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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

Statement submitted by Education International (EI), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Public Services International (PSI), non-governmental organizations 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 and of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

Statement

The economic empowerment of rural women workers through rights at work, education and public investment

EI, ITUC and PSI¹ recognises the contribution of women to growing, processing and preparing food and in particular the contribution of women on family farms to ensuring global food security – which is key knowing that today 1 billion of people are living in hunger. We welcome measures to ensure that women have access and ownership of land, have access to credits, to markets, to technology, to all measures that empower and assist them in eradicating poverty and hunger. The situation of rural women workers, in particular in agriculture also needs to be addressed. They are all too frequently ignored by researchers and academics, policy makers and legislators. The global trade union movement calls for specific measures to ensure the economic, social and political empowerment of all rural women workers, including access to public goods, legal and social protection and public investment in social and physical infrastructure and effective service delivery. This is most urgently needed: out of the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty (ie on less than US\$1.25 per day), 1 billion are in rural areas.

Employment of women in agriculture

Agriculture remains a significant employment sector. In 1991, 45.2 per cent of total employment was in agriculture but by 2007, this share had fallen to 34.9 per cent. Women make up 41.3 per cent of the total and work across all agricultural sectors. They work as day labourers, seasonal workers, migrant workers, on plantations and in pack-houses, in glasshouses and cold stores, although the percentage of the workforce they constitute varies and job classifications are often gender defined. In the tea sector which globally employs millions of workers, women are the largest workforce. In the banana industry they are mainly confined to pack houses. In newer crops like cut flowers and export horticulture women make up a majority of the workforce both in harvesting and packing.

Current challenges

Agriculture is regrettably characterised by significant decent work deficits. Agricultural workers are often denied access to even the most basic of rights covered in the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) set of core conventions: freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively, elimination of all forms of discrimination, equality at work and elimination of child labour, bonded and forced labour. In addition, labour inspection is often non-existent or weak².

¹ The statement is prepared in partnership with IUF (International Union of Food Agriculture, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco & Allied Workers Associations)

² Report ILO 2008, "Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction"

Women particularly face inequalities when trying to access decent work. For instance, due to practices of employers, who offer women short term contracts and/or demand a pregnancy test before offering employment, women workers cannot exercise their right to maternity benefits.

Apart from the multiple roles women have as household managers and family carers, as organisers and providers of community services and in the economy, rural women workers in particular have the longest working day. The unequal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men as well the absence of quality public services lead to excessive hours of paid and unpaid work for women and limits women's access to paid work.

The low participation and representation of women in decision making in rural areas – which is even a more acute problem than in urban areas - inevitably leads to biases in priorities, policies and programs.

Further, the agriculture sector ranks as one of the most dangerous industries. Injuries and fatalities are common, often leading to incapacity or death which plunge families even deeper into poverty. Women working in pack-houses and the cut flower industry often contract upper limb disorders through repetitive work and poor work stations.

Evidence gathered by trade unions indicates that sexual harassment is widespread especially when women are on temporary contracts or piece rates. Often employers demand sexual favours before renewing contracts and/or paying full entitlements.

Use of child labour in rural areas is widespread with agriculture being the biggest user across all sectors. ILO's latest figures estimates that 60 per cent of all child labour is in agriculture. This means that 132 million girls and boys aged 5 to 14 are working in agriculture often doing work that is hazardous to their health and/or interferes with their education.

The severe decent work deficits of women and men rural workers as well the existence of child labour need to be effectively addressed in rural employment and poverty reduction programs and policies.

In addition, providing rural workers with access to social protection must be a priority. It is an important step towards the formalisation of their working situation. The UNCSW must express support for the conclusions of the ILO General Discussion on social protection that took place during the 100th session of the ILC and for the “Bachelet report: Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization”. Governments must set up social protection floors - with the technical support of the ILO - to make sure female rural workers are effectively covered. The role of the social partners is crucial in building a social protection floor for rural working women.

Empowering rural women through public investment

Privatisation and the reduction in the role of the state in economic life have had an acute impact on the lives of women in rural areas. Because of their specific productive and reproductive roles and position within society, rural women have been among the worst affected by cuts in social spending, where substantial costs have been shifted from the state to the household.

There are few rural areas where the demand for health and care services – including for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS – water, sanitation and transport services and access to energy supplies is met by existing provisions. As a consequence, rural women have been forced to take on an increasing burden of unpaid work (care tasks, obtaining food, collecting water and firewood, etc.) A World Bank study found that women in rural Africa spend 65 % of their time on journeys on foot.

