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Statement submitted by Sociologists for Women in Society, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Rural women and girls are essential to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the realization of the unfulfilled promises of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. In many areas, rural women are the key food producers and critical for reducing hunger and absolute poverty levels. Yet rural women have too often been ignored in international documents and development schemes. Sociologists for Women in Society urges Member States to take the following actions:

Protect Rural Women's Access to Ownership and Control over Land

Land tenure is a critical issue for rural and peri-urban women. Traditionally in many cultures usufruct rights to land were controlled by lineages, extended families, or local officials such as chiefs. During colonial times, the concept of land ownership was introduced in many communities and in line with the custom in the metropolitan society, vested in male heads of household. The result in many places has been that women have lost their land use rights without gaining land ownership.

We recommend that Member States take the following measures:

- Ensure that rural women have equal rights to ownership and control of property (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1.4, 5.a)
- Safeguard the customary rights of rural women in usufruct systems when implementing ownership schemes (CEDAW General Recommendation (GR) 34:78)
- Register land ownership in the name of women as well as men (SDG 5.a)
- Enact land distribution schemes to provide land to rural female heads of household (CEDAW GR 34.15, 34.57)
- Engage in discussions with tribal officials to ensure that women's rights to control land are safeguarded, including indigenous women's rights (CEDAW GR 34.58)

Preserve land for food crops

In many parts of the world land is eroded through over-farming, tree cutting, and scarce water. Some land has been converted to cash crops and peri-urban growth has taken over farmland. These factors have reduced the amount of land available for domestic cultivation and impact all women who produce for family consumption. Yet in traditional areas, women are still obligated to provide food for their families.

We recommend that Member States:

- Enforce rules against excessive tree-cutting and enact systematic plans to plant new trees
- Preserve sufficient land for food crops to provide for local and national consumption (SDG 2.3)
- When peri-urban land is under consideration for development, consult with local communities and land owners to identify probable impacts and plan for equitable compensation and preservation of land for food crops (CEDAW GR 34.62)

Recognize and support the key role of women as food producers

In many rural areas, women are primary food producers for the family as well as the market. Yet many development plans are directed at male farmers and cash crops only. Changes in agricultural production as the result of climate change or changes in trade policy affect women farmers as well.

We recommend that Member States:

- Provide female farmers with training, agricultural inputs, and credit to improve their food crop yields (CEDAW GR 34.43)
- Include rural women farmers in all development planning aimed at food production (CEDAW GR 34.17)
- Facilitate and encourage participation of rural women's civil society organizations in dealing with agricultural changes such as new food production technologies and climate change impacts (CEDAW GR 34.11, 12)
- Support the inclusion of women farmers in farm cooperatives to facilitate village adaptation to agricultural change (CEDAW GR 34.50)

Safeguard land rights for widows and divorcee

When women are widowed or divorced, they sometimes lose rights to the land they have cultivated for years. The land reverts to the husband's family or community and the female cultivator must petition the authorities in order to feed herself and her children.

We recommend that Member States

- Enact laws safeguarding widows' and divorcees' right to marital land
- Institute avenues of mediation for widows and divorcees when threatened with loss of their land or other possessions
- Emphasize to judicial, police, and customary authorities that widows' rights are human rights

Improve access to water by rural women and girls

The United Nations recognized the human right to water and sanitation in 2010, and at a global level, several targets for providing safe drinking water have been met. According to WHO, 89 percent of the world's population has access to improved drinking water. Hidden among these accolades are significant inequalities, especially by gender, income, ethnicity, and location, of who is able to access adequate water.

We recommend that Member States

- Assess safe water access, disaggregating results by gender, class, ethnicity, and location
- Consult with rural women's groups, local authorities, NGOs, and academics to determine dynamics of unequal access to safe water
- Establish national plans for improving access to safe water and sanitation by marginalized groups, including rural women (SDG 6.1)

Include rural women in all water and sanitation planning

The advantages that have accrued in the West through development and globalization have been accompanied by a deepening of a water divide between the

over-consumption of the affluent and the scarcity experienced by the rest. Women are particularly affected by these divides since they are responsible for the provision of water within families.

We recommend that Member States

- Include representatives of rural women's civil society organizations in all water, sanitation, and other development planning processes (CEDAW 14.2, CEDAW GR 34.54)
- Address industrial pollution of water sources, establishing laws to safeguard clean water

Facilitate school attendance for children of rural women

Poor small-holder farmers must use their scarce resources to provide school fees and uniforms for their children, restricting funds available for nutrition and other necessities.

We recommend that Member States:

- Eliminate formal and informal school fees so that family resources can be directed to good nutrition (CEDAW GR 34.43)
- Raise teacher salaries so that families are not pressured to provide daily fees for children to attend school
- Provide breakfast and lunch at school to incentivize rural parents to send their daughters as well as their sons
- Address child care needs so that girls do not miss school due to caring for younger siblings (CEDAW GR 34.43)
- Ensure girls' physical security in travelling to school and on school property.

Expand literacy programs for adult rural women

Adult literacy is much lower for rural women than for urban women. Even among rural women, literacy varies dramatically along class, caste, ethnic, and religious lines. When rural women acquire literacy, they have new opportunities for paid employment and the means to contribute more effectively to their family circumstances. Educated women are more able to press for the enforcement of laws protecting women and girls such as those against domestic violence and early marriage.

We recommend that Member States

- Establish classes in rural villages that accommodate women's work responsibilities, offering them at hours that women can realistically attend (CEDAW 10.e, 14.2, CEDAW GR 34.43)
- Provide child care and meals to enable women to attend class regularly
- Develop literacy materials that address rural women's circumstances

Promote the formation of rural women's community grassroots groups

Women's community grassroots groups provide the means for rural women to support one another as they address community and family needs. Community grassroots groups mobilize and empower rural women, giving them the confidence and skills to engage in the political process. They can advocate for girls' education, adult literacy classes, access to clean water, improved sanitation, and primary health care.

We recommend that Member States

- Build women's groups into adult literacy programs and provide child care
- Provide funding in rural budgets to promote and support rural women's groups
- Support and encourage female leadership that arises from rural women's groups
- Encourage full participation of women in political office (CEDAW 7.a, CEDAW GR 34:54)

Provide comprehensive health services to rural women and girls

Access to health care is essential for women's control of their lives and care for their families. Health crises can devastate a rural family's finances and ability to provide for the future. Women need easy access to reproductive and other health services to plan their families and maintain their health into their elder years.

We recommend that Member States

- Build networks of rural health clinics with modest fees and provision for free care for the poorest families (CEDAW 14.2; CEDAW GR 34.39)
- Encourage rural girls to enter medical careers and provide low-cost medical and nursing schools (CEDAW 10.a)
- Provide free contraception in easy-access centres (CEDAW 12.1)
- Promote preventive healthcare measures including free vaccinations.