised this basis.

A second example. Especially in developing countries, fewer girls than boys go to school. Some countries are failing to achieve international targets for school attendance by girls because too many of them are working on the land or doing domestic work. When people have to produce their own food, girls tend to be kept at home. And even if they do go to school, girls and young women – just like boys – tend to perform worse when they are hungry. In short, one of the consequences of food crisis is that fewer girls will go to school.

What can we do? There is no easy or straightforward solution for rising food prices and food scarcity. There are a lot of ideas and some specific plans but not all of them have been developed and implemented, because they don't yet enjoy broad-based support or agreement. The failure to reach agreement at the World Trade Organisation summit is a missed opportunity in this respect.

Mr Chairperson,

I would like to propose that we start making a number of commitments today:

- give women, especially in developing countries, more property rights by ensuring equal access to land ownership for men and women. Implementing Article 14 of the CEDAW convention is key;

- give women adequate access to education and engaging them in training in and the distribution of agricultural technology;
- guarantee women equal access to agricultural resources;
- provide women and girls with equal access to resources like water, technology and credit, as well as an equal voice in decision-making;

Women play a crucial role in agriculture, food production and food processing, and to be able to play this role we need to strengthen their position by eliminating existing discriminatory practises and legislation.

Making a new start also means:

- protect small scale farmers and local products against dumping and the activities of aggressive multinationals; and at the same time, opening markets to small scale farmers and refraining from favouring multinationals;
- provide coordinated, demand-driven assistance and financing at international level. Development assistance is still too often driven by the wishes and expertise of the donor.
- extend assistance with structural solutions and discontinuing incidental assistance without results. Instead of donating modified seeds that will yield only one harvest, we should donate seeds that will contribute structurally to food production. In other words, besides giving people fish, we should give them a fishing rod;
- continue to invest in clean water for drinking and water for producing food;

And lastly:

- carefully review the effects of large scale production of crops for use as biofuel.

In June 2008, the High-Level Conference on World Food Security, held in Rome, established a task force to help solve the global food crisis. The task force presented its report and now it needs to coordinate and implement it as soon as possible while ensuring the rights of women and girls. In implementing the plan it should also make use of the successful 'Delivery as One' concept. As the Dutch Prime Minister said at the MDG high-level event: 'By coordinating the activities of governments and international organisations more closely and entering into new partnerships, we can make development cooperation much more effective.'

Food is a basic necessity, and governments need to do their best to make sure people have access to it. Food scarcity and rising food prices maintain or increase inequality between men and women. For this reason, I would ask you all to devote more attention to women and girls when developing national and international policies on food production.

Thank you.

Hester Maij

Dutch women's representative to the UN General Assembly 2008