



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
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Summary record of the 1167th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Monday, 7 October 2013, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Ameline

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

General discussion on rural women

1. **The Chairperson** welcomed the many participants in the discussion, including States parties, United Nations bodies and non-governmental organizations. She said that rural women made crucial contributions to the development of their communities, yet their rights were still insufficiently taken into account when designing legislation, policies, budgets and development projects. The half-day general discussion marked the start of the process of drafting a general recommendation on rural women, which was intended to provide guidance to States parties on the measures required to ensure that they fully met their obligation to protect and observe women's human rights in accordance with article 14 of the Convention.

2. **Ms. Rasmusson** (World Food Programme (WFP)), speaking also on behalf of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and UN-Women, said that 70 per cent of the 1.4 billion extremely poor people in the world (those living on less than US\$ 1.25 per day) lived in rural areas. Most of those people depended either completely or partly on agriculture, 43 per cent of whom were women. Any discussion about decent work must reflect the burden of unpaid care work, which was borne mostly by rural women because of a lack of infrastructure and services. Over 150 million people would be lifted out of hunger if women had equal access to land, education, tools, technologies, credit, markets and political participation.

3. FAO, IFAD, UN-Women and WFP were committed to achieving a world of equity without hunger. More sustainable results could be achieved by joining forces to empower rural women economically through the promotion of gender equality and women's rights. The structural economic, social and political factors that caused gender inequalities and discrimination must be eliminated.

4. The empowerment of rural women was also fundamental for addressing gender-based violence, which was more acute in rural areas, where harmful practices were more widespread. Partnerships must be forged with men and boys to champion positive steps towards the improvement of the status and condition of rural women.

5. Gender perspectives must be mainstreamed into all rural, agricultural and development policies, plans and budgets and macroeconomic policies must be especially sensitive to their impact on rural women. The Convention was truly important in raising awareness of the needs of rural women and should guide gender-sensitive rural development.

6. **Mr. Salama** (Director of the Human Rights Treaties Division) said that the Committee was undoubtedly one of the most productive treaty bodies, especially when it came to drafting general recommendations. Rural women often had low status, which made them vulnerable and subject to multiple discrimination. The general recommendation would be a testing ground for taking into consideration human rights violations against the backdrop of the indivisibility of fundamental rights and the diverse cultures and traditions worldwide. The Committee's work in promoting greater understanding of the provisions of the Convention would help to ensure that the universality of human rights became a reality and was put into practice on the ground.

7. **Ms. Gabr** said that the Convention was the first instrument to recognize rural-urban differences explicitly and article 14 designated rural women as a distinct population. She commended the significant efforts made by non-governmental organizations to improve the status of rural women, including awareness-raising activities, exchanges of best practices, skills and expertise and the creation of projects. She was grateful for the contributions of the academic community to the Committee's work and the working group's drafting

exercise. The proposed general recommendation would provide an opportunity to address gender-based discrimination in rural areas and to develop a framework to expand the interpretation of State obligations to help eliminate discrimination and promote equality for rural women.

8. **Ms. Aouij** (Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and practice) said that the Working Group had been set up by the Human Rights Council in October 2010 and consisted of five independent experts from different geographical locations. Its mandate was to establish best practices, make recommendations to States parties and discuss ways of meeting the Millennium Development Goals, particularly to promote gender equality and empower women. Its current focus was on eliminating discrimination against women in social and economic life, especially in the context of economic crises.

9. Rural women continued to suffer disproportionately from poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, and the lack of access to social services, family planning and microcredit services kept them in a state of near servitude.

10. Turning to women's empowerment and participation in political life and decision-making, she said that rural women believed that they were not entitled to discuss politics; they lived in a private, sheltered and closed environment, while politics took place in an open public sphere. Efforts must be focused on providing more opportunities and training to enable rural women to enter politics and decision-making at the local level; improving working and living conditions and access to basic services and information (including facilities for the care of children and elderly dependents); encouraging more participation in public debates; and facilitating access to credit, employment and other support to enable them to become financially independent.

11. States had a responsibility to ensure the effective implementation of development policies and strategies that led to equality and helped to reduce the vulnerability of rural women, strengthen their economic empowerment and protect them from violence.

12. **Mr. de Schutter** (Special Rapporteur on the right to food), accompanying his statement with a slide presentation, said that the relationship between women's equality and the right to food was very important. Empowering women increased the availability of food. The situation of children was significantly improved when women had a say in how the household budget was spent because, when women's rights were recognized, their bargaining position was strengthened and their household choices benefited the health, nutrition and education of children. Nutritional outcomes were directly improved by women's empowerment, which resulted in women becoming educated, marrying later, having fewer children and earning an income, and led to better health and nutrition levels for all the family.

