RURAL WOMEN ‘POWERFUL CATALYSTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT’, AGENTS AGAINST POVERTY, HUNGER, WOMEN’S COMMISSION TOLD, AS GENERAL DEBATE CONCLUDES

Speakers Stress Links between Gender Equality, Empowerment and Wide Array Of Issues, Including Agricultural Finance, Migration, Urbanization, Global Trade

Calls to incorporate gender equality into a wide array of challenging global issues — from sustainable development to migration to urbanization — were at the forefront of discussions today, as the Commission on the Status of Women concluded the general debate segment of its sixty-fifth annual session.

“Rural women are powerful catalysts for sustainable development, as well as agents against poverty and hunger,” said the representative of the non-governmental organization International Trade Union Confederation, echoing the statements made by many States and intergovernmental and other organizations throughout the day. Indeed, she said, rural poverty was deeply rooted in the balance between “what women do and what they have”. Around the world, women were frequently deprived of their basic rights, including the right to collective bargaining and to safe working conditions. The world had no choice but to solidify the position of rural women, she added, as it was “on their shoulders” that sustainable development would be achieved.

Indeed, agreed the representative of Timor-Leste, as the upcoming United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development — known as “Rio+20” — approached, it was crucial for the international community to once again recognize women’s vital role in the three pillars of sustainable development: economic; social; and political. In order to achieve sustainable development, gender equality and empowerment must be mainstreamed into all policies, such as health, agriculture, energy and finance, she said.

Other speakers, including the representative of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), encouraged all partners to scale up investments in rural development, finance and agriculture, as well as to expand rural women’s access to, and ownership of, productive resources and land. Mainstreaming the economic empowerment of rural women into Rio+20 was critical, he added, as it would ensure that due attention was paid to them in the post-2015 framework. Meanwhile, the representative of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies brought a unique disaster risk and reduction perspective to the issue of women’s empowerment, calling for the effective mainstreaming of gender-sensitive risk reduction into sustainable development efforts.

“In many cultures, it is the women who work in the fields,” said the representative of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), who also addressed the Commission today. However, he added, “they are often ignored in policies to support the [agricultural] sector”. Focusing on the links between global trade and the struggle for gender equality, he said that UNCTAD was examining the roles of women as producers and consumers of agricultural and food products, and had begun research on the particular impacts of trade policy and trade liberalization on women. In that context, he said, it was crucial to build the productive capacities of both women and men in developing and least developed countries, enabling them to attract more investments, to upgrade technologically, to diversify their production and to better integrate into the world economy.
International migration was yet another issue whose intersection with gender equality and women's empowerment was explored during the day's debate. In societies where women's power was limited, said the representative of the International Organization for Migration, the act of migration was, in itself, empowering. Migration stimulated change in women and migrants themselves, and in the societies which sent and received them. Female migrants also made a significant contribution through their labour, both to their countries of destination and, through remittances, to their countries of origin.

At the same time, rural women could be left particularly vulnerable when the male head of household migrated, as they might face an increased workload or pressure to sustain multiple social functions. Lack of information could also have dramatic consequences on the lives of women after migration. Additionally, there was evidence that remitted money was frequently spent on consumption and not on productive purposes, and access to resources remained challenging for rural women. Therefore, she said, incentives for targeted financial advice to rural women should be provided to remittance-receiving households.

Also underscoring the unique challenges facing women in her area of focus, the representative of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) said that, while one in three people in developing world cities lived in a slum, it was women and girls who often suffered the worst effects of slum life. Those included poor access to clean water, inadequate sanitation, unemployment, insecurity of tenure and gender-based violence. There had been a long-standing notion that the poor were better off in urban than rural areas, she said; however, recent studies had shown the contrary.

On the whole, Governments and policymakers were still responding inadequately to the different needs of women in towns and cities. She, therefore, called on stakeholders to ensure women's full participation in the planning management and governance of cities and towns; to mainstream gender issues into the design and implementation of urban water and sanitation programmes; and to ensure effective reform around land and property to provide pro-poor and gender-responsive policies; among other recommendations.

Also speaking today were the representatives of Iraq, Viet Nam, Sri Lanka, Syria, Libya, Nepal, Bahamas, Costa Rica, Burundi, Bolivia, Rwanda, Comoros, Trinidad and Tobago and Haiti.

An observer for the Holy See also participated.

Also taking part were the representatives of the League of Arab States, the African Union, the Organization of American States, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Regional Economic Commissions, the International Labour Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

Representatives of the Working Group on discrimination against women in law and practice, African women's regional organizations, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, the Asia Pacific Regional Caucus and the International Council of Women also took part in the discussion.

Israel spoke in exercise of its right of reply.

The Commission will reconvene at 10 a.m. Tuesday, 6 March, to hold a panel discussion on “Engaging young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality”.

Background

The Commission on the Status of Women continued its sixty-fifth session today, completing its general discussion on the priority theme — the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, sustainable development and current challenges. (For more information, see Press Release WOM/1889 of 24 February.)

