

**DPI Weekly briefing to NGOs associated with DPI  
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**“The situation of rural women: Providing tools for economic empowerment”**

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I would like to thank DPI for the opportunity to participate in this panel on the important topic of rural women. I will begin by saying a few words about the establishment of the International Day of Rural Women by the General Assembly in December last year and its first observation yesterday.

*International Day of Rural Women*

During the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, women’s non-governmental organizations called for an official commemoration of the role of rural women in development. Since then, World Rural Women’s Day has been observed on 15 October in a number of countries around the world. The day before the World Food Day was chosen to highlight the critical role of rural women in food production and food security. Thanks to the General Assembly, the World Women’s Day has now become the International Day of Rural Women and was commemorated around the world yesterday.

The first observation of the International Day here at the UN headquarters included a message from the Secretary-General as well as a panel discussion organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In addition, the Division for the Advancement of Women launched a new publication on rural women, entitled: “*Women 2000 and Beyond: Rural women in a changing world: Opportunities and challenges*”. Copies of the Secretary-General’s message and the publication are available in the room. A joint publication of IFAD, FAO and the World Bank and other partners – “*The Gender in agriculture sourcebook*”, which provides an impressive collection of strategies and good practice experiences, was also launched yesterday.

The focus of today’s panel is economic empowerment of rural women. Since today is also World Food Day and the theme of this year is “World Food Security: The challenges of climate change and bioenergy”, I would like to include a focus on these issues in my presentation. And as tomorrow, 17 October, is the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, I will also briefly link the situation of rural women to poverty eradication.

### *The economic empowerment of rural women*

As the Secretary-General noted in his message for the International Day of Rural Women, the economic empowerment of rural women is not only important for women themselves, but is also for enhancing the wellbeing of their children, communities and ultimately their countries.

Rural women play a critical role in the rural economies of both developed and developing countries - in crop production, livestock care, and income generating activities both on- and off-farm, as well as in household maintenance and care-giving. Their economic empowerment is critical to the fulfilment of all these responsibilities. The potential for economic empowerment of rural women is influenced by their position within household and community structures; the gender division of labour; their access to and control over resources; and their participation in decision-making. In many parts of the world rural women face serious challenges in all these areas.

The many changes underway in rural areas have a direct impact on women's lives, in both positive and negative ways. Economic changes can intensify gender biases - for example land privatization programmes can undermine women's traditional land use rights. On the other hand, many women, particularly younger women, have found that independent sources of income give them the confidence to question traditional views of rural women's roles both in the household and in society, and to challenge gender biases in access to resources.

In many countries, gender-based stereotypes and discrimination continue to deny women equitable access to and control over land and other productive resources, opportunities for employment and income-generating activities, access to education and health care, and opportunities for participation in public life - all of which constrains their economic empowerment.

Women receive only a small share of formal agricultural credit even in countries where they are major producers. As land is the major asset used as collateral to obtain rural credit, women have limited access to credit facilities. Estimates indicate that only 10 per cent of agricultural credit is extended to women.

It is not possible to consider the empowerment of rural women without also giving attention to poverty reduction. Women, and particularly rural women, are among the poorest of the poor. They are responsible for food security and for sustainable livelihoods for their families, often without access to the required resources or decision-making powers. The causes and consequences of poverty can be different for women and men in rural areas because of the existing divisions of responsibilities and inequalities in access to resources. Similarly, the coping strategies can differ between women and men. It is therefore important that all poverty eradication efforts explicitly taken into account the situation of rural women. As the Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations from Malawi stated at the plenary discussion on the gender equality item in the

Third Committee on Tuesday this week, “The empowerment of women, particularly those living in rural areas, is a strong factor in Malawi’s poverty reduction processes.”

*Climate change and the food and energy crises*

Women’s economic empowerment is also critical for addressing the current challenges of climate change and food crises. Rural women are vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Drought and intermittent rainfall patterns directly impact women as primary producers of staple food. The rising incidence of desertification increases the time burden on women and girls as they have to walk further to collect water and firewood. As a result they have to forego opportunities which are important for their economic empowerment, such as attending school and undertaking income-generation activities. At the same time, women can be important agents of change in combating climate change, if their access to resources, such as land, credit and extension services, is assured and they are involved in decision-making processes.