13. A major obstacle to women's empowerment was a cycle of discrimination that must be broken. Women had to stay at home to care for children and elderly relatives and had a weak negotiating position within their own households. They had fewer opportunities to seek education and outside employment, because they lacked extra time, and thus enjoyed limited mobility. The constraints that women faced should be recognized; they needed relief from the burdens that they shouldered, which should be shared more equitably by challenging stereotypical gender roles, involving men in household tasks and ensuring adequate public services.

14. Public works and school-feeding programmes could help change the lives of rural women and girls. Furthermore, States must act to remove all discriminatory legislation and develop multisectoral national strategies, with the participation of both men and women, to support women's collectives and their endeavours as food producers and entrepreneurs.

15. **Ms. Gomez** (Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) said that land was a critical issue for rural women. Their livelihoods and welfare were inextricably linked to their right to land. Women produced 50 per cent of food globally and up to 80 per cent in the developing world, yet only around 1 per cent of women owned land. Many held land rights through a male family member and often systems of customary law did not permit widowed women to inherit land from their deceased husbands. When women did have access to land, their plots were usually smaller and of lower quality than men's.

16. Secure land rights helped to raise the status of women, increasing their decision-making power and autonomy, and possibly helping to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS by promoting women's economic empowerment and reducing their vulnerability to certain forms of gender-based violence. It was vital for women, and not just households, to enjoy secure rights to land, which had a positive impact on food security and nutrition, the management of environmental risks and natural resources, and economic sustainability. Certain studies also linked land rights to better health and educational outcomes for children. The drafting of a general recommendation presented an ideal opportunity to highlight the issue of land rights. She urged the Committee to foster the development of a normative framework for women's land rights, to clarify States' obligations in that area, and to encourage them to amend discriminatory laws, review domestic legislation and end harmful practices. It was necessary to focus on the needs of rural women, involving them in consultation processes, to address gaps between customary law and national legislation and to ensure the cooperation of communities and local authorities. It was important to highlight obstacles to substantive equality, such as social and cultural practices, poor awareness of rights, especially at institutional level, illiteracy and lack of education and limited access to justice. She encouraged the Committee to express concern that customs and practices in rural areas prevented women from enjoying secure rights to land and to urge States to develop comprehensive strategies to address those problems, including through the use of temporary special measures and campaigns to raise awareness of women's rights.

17. **Ms. de Albuquerque** (Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation) said that the lack of access to sanitation undermined women's dignity and human rights. Insufficient progress had been made in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and millions of people still lacked access to clean water and sanitation, leading to a host of problems, including the spread of disease. For example, the lack of sanitation facilities prevented many girls from attending school, and women avoided seeking medical care in hospitals without adequate toilet facilities.

18. Throughout the world, around a billion people were forced to practise open defecation on a daily basis. That situation placed women in particular in a vulnerable situation. Inadequate menstrual hygiene management also forced girls to miss school, especially where sanitary facilities were absent or sanitary pads too expensive. Rural women employed as sex workers in cities, particularly illegal migrants, often found it difficult to access water and sanitation facilities, and were vulnerable to abuse from their employers, who sometimes reportedly charged them for the use of such facilities. Lack of access to water or sanitation deprived women of other rights, including the right to education, health care and employment. In certain cases, inadequate sanitation facilities could even amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. She drew attention to the fact that persons with unrestricted access to water frequently paid less for those services than poor communities in rural areas.

19. She encouraged the Committee to urge States parties to collect sex- and age-disaggregated data on the situation of women in rural areas. It was also necessary to establish a framework to monitor action to ensure access to water and sanitation and to require States to report on progress made.

20. **Ms. Shivutse** (Groots Kenya) said that there were serious gender disparities with regard to access to land and conflicting laws relating to inheritance rights in Kenya. Groots Kenya had set up a group to monitor community land use and was involved in increasing access to legal information, as legal advice was extremely expensive. It had also launched campaigns to promote accountability and to raise awareness of the provisions of the Convention and the relationship between land rights and other development issues.

21. **Ms. Stasinowsky** (Australia) said that rural women often faced multiple discrimination and disadvantages, such as isolation and a lack of opportunities or access to services. The Government had implemented a range of measures and an aid programme to improve women's access to services, end violence against women and ensure that women participated in policy development and decision-making.