Statements

PARIKHAN SHAWKY, Counsellor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iraq, said that her Government prioritized the improvement of the situation of rural women, as well as the empowerment of all Iraqi women. The country was working to improve the skills of rural women and to encourage
their use of scientific methods in agricultural work, meanwhile increasing agricultural production. It had introduced a new Government unit on rural women, with a number of targets and tasks, including the establishment of agricultural projects. Iraq was also making investments in primary materials, and was helping women enhance their role in social and humanitarian development. Among other things, she said, workshops were being held in the use of computers and technology. The role of civil society organizations was being increased and women were encouraged to take part in all aspects of life. Iraq stood committed to all international agreements to which it was a party, she added.

NGUYEN CAM LINH (Viet Nam), aligning with the “Group of 77” developing countries and China, said that, if rural women were given equal access to productive resources, global agriculture output could increase by 30 per cent. In her country, women were a crucial force in rural modernization, accounting for 50.5 per cent of the agriculture workforce. Viet Nam had worked to improve gender equality policies and legislation, as well as promote the implementation of social security policies. Together with the gender equality law, the Prime Minister had approved a national gender equality strategy for the 2011-2020 period, and a national gender equality programme for the 2011-2015 period. Access to credit had also improved for rural women. By 2010, 83.7 per cent of poor households headed by women had received loans from the Viet Nam Social Policy Bank. But, rural women faced educational, employment and information access disadvantages, as compared to urban women. The Government was determined to promote the implementation of the gender equality law, and ensure equal rights for women and girls in all fields.

PALITHA KOHONA (Sri Lanka), associating himself with the Group of 77, urged recommitting to intensified support for women, especially rural women. For its part, Sri Lanka had created an environment for women and girls to reach ever higher goals by mobilizing resources and poverty-focused programmes. Among the key constraints for women were limited or no access to productive resources, public goods and decision-making opportunities, challenges that Sri Lanka had confronted since independence. Early on, Sri Lanka had identified women as critical agents of social and economic change. Achieving success in low maternal mortality had been facilitated by infrastructure investments in roads and hospitals — success achieved with modest overall total public expenditures in health. Sri Lankan women also enjoyed a longer life expectancy than men. In sum, he said Sri Lanka had recognized the mutually reinforcing links between gender equality, economic growth, poverty eradication and sustainable development.

SOFIA MESQUITA BORGES (Timor-Leste), associating herself with the Group of 77, said that women in Timor-Leste were particularly vulnerable to shocks, natural disasters and climate change, and they generally undertook work outside the formal economic sphere. Those women were often less educated and faced additional barriers in obtaining education, access to health services, formal economic activities and participation in government. Additionally, 70 per cent of women with disabilities were from rural backgrounds, which further compounded the challenges they faced. As the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”) approached, she said, it was crucial for the international community to recommit itself to Principle 20, which acknowledged women's vital role in all three pillars of sustainable development: economic; social; and political. In order to achieve sustainable development, gender equality and empowerment — including for rural women — must be mainstreamed into all policies, such as health, agriculture, energy and finance. In addition, she said, women must gain full participation in both the political and economic sectors of society; to that end, Timor-Leste had amended its Parliamentary Election Law to increase the quota of female parliamentary candidates from 25 per cent to 33 per cent.

MONIA ALSALEH (Syria), associating herself with the Group of 77, said that her delegation regretted that, as in previous sessions, the report of the Secretary-General contained no mention of the challenges and obstacles faced by Syrian women — in particular, rural women — in the occupied Syrian Golan; in that regard, Syria had transmitted information on the suffering of those women to the Secretary-General by official memorandum, she said. The psychological, physical and social dimensions of that “odiously” imposed occupation constituted a socio-economic burden weighing on women. Moreover, the Israeli occupation was seriously impeding development and human rights efforts put forth by the State. She emphasized that, for its part, the Syrian Government was putting in place a number of initiatives to increase the participation of women in decision-making circles.

“Women are becoming more prominent in all areas of life,” she said, noting that they now held political, military and other posts. Women also enjoyed the right to vote and could be candidates in elections, she concluded.

MERIAM EL AMIN AHMAD (Libya) aligning herself with the Group of 77 and the African Group, said her country was committed to respecting women’s human rights. Libya had adopted
legislation to guarantee women’s rights, which reaffirmed their right to access health and social security services, as well as economic activities. Education was essential, as it ensured women’s access to work. Girls’ enrolment rates were almost equal to those of boys, while the number of girls at university exceeded that for men. But, some Libyan women did not fully enjoy their rights, due to cultural conditions and social traditions that affirmed the man as the master of the house and family decision maker. “Libya is going through a significant transitional stage,” she said, noting that one year had passed since the 2011 “revolution.”