The food crisis has also had a disproportionate impact on women and girls. Rural women’s unequal access to resources limits their capacity to ensure food security for their households and communities. Increasing attention to the challenges faced by rural women in agriculture is essential for effectively addressing the food crisis on both a short- and long-term basis. The message of the Secretary-General was also very clear on this issue and I quote: “By making women active partners in addressing the world’s pressing food crisis, we can do much more than solve the immediate problem; we can pave the way for a more secure global future.”

The current energy crisis has an impact on the economic activity of rural women since it, among other things makes food more expensive and agriculture less profitable. The gender perspectives of the energy crisis on rural women are usually not given attention and I would therefore like to focus on this in a little more detail.

Women and men have different roles in energy provision in rural areas. Women bear the main burden of providing fuels such as firewood, dung and crop residue for cooking. They use significant time and physical effort (often without access to any technology) in pumping water, transporting crops and processing food and other activities that could be done much more efficiently with modern fuels and could free their time for participation in other income-generating activities. Electricity, when available in rural areas, is often too expensive for poor families.

Agriculture remains a burdensome and inefficient activity for women in many parts of the world because of the lack of modern fuels. The introduction of liquid biofuels could free women from back-breaking burdens. Women’s income-generating activities in rural areas, such as brick-making, tobacco curing, milk processing, fish smoking and beer-brewing, require access to energy sources, usually require significant sources of firewood and charcoal.

The environmental and socio-economic transformations resulting from the growing global demand for liquid biofuels may have differential impacts on women and men in rural areas. There could be different risks with regard to access to and control over land and other productive assets, employment opportunities and food security, all of which have implications for economic empowerment of women. Production of biofuels may put pressure on the so-called “marginal” land or “wastelands”. These common property resources are an essential element in the livelihoods of rural poor, particularly women, as they rely on these lands for food, fuel, fodder, medicines, building materials and other uses.

If land traditionally used by women is converted for biofuel production, women’s agricultural activities may be pushed to more marginal and less productive land, negatively affecting women’s ability to meet food provision responsibilities. Such shifts in land use could also negatively affect women’s role in decision-making regarding agriculture and use of land. There could also be negative impacts in loss of gender-specific knowledge of local plants and loss of agro biodiversity.

While the increasing demand for biofuels may create employment opportunities and income-generating opportunities, women may not be able to fully benefit from these because of existing inequalities. Large-scale production of bioenergy in particular will require the intensive use of resources that smallholders (particularly women) have limited access to, such as land, water and fertilizers and pesticides.

Nonetheless, access to modern biomass fuels could lead to provision of important services such as water pumping, grain milling, lighting and improved medical facilities. This would free-up women’s time from domestic work and allow for education and training and access to ICT, as well as for employment, income-generating activities and involvement in community activities – which would contribute significantly to their economic empowerment.

#### *Tools for women’s economic empowerment*

Finally, let me address the question of the tools needed to improve the situation of rural women. The new publication on rural women from the Division on the Advancement of Women provides a framework for promotion of empowerment of rural women, which includes improving their *capabilities* through health and education; increasing their access to and control over *opportunities and resources*, including land, water and sanitation, financial services, extension programmes, technologies and ICT; enhancing their *agency and leadership*, including through participation in political bodies and farmers’ organizations; and ensuring their *rights and security*, including through combating violence against women.

There is a need for increased specific activities and programmes focused on the economic empowerment of rural women, as well as for consistent attention to the needs, priorities and contributions of women in all policies and programmes on agriculture and rural development. This requires improved gender analysis methodologies. It is

particularly important to ensure that rural women are consulted, and their situations adequately reflected and addressed, in national development strategies, Poverty Eradication Strategies and national Millennium Development Goals Reports.

Micro-credit and other financial services are an effective tool for poverty reduction. Evidence suggests that lending to women is more cost-effective as women are better and more reliable credit-takers, compared with men,. Furthermore, women's income is consistently utilized for expenditures that are beneficial to the entire family and the wider community.

Increased investment of financial resources is needed to improve the situation of rural women. The message of the Secretary-General made this very clear, and I quote: "I urge all countries to seize the opportunity we will have next month at the Conference on Financing for Development in Doha to put the needs of rural women at the top of the global agenda."

Thank you.