22. Removing the barriers that rural women faced in accessing key services could have a significant impact. For example, facilitating access to education and training could lead to better employment opportunities and decent work for women. Her Government was working to improve access to information and communication technologies in rural and remote areas, through programmes such as the digital hubs programme, which provided literacy training. It was also seeking to improve access to health, education, government services and business opportunities and to help women to overcome physical and social isolation. The aid programme was aimed at women's education, training and leadership and provided resources for entrepreneurship and access to credit and markets. The programme also aimed to expand mobile telephone access to poor women. Eliminating violence against women through comprehensive national responses improved women's ability to contribute to the development of their communities and the country.

23. **Mr. Cacho** (Spain) said that public policies should include a special focus on rural women. The general recommendation should call for improving the information available on rural women, through the collection of gender-disaggregated data, and efforts to foster an information society through public policies that take into account the needs of rural women. It was essential to implement strategies that presented women as key players in the economic diversification of rural areas and the services sector, as they were frequently better qualified than men, and policies to promote a work-life balance, rural family businesses and positive action to support women entrepreneurs. It was also essential to promote women's participation in decision-making bodies in rural areas, for example by making public support contingent on a certain share of women in decision-making roles. Efforts must be stepped up to assist women facing discrimination or violence, including minority women, and to implement awareness-raising campaigns on the role of women in society in general and in rural areas in particular.

24. **Mr. Quintanilla** (Cuba) said that rural women faced a number of challenges in Cuba, including a lack of employment opportunities, particularly in highland areas, a lack of recognition of their economic contribution and difficult living and working conditions. The Government had introduced a raft of measures to support rural women, including efforts to distribute and manage uncultivated land equitably, to increase women's participation in the agricultural sector, to introduce training schemes and to improve women's living conditions and business opportunities, including access to credit.

25. **Ms. Farani Azevêdo** (Brazil) said that rural women faced difficulties in accessing social services and productive resources, and were excluded from decision-making processes. In Brazil, measures to support rural women formed part of the Government's rural development agenda and included a national forum to combat violence against women in rural and forest areas, a national network to assist women in situations of violence, which included mobile support units, and a toll-free helpline to help victims of gender-based violence. The Government had also developed a technical assistance and rural development policy for women, and introduced a programme for the productive organization of rural

women and a national programme to support family-run agriculture, which provided female farmers with access to credit and microcredit. Moreover, affirmative action programmes had been implemented, including schemes which set minimum participation quotas for programmes aimed at the commercialization of agricultural production.

26. **Ms. González** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that the Government's strategy focused on ensuring access to resources to support micro-businesses and social and productive projects, in order to provide women with an income and decent work. It was necessary to develop programmes that provided comprehensive protection and support for the social and economic development of vulnerable women. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Women's Development Bank (Banmujer) provided credit and other financial services to women's groups and cooperatives, especially in the poorest areas. The Neighbourhood Mothers' Mission project aimed at supporting mothers living in extreme poverty by providing assistance and training. It was also important to acknowledge the importance of women's labour, and the Venezuelan Constitution enshrined domestic work as an economic activity which generated added value, wealth and increased welfare, stipulating that homemakers had the right to social security. Likewise, the legislation on equal opportunities was based on the principles of equal access to employment and equal pay for work of equal value. Since 2005, the minimum wage in rural areas had remained on a par with the wage in urban areas.

27. Lastly, it was essential to strengthen efforts to empower women working in the agricultural sector. However, none of the above-mentioned measures would be successful without a strong policy to break up very large agricultural holdings. The Government had developed a series of plans to promote the fair distribution and management of rural land through the provision of microcredits, machinery, infrastructure, training and advice. Moreover, the Government was endeavouring to empower women in the agricultural sector by collecting gender-disaggregated statistical data, which would help it to develop public policies tailored to the needs of rural women.

28. **Ms. Youssef** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that recent events in the country were disproportionately affecting rural women. Their tragic circumstances, including the death and displacement of family members and the loss of homes, incomes and services, had resulted from terrorist groups whose backers were guilty of crimes against the Syrian people. She also drew attention to the suffering of women in the Syrian Golan Heights currently occupied by Israel, in violation of international and humanitarian law.

29. **The Chairperson** pointed out that the specific situation of women in conflict, though deserving of attention, would be addressed in a separate general recommendation.

30. **Ms. Putanapan** (Thailand) said that the Thai Government had been taking steps to fulfil women's rights, such as establishing a national women's development fund for the creation of career opportunities, granting universal access to education regardless of residency status and setting up centres for training in information and communication technologies. Thailand was facing challenges in implementing water provision and sanitation policies. Migrant workers in urban areas were not discriminated against and had the same access to sanitation facilities as their Thai counterparts.