Indeed, Libyan women had only recently discovered their rights and she hoped women would claim their full exercise in the political process by participating in the electoral campaign and the vote, and rejecting any law that sought to marginalize their role in society. She welcomed that this year’s meeting had made rural women a priority, proving that the international community recognized their important role in society. Women had the primary duty of securing food for the family, yet suffered gender discrimination in the agricultural sector, including in accessing loans and markets, as well as in owning agricultural land.

GYAN CHANDRA ACHARYA (Nepal), associating himself with the Group of 77, said the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was the most comprehensive global policy framework for gender equality and women’s empowerment. Nepal was firmly committed to ensuring gender equality and women’s empowerment, having adopted a rights-based approach to social, economic and political empowerment for women. Access to education, health and resources would greatly strengthen rural women’s empowerment. As such, Nepal had introduced programmes, such as gender-responsive budgets and targeted resource allocation to uplift women, especially those in marginalized groups and regions. Microcredit, education and food-for-education programmes had also helped to empower women and girls at the community level, efforts that must be enhanced in the years ahead. Nepal had taken legal and administrative measures to end discrimination against women, including by amending laws and enacting the Human Trafficking Control Act. The Government had also adopted a national action plan for the implementation of Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008). Such efforts showed that Nepal was heading in the right direction.

PAULETTE A. BETHEL (Bahamas) aligned herself with the Group of 77, with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). She said that her country continued to make progress, despite its vulnerabilities, in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women at the national level, and had undertaken a number of initiatives in that regard. The Bahamas had completed the initial draft of its Gender Policy, which was created with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) subregional office in the Caribbean; once approved and implemented, that policy would enable the Government to mainstream a gender perspective into national development policy, programmes and initiatives. As the country prepared to conduct its General Elections, there had been an increase in the number of women seeking political office. Of the 38 available parliamentary seats, there were 17 female candidates seeking office, she said.

As an archipelagic State spread over 100,000 square miles of Atlantic Ocean, the Bahamas had many residents who relied heavily on agriculture and fisheries production as a way of life. Agricultural development was, therefore, a key factor in the further development of the Bahamas and also a means to food security. The Bahamas Agricultural and Industrial Corporation encouraged that development and provided a number of incentives to persons — including women — who were interested in becoming involved in farming and industrial ventures, or were already involved in such ventures.

EDUARDO ULIBARRI (Costa Rica) said that it was critical to address, appropriately and thoroughly, the situation of rural women as a matter of human rights and social justice. Rural conditions “compounded and deepened” the challenges faced by women, he added; as rural women were “always the most affected”. “We must listen to their voices, especially in light of the Rio+20 conference,” he stressed, adding that, today, the contributions of many women were hardly recognized. It was important to expand caregiving services in rural areas and to divide household work more evenly. Costa Rica had its first female President, Laura Chinchilla Miranda, he said, whose agenda included the strengthening of women’s social and economic rights; closing the employment gap; and increasing women’s participation in public life, among other goals. Today, almost 40 per cent of parliamentarians and about half of those taking part in local councils were women. Costa Rica had also continued to improve its electoral laws to include the principle of parity, he said. As the international community continued its efforts towards gender equality and the empowerment of women, it was very important to work jointly with UN Women, the Office of the United Nations High
HERMÉNÉGILODE NIYONZIMA (Burundi), noting that his country was committed to the Millennium Development Goals, said that, in the area of education, the 2006-2015 plan aimed to help the most vulnerable populations. Free education had been offered since 2005. In terms of health, Burundi had developed a national health policy, which was part of the poverty reduction strategy, as well as a reproductive health policy. Burundi also offered childcare until age 5. In other areas, he said 55.2 per cent of women worked in the agriculture sector and that Burundi would start a credit policy, which would include microfinance. In terms of political participation, he said 42.8 per cent of people in government were women; and 32 per cent of people in the national assembly were women. The “Burundi 2025” plan promoted women’s advancement, which aimed to increase women’s participation in economic development. The strategic framework for growth and poverty reduction also included women’s promotion and gender equality plans. He also cited a national gender policy, a plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and a national strategy to combat gender-based violence. “Women are deeply affected by the effects of poverty,” he said, noting that women faced challenges in accessing productive resources.

RAFAEL ARCHONDO (Bolivia), aligning with the Group of 77, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), said 62 per cent of the Bolivian population was indigenous. As such, the Government had approved several public policies on indigenous peoples. A new basic curriculum for schools, drawn up with women’s participation, aimed to find a balance with Mother Earth. From its 2011 budget, some 45.3 million bolivianos had been invested in the country’s three indigenous universities. To prevent dropouts, a bonus was granted each year to all boys and girls in primary schools. In the productive heritage and citizenship programme, the Government helped women access productive resources, land and technical assistance. Such efforts had helped 10,000 women in 18 municipalities. Through a new agriculture law, Bolivia had created agrarian security — “pachamama” — while the “My Water” programme financed drinking water and food sovereignty. He said 724,000 families had land titles. If a woman was married, her name appeared first on the registry, which guaranteed inheritance for women.