Studies show that women work 12-13 hours a week more than men. Improvements in rural infrastructure, such as affordable and safe water, sanitation and energy near the home and accessible and affordable modes of transport could dramatically improve the “time poverty” of rural women.

The provision of public services in rural areas is also a key driver in the creation of quality jobs for women and men, rural development and the expansion of social protection, which remains non-existent or inadequate in rural areas.

The Monterrey Consensus noted that investments in basic economic and social infrastructure, social services and social protection, including education, health, nutrition, shelter and social security programmes, which were gender sensitive and fully inclusive of the rural sector, were vital for enabling people to adapt to and benefit from changing economic conditions and opportunities.

The UN Millennium Project has emphasised the importance of expanding rural access to vital public services and infrastructure in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Education is key to empowerment of girls and women in rural areas

There is universal agreement that economic and political empowerment of women and girls through education is the key to development. Amongst others, education of women and girls is the most effective means of eliminating child labour, the best remedy against child marriage, and the best medicine for improving maternal health.

Despite the obvious benefits of education, data show that particularly poor girls from rural areas and from ethnic minority or Indigenous groups have the lowest education and literacy levels: Rural location compounds wealth and gender disadvantages, reflecting the impact of cultural attitudes and the unequal burden of household labour. Among Indigenous Peoples, poverty and gender discrimination

further exacerbate education deprivation (UNESCO 2010). Globally, two thirds of the 796 million illiterate adults are women (UNESCO 2011).

Rural and Indigenous women and the environment

Rural and Indigenous women's lives and livelihoods are directly threatened by climate change, environmental degradation, militarisation, ethnic and religious discrimination and economic policies that make small scale subsistence farming unsustainable.

Women are affected more severely and are more at risk from natural disasters and extreme weather events, including during post-disaster response efforts. Women's exclusion from decision-making and limited access to and control over resources impedes their rights, and in the case of climate change, it means that women's voices are absent from decisions about environmental management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, with long-term consequences for the wellbeing of women, their families and the sustainability of their communities. It is therefore important to articulate rural and Indigenous women's critical role and capacity in the nurturing of a sustainable ecological system.

Rural domestic workers

Millions of women work as domestic workers. In rural areas it is not uncommon for the wife or girl child of an agricultural worker to be expected to "help out" in the employer's household. Their work is unrecognized, unacknowledged, in particular because it takes place in private households.

Governments fail to extend to domestic workers the rights and benefits other workers enjoy. Global unions campaigned successfully for the adoption of a new ILO Convention 189 on domestic workers (2011). In 2012, their "12 by 12" campaign aims at the ratification and implementation of C189 in 12 countries.

Conclusions

EI, ITUC and PSI (supported by IUF) call on Member States at the CSW56 to:

- Ensure the concept of decent work and creation of decent jobs are fully incorporated into rural development strategies;
- Review, extend and effectively implement national legislation which covers all rural women workers, including agricultural workers and ratify and implement ILO conventions: C110 (Plantations), C131 (Minimum Wage), C129 (Labour Inspection -Agriculture), C141(Rural Workers' Organisations), C156: Workers with Family Responsibilities, C138: Minimum age for employment and C182 on combatting the worst forms of child labour, C183(Maternity Protection), C184 (Safety and Health in Agriculture) and C189 (Domestic Workers);

- Implement CEDAW, the Beijing Platform of Action and the Millennium Development Goals (on gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment);
- Set up social protection floors with the technical support of the ILO to make sure female rural workers are effectively covered;
- Ensure that gender responsive budgeting, gender mainstreaming and gender sensitive employment policies are systematically integrated in the design and implementation of rural development policies, programs and budgets;
- Strengthen rural labour inspection;
- Develop innovative communication strategies to ensure rural women workers are aware of their rights in particular maternity rights;
- Ensure provision of public quality education free of charge and with adequate facilities, qualified teachers, good sanitation, safe transportation in order to increase the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and reduce child labour. Incentives for families to send their girls to school, gender-sensitive relevant curriculum and text books, opportunities for further education and training, and access and entry to the labour market, makes a difference.
- Provide incentives for qualified female teachers to work in rural and isolated areas and introduce measures to ensure their safety;
- Develop and combine rural vocational educational training opportunities and qualifications with employment promotion, which is a recognised link between rural employment, poverty reduction and food security.
- Establish consultative processes that call for social dialogue with trade unions. Create opportunities for rural women to participate fully and effectively in decision making processes, including development planning.