31. **Ms. Kaaria** (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)) said that the general recommendation should: encourage States parties to foster rural women's leadership and participation in institutions and policymaking; emphasize a broadening of social protection programmes to better respond to women's specific needs, opportunities and constraints; stress the urgency of employing more female outreach workers and recognizing women as direct clients of rural counselling services; underline the need to mitigate disasters by empowering women to be active in relief, recovery and resilience-building activities; and

address the need to increase rural women's technical knowledge of food harvesting techniques, preservation, storage and processing.

32. **Ms. Hartl** (International Fund for Agricultural Development) said that the face of rural poverty was changing, as increasing numbers of young people were moving to urban areas, leaving behind women, especially older ones, to work in agriculture. The Fund's gender policy centred around three strategic objectives, namely, fostering the economic empowerment of rural women, giving women an equal voice in rural institutions and reducing women's workloads. The general recommendation should not be limited to article 14 of the Convention and should focus on the legal and budgetary actions that States parties must take for the economic empowerment of rural women, such as promoting equal participation in public life, granting equal access to land and credit and eliminating harmful traditional practices. The general recommendation should also be an opportunity to enhance cooperation between the Fund, the Committee and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to make the Convention more relevant to rural women.

33. **Ms. Olney** (International Labour Organization (ILO)) said that the Organization had focused on the empowerment of rural women as a key strategic objective of its mandate to improve rural livelihoods. It had repeatedly called on States to promote gender and social justice in rural communities and to strengthen the participation of women in workers' organizations and cooperatives in rural areas. The Decent Work Agenda — which had at its core the concept of women as economic agents — provided a comprehensive framework to assist countries in addressing persistent structural gaps in rural areas, such as inadequate access to education and public services, precarious and limited employment and low productivity. The general recommendation should take into account international labour standards in order to make it more authoritative, especially ILO Rural Workers' Organisations Convention, 1975 (No. 141) and Rural Workers' Organisations Recommendation, 1975 (No. 149).

34. **Ms. Hien Tran** (Landesa), speaking on behalf of a group of seven NGOs, said that securing the right to land was essential to rural women's realization of their full potential and enjoyment of their rights and to sustainable economic development, global food security, gender equality and combating HIV/AIDS. Yet unequal access to land, which stemmed from complex legal and social and cultural factors, often lay at the heart of rural women's poverty and exclusion. She encouraged the Committee to clarify the obligations of States in respect of: establishing a clear legal and regulatory framework for the protection of women's land rights; ensuring effective access to justice in order for women to secure their land rights; removing preconceptions and discriminatory customary law as obstacles to land rights; protecting women from the adverse effects of private and foreign companies confiscating land; ending the practice of registering land only to male heads of household; providing gender-sensitive agricultural programmes and extension services; collecting comprehensive data on the de facto enjoyment of women's land rights; and promoting the participation and representation of rural women in all aspects of land-related laws, policies and programmes.

35. **Ms. Córdova** (FIAN International), speaking on behalf of 14 organizations advocating for the economic, social and cultural rights of women in rural communities, said that the general recommendation should explicitly recognize the right to adequate food and nutrition, as rural women's enjoyment of all their other rights could not be realized without it. It should also refer to the obligation to ensure women's access to, control, management and ownership of all natural and productive resources; value and protect rural women's knowledge, culture, traditions and practices as food producers; provide decent work for all rural women in accordance with international instruments; enable women to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health; recognize and protect women's role in

farming, food production, processing and distribution; and establish an adequate legal and constitutional framework to guarantee rural women's fundamental rights and freedoms.

36. **Ms. Lee** (International Disability Alliance) said that rural women and girls with disabilities faced multiple discrimination because of their gender, disabilities and residence, which might also intersect with other factors such as ethnicity. As a result, their rights were often violated, they faced a lack of support for basic life necessities, assistive devices, mobility aids and health and rehabilitation services, they were three times less likely to be employed than other women, they were not deemed creditworthy, they tended not to have a voice in public life, they were subjected to forced sterilization and were often victims of sexual violence with limited access to justice. Accordingly, she urged the Committee to tackle the many barriers that impeded the full inclusion and participation of rural women and girls with disabilities. It should call on States to abolish discriminatory laws, policies and practices; take steps to make rural services and infrastructure accessible; raise awareness and provide training; systematically collect data in all domains disaggregated by disability, rural residence and indigenous background; and involve rural women and girls with disabilities in the development, implementation and monitoring of all initiatives of concern to them.