MOSES RUGEMA (Rwanda) aligned himself with the Group of 77, as well as with the African Group of States. The Government sought to create favourable conditions to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, he said, in particular by putting in place specific — and explicit — laws to ensure the equality between men and women. The implantation of those instruments was progressively taking root at both the central and local levels. The Rwandan agricultural sector accounted for a large proportion of the economy. Therefore, a land registration system had been put in place to ensure that everyone had equal access to land; land was now registered in the name of both a husband and wife, and children were listed as beneficiaries. A 1999 law on marriage and inheritance also ensured equal rights to land under the law. Facilitating the abilities of rural Rwandan women to access credit was the goal of a number of other initiatives, he said, naming, in that respect, the Women Guarantee Fund and the establishment of a women’s bank. In relation to good governance and women’s empowerment, women were encouraged to take part in government at all levels of society. However, limited access to technology and resources were among the challenges still faced by many rural women.

FATIMA ALFEINE (Comoros) joined with the statements of the African Group of States and the Group of 77. The Comoros Constitution guaranteed equality for all its citizens, she said. The Government recognized the importance of a gender perspective and the full participation of women in the process of development. Women made up 48 per cent of the agricultural sector, which accounted for some 31 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product. However, women were limited by low levels of schooling; many worked in the informal sector or in small commerce enterprises. Many women could not avail themselves of all provisions of the law ensuring women’s rights. In response, she said, the Government had implemented specific measures to spread and recognize the achievements of rural women. It hoped to institutionalize district centres to help women access information and technology and to promote information campaigns among women. It was currently holding workshops on the rights of women and on functional literacy, among others. Additionally, violence against women, illiteracy, hunger and other major issues continued to be priorities for the Government, and required the support of the international community.

DIANNE WILLMAN, observer for the Holy See, said rural women often worked in deplorable situations, with long hours of unpaid work, limited access to health care and exposure to violence. Rural-to-urban or international migration often was the only viable option for rural women, which could
result in exploitation and abuse as migrants. Rural women were often the caregivers in the family and community. The negative impact of neglected children and the family were far-reaching. Improving rural women’s lives would improve society as a whole. Education and training, provision of resources, service delivery, access to financial systems and communication technology were just some areas that demanded ongoing attention, as they led to realizing the right to development. Men’s cooperation and involvement, especially in overcoming prejudice, also was crucial to an authentic human-centred approach. International and national stakeholders should contribute to policy development that would free women from oppressive circumstances. Quoting the Secretary-General, she said: “Rural women are powerful agents and participants in sustainable development.” She highlighted food security, poverty eradication and the central role of the family in that regard.

KAMALA CHANDRAKRIRANA, Working Group on discrimination against women in law and practice, said the Working Group had been established by the Human Rights Council in 2010. Working Group members had taken up their functions on 1 May 2011. They had met three times and adopted methodological and analytical approaches to future work. They had been tasked to prepare a compendium of best practices related to the elimination of laws that discriminated against women, as well as study the ways and means of cooperation between the Working Group and States to eliminate discrimination against women in law. The Working Group would conduct two to three country visits each year, which would allow for collecting first-hand information on laws and practices that discriminated against women. Thematic priorities included discrimination against women in public and political life, which would pay special attention to periods of political transition. During its recent mission to Morocco, the Working Group had met with rural women leaders who had participated in local elections and government development programmes. The findings would be reflected in its report presented to the Council in June. In 2013, the Working Group would address discrimination against women in law and practice in economic and social life.

ANNE CHRISTENSEN, of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (ICRC), said that one of today’s greatest challenges was that health inequalities were on the rise, despite overall progress on health. Particular attention must be paid to the most vulnerable groups, including women and children, who were too often subjected to stigma and discrimination and denied access to health care. In that regard, she said, community-based volunteers would reach the most un-reached in places around the world; in addition, many of the 187 ICRC member States were helping to bridge the gaps in health inequality, at the same time building women’s knowledge, skills and leadership by engaging them in programme design and delivery. The ICRC welcomed the initiative by Japan to address “Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Natural Disasters” in a new resolution at the current session of the Commission, and hoped that it would be adopted unanimously. The ICRC also encouraged an increased and improved collaboration between humanitarian and development practitioners for the benefit of safer, healthier and more resilient communities. Effective collaboration was crucial in mainstreaming gender-sensitive risk reduction into sustainable development work in health, water and sanitation and food security, and must take place at local, national and global levels, if minimum safety and resilience standards were to be achieved.

Ms. CARRENO, speaking on behalf of the President of the Inter-American Commission for Women of the Organization of American States, said that the 84-year-old Commission was the first intergovernmental mechanism of the Americas for the protection of the human rights of women. Today, at a time when the democracy and governability of the hemisphere faced innumerable challenges, it was urgent to generate the appropriate conditions in order to guarantee the full exercise of women’s citizenship at all levels. The Brasilia Consensus, adopted by Governments at the eleventh Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Women, as well as the Declaration of the Year of Women, constituted the basis of the intergovernmental agenda for the human rights of women in the region. In that framework, the synergies between the bodies present at the current session of the Commission formed part of the “new architecture” for the twenty-first century, she said, and were fundamental in the implementation of those accords aimed at combating structural inequalities and discrimination. In addition, the theme “Food security with sovereignty” would be examined during the next period of sessions of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States, taking place in Bolivia in June. The agreed conclusions of the current session of the Commission would be incorporated by Governments into the results at that occasion.

