2022– 2023 Biennium

SI Where We Stand Statement

Rural Women

Where Things Stand…

In 2023, the UN Secretary General has reviewed whether or not implementation of the agreed conclusions of the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which dealt with the challenges that rural women faced, had been successful. As to women in general, it was observed that the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 5 (Gender Equality), by 2030, appeared increasingly unlikely for a number of reasons – including the fact that less than half the data needed to monitor progress was available.

The UN Secretary General's observations regarding the implementation of CSW 64's outcome document regarding rural women and girls was even more troubling. It was observed that long before the COVID-19 and Ukraine crises, rural women and girls were at a greater risk of rising poverty, food insecurity, violence, and exclusion in the context of the escalating consequences of the environment and climate emergencies, the lingering impacts of the great recession, as well as the deep persistence of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

In 2022, almost every global gender and development indicator with available data continued to show that rural women lagged behind rural men and urban women. They have joined others in facing cascading crises in the forms of the lingering impacts of the pandemic and sluggish recovery in many countries which was only intensified by rising inflation and the effects of the war in Ukraine.

The UN Secretary General gave specific examples regarding how rural women and girls continued to be negatively impacted in 2022. Forty three per cent of the world's population, or more than 3 billion people, including women and girls, live in rural areas. Eighty per cent of the world's extreme poor, which also includes many women and girls, are also located in these rural areas. An estimated 2.5 billion people rely on agricultural livelihoods with approximately 1.5 billion people, including poor women and girls, living in smallholder households with heightened vulnerability to the effects of economic, environmental, and climate shocks, and the disruptions in supply chains and unprecedented price rises for food, fuel and fertiliser brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These effects have all had disproportionate gendered impacts, pushing rural women and girls even further behind.

The unforeseen impacts of the pandemic have resulted in 1.6 million learners leaving school and an estimated 11 million girls at risk of not returning in addition to the 130 million girls who were already out of school. Girls from the poorest households and in rural areas have been left behind. The difference in upper secondary school completion rates between the poorest rural girls and the richest urban girls ranges from 11.5 to 72.2 per cent in 29 countries with recent data. The chances of rural girls completing primary and secondary education continue to be jeopardised not only by poverty but also by additional burdens such as the need to spend precious time on unpaid care and domestic work and the lack of improved drinking water or electricity in their households.

The situation of women in rural areas is challenging. Rural women and girls suffer disproportionately from gender-based discrimination, they face greater pressure than their urban peers to adhere to traditional practices and customs. Their opportunities are limited by the broader development context and by specific local factors, such as isolation and remoteness.

Poverty. Gender inequality is a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty. It is estimated that 60% of chronically hungry people are women and girls. 80% of the world's poor live in rural areas and work mainly in farming, often for the needs of family, or simply subsistence. Women living in rural areas suffer disproportionately from poverty, far worse than rural men or those living in cities.

Agriculture. On average, women make up about 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. If women had the same access to productive resources as men, for example land, livestock, and mechanical equipment, they could increase yields on their farms by 20% to 30%, raising total agricultural output in these countries by 2.5 to 4%. This would reduce the number of hungry people in the world by around 12 to 17%.

Water and sanitation. Women in sub-Saharan Africa collectively spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting water. This negatively impacts women's employment and girl's educational opportunities. There is still far less access to clean or improved water sources in rural areas than in urban areas.

Education. Rural girls are more likely to be out of school than those who live in urban areas. Lack of education can lead to limited access to employment and income, as well as exclusion from political and civic leadership, leaving women and girls behind. Girls forced into early marriage may not have access to continuing education; if secondary education is available to girls, they may regularly be missing it due to lack of adequate toilet facilities or taboos around menstruation.

Natural disasters, climate change, and conflict. Rural women's health, education and livelihoods can be undermined by natural disasters, climate change, and conflict more so than men. Land titles are more likely to be held by men. This means that following a disaster, if a woman is widowed, she cannot independently claim state-offered reconstruction funds. Women can also be more at risk from natural disasters and flooding, as often boys and not girls are taught to swim at an early age.

And Where Things Need to Go…

Fundamental Action

To empower rural women and girls, action must be taken by Member States, the private sector and civil society. Together we must ensure that all human rights are realised, including the equal involvement of women and girls in the economic, social, cultural, and political development of communities.

All Member States must fully implement previous human rights agreements and comply with the requirements of CEDAW.

To achieve the SDGs that support all rural women and girls, Member States must first improve national statistical offices and other relevant parties to properly collect, analyse, and disseminate sex and age disaggregated data. In doing so, Member States can then produce gender statistics throughout all censuses that will better enable them to implement and monitor policies designed to aid rural women and girls. Furthermore, Member States must recognise the value of data available from civil society.

Further Action Required…

Policies and programmes should take a life-course approach to education and employment for rural women and girls, recognising and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages and that women and girls living in rural areas have different learning needs at different times in their lives.

Work with local partners to ensure gender appropriate and sensitive sanitation facilities.

Develop policies and programmes that involve women in the management and provision of accessible, safe, and effective water and sanitation resources. Support policies and programmes which provide rural women and girls with finance and land security, as well as securing a place in decision-making forums at all levels, encouraging more female leadership in organisations pertaining to food and agriculture through mentoring opportunities and training.

Where Soroptimist International Stands…

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for on behalf of all women and girls in rural areas:

Soroptimist International urges governments, civil society, the private sector, and other relevant partners to support the recommendations contained in the **Secretary General's 2023 report** E/CN.6/2023/4. Soroptimist International believes that the following require priority measures for action to enable all rural women and girls to achieve gender equality and empowerment:

Poverty. Member States and government at all levels must be encouraged to provide all women with support through economic and social policies aimed at the eradication of rural poverty, ensuring that social protection is available for the most vulnerable.

Agriculture. Enable all women to participate as equal contributors in agricultural and non-farm sectors, providing full and equal rights to land and inheritance, improvement of skills and capacity building **through Internet and digital technologies**, technical, and vocational training, and access to financial and other resources for entrepreneurship.

Water and Sanitation. Engage all women in the development of appropriate infrastructures for access to clean and safe water **and energy resources**, and support the improvement of provision of safe sanitation facilities, especially for educational and health institutions.

Education. Quality education must be accessible beyond primary stages, and **now include Internet and digital technologies as such an education** can be regarded as one of the major pillars of social protection, offering all women and girls the opportunity to fulfil their potential, engage in social entrepreneurship or find meaningful employment. Recognise the fundamental importance of educating all rural women and girls to achieve gender equality, enabling them to regularly and safely attend educational institutions.

Soroptimist International supports the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through its Federations, Unions, Regions Clubs, by working on the ground with partner organisations and UN agencies to Educate, Empower, and Enable all women and girls everywhere.

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