37. **Ms. Thomassen** (Centre for Reproductive Rights) said that rural women faced higher health-care costs yet had fewer health-care options and services and experienced higher maternal mortality rates. In order to enable rural women to exercise their reproductive rights and make informed decisions, States should ensure that a wide range of reproductive health information and services, including contraception and abortion, were legal and accessible and were provided free of charge or at low cost, and repeal laws that impeded rural women's access to reproductive health services, such as laws that mandated waiting periods or third-party consent to those services.

38. **Ms. Stiffler** (Soroptimist International) said that investing in small-scale farming, particularly by women, was a vital step towards meeting future food-production challenges. Yet, rural women still found it more difficult to access a range of resources such as credit, land, agricultural inputs and extensions, with obvious consequences for their food security. Based on its field experience, Soroptimist International proposed that the general recommendation should urge governments, civil society, the private sector and other relevant partners to: recognize the increasing role of women as primary producers and purchasers of food; take systemic, rights-based action to empower rural women; implement programmes to promote the financial, employment and food security as well as the education and public participation of rural women; and collect disaggregated data on a range of indicators of women's well-being rather than mere economic indicators.

39. **Ms. Rahamatali** (Care International) said that the general recommendation should encourage States to take immediate steps to guarantee equal rights to land, property and inheritance for men and women, implement policies and programmes to facilitate women's access to and control over land, water and other natural resources, engage women in policymaking and planning processes at all levels, increase gender-sensitive investment in women smallholder farmers and use gender-disaggregated data to track progress on gender-specific indicators. Moreover, States should study the constraints rural women faced in exercising their rights and ensure that existing policies did not reinforce gender discrimination.

40. **Ms. Barrios Marceles** (Colectivo Mujeres al Derecho) said that the agrarian reform policy initiated in Colombia in the 1990s that aimed at guaranteeing indigenous women farmers equal opportunity to participate in agricultural development projects had not closed the gap in land tenure, which was exacerbated by the fact that women were significantly more affected than men by forced displacement during armed conflict. Thousands of women had lost, or were on the brink of losing, their land in legal suits for failure to pay

their mortgages. Based on that experience, she urged the Committee to call on States to include a gender perspective in their agrarian reforms, implement those reforms that were most urgent for women and ensure that their voice was heard along the entire process, empower women to lead efforts to support women farmers and rural development, increase investment in the collection of gender-disaggregated data and recruit more female experts with a view to making institutions more gender balanced.

41. **Ms. Bhattacharyya** (Bhairab Ganguly College) said that agriculture, which was the linchpin of the rural Indian economy, was largely practised by women, yet very few had ownership of their land or productive assets. In 2005, women's right to work was recognized under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which also provided for drinking water, shade, first aid and workplace childcare, among other innovations that enabled women to balance their family obligations with the need to earn a living.

42. **Ms. Barón Romero** (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular) said that, in recent years, the Government of Colombia had strengthened its resolve to tie its economic development policy to the booming mining industry. However, women made up less than 20 per cent of the mining sector and tended to be limited to unstable, traditionally female occupations. Providing examples of the health hazards of living near mining operations, she said that the maternal mortality rate in the area around the coal mine at La Guajira had more than doubled between 2004 and 2011 — with over 90 per cent of deaths occurring among the Wayuu indigenous community — and malnutrition in children under 5 was more than three times the national average. Furthermore, mining threatened traditional knowledge and the rights to collective property, prior consultation and self-determination of local populations, especially indigenous communities and persons of African descent. There was also a greater risk of gender-based violence, including trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation or prostitution, as demonstrated by the recent murder of a female human rights defender. Accordingly, the general recommendation should encourage both States and corporations to assess the impact of mining projects on women's lives and health and urge governments to implement measures to protect women's land access and social, economic and food security.

43. **Ms. Nygren-Krug** (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)) said that nearly one quarter of new cases of adult HIV infections in low- and middle-income countries involved women between the ages of 15 and 24; that women who had been physically or sexually assaulted by their partners were 1.5 times more likely to be infected by HIV than women who had not; and that women who were economically dependent on their partners were more likely to discontinue antiretroviral therapy. Therefore, the general recommendation should request States to report on steps taken to ensure rural women's access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services; to provide data on rural areas disaggregated by sex to reflect the situation of rural women; to eradicate harmful traditional practices and gender-based violence; to support caregivers; and to empower rural women to be agents of change.

44. **Ms. Gabr**, thanking all the participants for their input, said that the issue of rural women's rights evidently exceeded the scope of article 14 of the Convention and that, therefore, the Committee would not limit the general recommendation to the provisions of that article. Among the key areas to address were the importance of comprehensive data for formulating targeted policies and programmes, the need to repeal discriminatory laws and the implementation of temporary special measures. Real progress could not be achieved as long as the rights of rural women were neglected.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.