FIAMMA ARDITI DI CASTELVETERE MANZO, observer for the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, said combating poverty, regardless of gender, race, religion or nationality, had been at the heart of the Order’s activities for more than 900 years. Indeed, the Order was committed to using the network of medical services to improve women's lives. It was unacceptable that around 1,000 women died daily from childbirth or pregnancy-related complications; 99 per cent of those maternal deaths
occurred in developing countries. That was due, in part, to a lack of adequate health-care clinics and education. Touching on several activities, she said the Holy Family Hospital in Bethlehem provided the only neonatal department in the Palestinian territories. It also ran mother and child clinics in other rural and impoverished areas around the world, notably in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Women's status must also be improved by promoting gender equality, especially in education and economic participation.

NURHAYATI ALI ASSEGAF, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), said it had been very useful to participate in the Commission's work, as such participation allowed for returning home with a better understanding of the United Nations process and of national follow-up to decisions taken. At the annual parliamentary meeting last week, more than 140 members of parliament from 50 countries had participated. The meeting focused on rural women's political empowerment and parliaments' role in reflecting their needs. It also addressed gender discrimination in law, especially in access to land, inheritance and health services. Among the highlights, it emerged that women played a pivotal role in development, but their potential had been hampered by discriminatory laws that limited their access to land. Parliaments must eliminate such laws and ensure that new legislation complied with international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It also was important to take rural women's social and economic needs into account. Without research and access to disaggregated data there was a risk of developing policies that would not meet the goal of empowering women. Noting the low levels of women as Heads of State, she said such figures were linked to the inequality of resources aimed at combating discrimination against women.

RODNEY CHARLES (Trinidad and Tobago) aligned himself with the Group of 77, as well as with CARICOM, and said that the current theme of the Commission was a central part of the solution to many of the crises facing the world today. His country had undertaken a number of initiatives in order to create an environment in which all women could fulfil their potential. Efforts were under way to integrate gender equality goals into all national policies, as were initiatives aimed at boosting skills development and sustainability — two important factors in women's self-confidence and self-worth. Training programmes also targeted non-traditional skills, in order to break stereotypes in the labour market, and focused on teaching skills, such as construction and auto and computer repairs. Technical and financial assistance was provided to women who showed the potential to own businesses. Trinidad and Tobago was also working to ensure that women and girls in rural communities stayed healthy — alongside the Ministry of Health, non-governmental organizations assisted in providing women with access to mobile health centres. The country also had a Federation of Women's Institutes, a network of non-governmental organizations for the empowerment of women, a network of women producers and other structures that helped ensure the participation of women.

MICHELE KLEIN SOLOMON, Permanent Observer for the International Organization for Migration, said that, through migration, women living in rural areas could face either greater empowerment, or increased vulnerability. Women migrants made a significant contribution through their labour, both to their countries of destination and, through remittances, to their countries of origin. In societies where women's power to move autonomously was limited, the act of migration was, in itself, empowering. It stimulated change in women and migrants themselves, and in the societies which sent and received them. At the same time, rural women could be left particularly vulnerable when the male head of household migrated, as they might face an increased workload or pressure to sustain multiple social functions. For rural women's own migration, access to information was particularly important, especially in the prevention of human trafficking. Women in rural areas had less access to information on migration processes and channels, which could increase their risk to falling prey to unregulated recruitment agencies or smugglers. Lack of information could also have dramatic consequences on the lives of women after migration. As noted in the report of the Secretary-general, she said, remitted money was frequently spent on consumption and not necessarily on productive purposes, and access to resources was challenging for rural women. Therefore, incentives for targeted financial advice to rural women needed to be provided to remittance-receiving households.

WADOUDA BADRAN, Director-General of the Organization of Arab Women, League of Arab States, said this session was essential, given the transformation taking place in the Arab world. Arab women had made enormous efforts towards development. The League had adopted a draft report on Arab women and democracy, having considered the situation in States that had undergone important changes. Its consideration of the “women’s dossier” had led to the Organization of Women, which was entrusted with coordinating efforts to promote women. That organization had established a local and regional strategy for women, which included a youth strategy, as well as an information strategy to consolidate information practices. Those efforts were part of a regional strategy on women, security and peace, in line with Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). Those strategies were being
implemented through different projects. The Organization of Arab Women had established numerous projects with the League, aimed at empowering women, and rural women in particular. It also had cooperated with the Cultural and Science Organization and the Arab Organization on Industrial Development.

LITHA MUSYIMI-OGANA, Director, Women, Gender and Development, African Union, aligning with the Group of 77, said rural women constituted more than 50 per cent of Africa’s rural population. Urban poor women, who constituted the majority of citizens in urban slums, were sometimes living in the same conditions as rural women, due to continued poverty, hunger and underdevelopment. Touching on various efforts, she said the African Union had chosen International Rural Women’s Day (15 October 2010) to launch the African Women’s Decade 2010-2020, which had been instrumental in highlighting African rural women. The Decade’s theme was a “grass-roots approach to gender equality and women's empowerment”. The specific theme for 2012 was “agriculture and food security”. The synergy of the Decade’s 2012 theme and that of the Commission’s fifty-sixth session provided an entry point for United Nations agencies, led by UN Women, to support the Decade’s implementation.

AISA KIRABO KACYIRA, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), said that the social, economic and environmental interdependence between urban and rural areas was now widely recognized. One in three people in cities in the developing world lived in a slum, and women and girls often suffered the worst effects of slum life, such as poor access to clean water, inadequate sanitation, unemployment, insecurity of tenure and gender-based violence. UN-Habitat worked directly with women’s networks and other United Nations agencies to enhance their awareness of the realities of urbanization. So far, the vast majority of women’s advocates had focused on the plight of rural women and girls, and there had been a long-standing notion that the poor were better off in urban than rural areas. However, recent studies had shown the contrary. On the whole, Governments and policymakers were still responding inadequately to the different gender needs of women in towns and cities. UN-Habitat, therefore, asked Governments and other stakeholders to ensure women’s full participation in the planning, management and governance of cities and towns; to mainstream gender issues into the design and implementation of urban water and sanitation programmes; and to ensure effective reform around land and property to provide pro-poor and gender-responsive policies, among other recommendations.

Ms. MORDEN, speaking on behalf of the Director of the North American Liaison Office of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), said that the attention to rural women came at a moment of renewed interest in agriculture as a key driver of development and poverty eradication. “Women are farmers and farmers are women,” he stressed, adding that economic empowerment went hand in hand with enabling women and men to have equal voices and influence in rural institutions and organizations, reducing women’s workloads and achieving an equal sharing of economic and social benefits between women and men. IFAD had recently finalized a new gender policy, in line with the system-wide action plan developed by the United Nations that set standards for gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment. Promoting the economic empowerment of rural women was a key strategic objective and all other improvements of rural women’s status — increased voice, access to assets and services, reduced drudgery — were directly linked to it. He, therefore, encouraged the full collaboration of all partners, in particular in scaling up investments in rural development, finance and agriculture; expanding rural women’s access to and ownership of productive resources, finance and land and creating off-farm employment; and mainstreaming the economic empowerment of rural women into the Rio+20 conference, thereby ensuring attention was paid to them in the post-2015 development framework.

Ms. EL AWADY, speaking on behalf of the Regional Economic Commissions, said the Commissions would continue to monitor global platforms for action, especially for gender equality. Citing examples of work on the priority theme, she said the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was providing technical cooperation for integrating a gender perspective into national policies. It was also starting an observatory in the Arab region that would have a sex-disaggregated database. In the Latin American region, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) collected data on rural women and was studying time-use by rural women. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) supported the implementation of the Bangkok Declaration. In the African region, the work of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) included addressing challenges faced by rural women in conflict and post-conflict situations.

KEVIN CASSIDY, International Labour Organization (ILO), said that, in many regions, women's
share of total employment in agriculture was more than 30 per cent, with their share in employment in parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa over 40 per cent. In South Asia, 70 per cent of female workers were in agriculture. The Decent Work Agenda provided a framework for an integrated approach to equitable and productive employment for women in agriculture and rural areas. Governments could support rural women by ratifying international conventions related to female agriculture workers and implementing international labour standards, especially Convention 100 on equal remuneration (1951). They could also provide for a social protection floor, to guarantee basic income in the form of social transfers in cash or kind. For its part, the ILO had published a new manual to improve the freedom of association rights of female workers in rural areas. Its Training for Rural Economic Empowerment Programme also helped people working in largely informal economies to build skills.

BERTIL LINDBLAD, Director of the New York Office of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), said that women accounted for half of the nearly 34 million adults living with HIV. The toll was especially devastating for young women ages 15-24, who accounted for 26 per cent of all new infections globally. The impact of the epidemic on poor rural populations could be felt most dramatically in entrenched poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, and lack of educational and economic opportunity. HIV also exacerbated women's property insecurity and risk of disinheritance, especially for AIDS widows. Effective HIV responses required action to address inequality, including through the promotion and protection of women's rights. Food and nutrition support programmes, especially for women and girls, were important to address the interlinkages between food insecurity and HIV, and to ensure a comprehensive HIV response in low-resource settings. Comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services was also critical for an effective response, as was keeping girls and young women in school until they completed secondary education. All those efforts, among others, would be stalled without adequate and sustained funding. UNAIDS was greatly concerned about the recent 10 per cent decline in international funding for HIV, from $7.6 billion in 2009 to $6.9 billion in 2010. It called on all stakeholders to honour their commitments, as well as for innovative sources of funding, including a financial transaction tax.

MOHAMED ELKEIY, Officer-in-Charge of the New York Office of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), said that his organization was acutely aware of the important role played by women in key economic sectors and their importance for poverty reduction, particularly in agriculture. “In many cultures, it is the women who work in the fields”, he said, however, “they are often ignored in policies to support the sector”. In that context, its research had begun to devote special attention to the impacts of trade policy and trade liberalization on women as producers and consumers of agricultural and food products. It was also working to include a gender dimension in its other policies and projects to support the agricultural sector in developing countries. UNCTAD undertook activities focused on building productive capacities in developing and least developed countries to enable them to attract more investment, upgrade technologically, diversify their production and better integrate into the world economy. It had adopted an integrated approach to the challenge of addressing supply-side deficiencies, which affected small-holder producers, in particular women. The strategy utilized three operative components — namely, market information, market intelligence and marketing services. In addition, UNCTAD was conducting a series of country case studies to assess the impact of trade policy on women.

SYLVIE NDONGMO, speaking for African women's regional organizations, voiced concern that the modernization of agriculture had negatively impacted small farmers, and that financial policies had limited women's access to loans and markets. She was also deeply concerned at the challenges of implementing international decisions at regional and national levels. She called for the implementation of General Assembly resolution 62/136 (2008) on the improvement of the situation of women in rural areas. She also urged the establishment of a new social contract that created infrastructure and opportunities for women and girls, and the availability of disaggregated data to facilitate gender mainstreaming in policies and programmes. She also urged that measures be taken to allow rural women to participate in economic, political, cultural and social decisions. Finally, at least 10 per cent of the budget outlined in the Maputo Declaration (2003) should be allocated to agriculture.

MARIE YANICK MEZILE, Ministry on the Condition of Women and Women's Rights of Haiti, aligning with the Group of 77 and CARICOM, said the Commission's theme was in line with Haiti's focus on the financial empowerment of Haitian women, under the country's new development plan. The national forum on Haitian Women would take place from 6 to 8 March to address major issues affecting social and economic development. The 2009 law on violence against women was a step forward and the Ministry was working to eradicate all such violence. She thanked the various United Nations bodies that had helped improve the lives of Haitian families.
CHANTAL KAMBIWA, Association of African Women for Research and Development, said that rural women were the backbone of the agricultural workforce. But, discriminatory legislation and inadequate leadership skills had hindered women’s freedom of choice and mobility in the socio-economic context. She voiced concern at the new phenomenon of “land grabbing” in the name of foreign investment, which had an impact on rural women. She called on African leaders to comply and fully implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as a fundamental way to alleviate gender disparities. Affirmative action measures should also be geared towards women’s participation in agriculture. Finally, she called on development partners to support multilateral and bilateral agreements, and on civil society organizations to monitor Government progress in delivering gender-sensitive budgeting.

PANHA SOK, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, said “this world is an unjust place for the majority of women living in the global South”, urging the Commission to recognize that the full enjoyment of human rights was essential for poverty eradication. While there had been repeated commitments to human rights, obstacles continued to block women’s access to resources, education and health care. Access to land and inheritance was important for rural women’s economic empowerment, but lands were being sold to foreign investors in the name of economic growth. She called on Governments to support subsistence farming and pay attention to rural women’s needs during the 2013 Commission, which would address prevention of all forms of violence against women. Further, she said neoliberal economic policies had resulted in privatized health care. Since their health was not profitable, rural women had become the last priority. She called on Governments to finance human and other resources to improve women’s access to such facilities and services. States must also ensure women’s meaningful participation at all levels of decision-making.

CAROLE SHAW, of the Asia Pacific Regional Caucus, said that rural women in the region continued to face gender-related inequalities that were rooted in discrimination based on ethnicity, caste, class and other factors. Their access to basic services, land, water and other productive resources were limited, and discrimination against those with disabilities and the elderly was a great concern. In addition, in many parts of the region, neoliberal trade policies were negatively impacting women, and violence against women was widespread. She, therefore, called upon States to recognize women’s rights and priorities in legal frameworks, as well as in development strategies at all levels.

ELISABETH NEWMAN, of the International Council of Women, said that her group represented millions of women from more than 60 countries across the world. She urged the Commission to give due consideration to the current session’s recommendations and to use them to create a strong framework for the empowerment of women — in particular, the use of grass-roots women as agents of change. She asked UN Women to consider several key issues. First, men and boys should be included in training programmes in order to reduce discrimination. Education should be free and accessible for all. States should protect women’s land ownership and inheritance rights, and should report “land-grabbing” by large companies. Women’s right to a strong communication system, such as accessibility to mobile phones, should be ensured. Finally, attention should be paid to the effects of the migration of families as a result of climate change; in that vein, she asked States and the international community to provide full support for their resettlement.

ADWOA SAKYI, of the International Trade Union Confederation said that the empowerment of rural workers required adequate policies. Rural poverty was deeply rooted in the balance between what women do and what they have, she said. Women around the world were frequently deprived of their basic rights, including the right to collective bargaining and the right to work in safe conditions, among others; they frequently lacked access to social protection and public services. She called for the Commission to ensure that the concept of decent work was implemented into rural development policies, covering all woman workers, as well as for incentives for families to send their girls to school. “Rural women are powerful catalysts for sustainable development, as well as agents against poverty and hunger,” she said, adding that the world had “no choice” but to solidify the position of rural women. “It is on their shoulders” that sustainable development would be achieved, she concluded.

ENGWASE MWALE, Non-Governmental Organizations Coordinating Committee, said that in Zambia, women constituted 64 per cent of the rural population, of which 80 per cent participated in the agricultural sector. Zambia was a signatory to international and regional conventions on women’s rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol, which called for women’s equal access to land, credit and markets. Despite that, it was very difficult for women in Zambia to access credit, due to their lack of land ownership rights. Because women had no land rights, they could not use land as
security. Women, who produced 80 per cent of the country’s food, lived at the subsistence level and had no access to marketing systems. Thus, she urged the Government to empower women in the areas of land rights, infrastructure, health-care facilities and credit. There was so much land grabbing in the name of development, she urged the Government to involve rural people in such decisions.

NADÈGE CHELL, Reso-femmes, said her group was based in Geneva and was composed of organizations in West Africa. It was important to train women together and develop innovative tools aimed at promoting women’s equal access in political, social and economic decisions. To encourage political action and eliminate discrimination against women, Reso-femmes had launched a project to integrate political figures “from the top and from the bottom” to reach fixed objectives. To foster social action, the organization worked to give women self-esteem so they could become human rights ambassadors from their countries. To spur economic action, another project aimed to train women — regardless of their social condition.

BISI OLATERU-OLAGBEGI, Women’s Consortium of Nigeria, said economic conditions exposed rural women to abuses, such as trafficking for prostitution. Rural women were unable to protect themselves from gender violence and their economic powerlessness had rendered them voiceless in their communities. The lack of resources, infrastructure and modern technology only aggravated their workloads and health needs. The Millennium Development Goals, among other objectives, were welcome steps. However, she was concerned that their implementation had not had an impact on rural women. In that context, she urged Governments to ensure periodic monitoring and evaluation of policies targeting rural women; provide adequate budgetary allocations to meet their needs; provide basic infrastructure and amenities, such as potable water and schools in rural areas; and design poverty eradication schemes with women’s participation. She also urged them to ensure that rural women could access information technology and renewable energy and protect rural women against gender violence.

MARNIE GROGAN, of the Young Women’s Caucus, said that young women continued to suffer exclusion from many of the gains made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Child marriage was just one human rights violation, for example, that continued to hinder the development of women, but which was easily rectifiable. Legislative measures were needed to ensure that women stayed in school; that would enhance their participation in the labour market, among other things. All women had the right to comprehensive health education, including contraceptive measures, sexual health care, information on healthy relationships and health-related decision-making. Young women must be involved and represented at all levels of politics and decision-making, she added; it was only through a significant improvement in their representation and participation that programmes and policies would be truly responsive. “Young women are one of the most powerful driving forces” for development, she said, adding, “we deserve better”.

JOCELYNNE SCUTT, of the European and North American Caucus, said that the empowerment of rural women could only be enforced by treating women’s rights as human rights. It must be recognized that rural women are disadvantaged in all Member States, including developed States; that marital status, and particularly widowhood, had a profound effect on women; that the effects of climate change and environmental degradation were seriously impacting the situation of women; and that environmental exploitation and abuses, including claims on plant and animal genomes, could constitute crimes against humanity. The Commission must incorporate a number of issues into all of its resolutions and outcomes, she added. Among those were protecting the full human rights of women; as well as the need to ensure the access of all women and girls to publicly funded and delivered health services, water, decent work and labour conditions, child care, transport and communications services, and others.

TOM OLIVA, of the Working Group on Girls, said that “as much as men are part of the problem, we are also a big part of the solution”. It was critical to reframe the issues of gender equality and women’s empowerment, as they were not just women’s issues. Young people, for their part, could provide a fresh and creative voice, as had been seen during the Arab Spring uprisings. Young people would take what they had learned at the Commission back to their communities, advocating for the empowerment of women both personally and at the social level. He hoped that the Commission, and the entire United Nations system, would take direct action to ensure that the rights of women and girls were respected, and that States implemented relevant policies.

Right of Reply
Exercising her right of reply, Israel's representative said that Syria’s delegate represented a regime that had killed more than 7,500 people in the last year. The attacks on Israel were meant to distract attention from the Assad Government, which was detaining entire families just to send a message. The Government had not even shown mercy to those staging women-only protests. Given that the Commission had one week left to complete its work, she called on delegates to deal with the tasks at hand.

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