

Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),

and committed to new ways to improve their own lives, those of their families and communities. Despite this knowledge and the attention given to rural women in international frameworks, women in rural areas continue to face serious challenges in carrying out their multiple roles within their families and communities and their rights and priorities are often insufficiently addressed by national development strategies and gender equality policies.⁹

It is estimated that at least 70 per cent of the world's very poor people live in rural areas. Rural poverty is the result of lack of assets, limited economic opportunities and poor education and capabilities, as well as disadvantages rooted in social and political inequalities. Rural women, in particular, are often disproportionately held back by disadvantages rooted in such inequalities.¹⁰ In many countries, gender-based stereotypes and discrimination deny rural women equitable access to opportunities, resources and services.¹¹

Most of the rural poor, in particular women and youth, are represented in the low-

country examples demonstrate the importance of capacity-building, dissemination of information, gender-sensitive statistics, legal assistance, mobilization and advocacy in enhancing women's rights and access to productive resources.²⁷

Education and health are two other areas that require sustained attention. Despite significant advances, in many countries, gaps remain between girls' and boys' enrolment and participation in education with gender disparities being far more severe in countries with greater rural and poor populations.²⁸ Rural children and those with a mother with no education are twice as likely to be out of school. In addition, illiteracy among rural women remains an area of concern. While efforts have been made to broaden the range of health services and quality of care, women living in rural areas still face significant barriers to health care and reproductive health. Fertility rates in rural areas are generally higher than those of urban areas due to rural women's lower access to education, family planning and healthcare services. Rural areas also have some of the highest rates of maternal mortality and obstetric fistula²⁹. The HIV and AIDS pandemic has increased the responsibilities of women in rural areas for both productive and care work.³⁰

There is also evidence indicating that rural women are exposed to high levels of violence, especially indigenous women and those from ethnic minorities, and that access to law enforcement, legal protection and services remain limited or non-existent.³¹

In addition, although there has been progress in women's participation in decision-making globally, the under-representation of women from rural areas in political and public life remains high in most societies. In some areas, discriminatory attitudes and practices at the local level limit the space for women's political expression within their communities.³² Rural institutions, such as agricultural producer and rural worker associations, rural credit unions, women's associations, water users' groups and self-help groups, can play a critical role in contributing to rural women's economic empowerment and public representation.

Women living in rural areas play an essential role to effectively mitigate and adapt to climate change and ensure more sustainable rural development. Rural women often depend on access to natural resources for food and fuel, and they are often more aware of the urgency to manage resources in a sustainable manner and to preserve biological diversity.³³ Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to the gender equality dimensions of climate change, natural resource degradation and the impact of natural disasters.

²⁷ A/64/190 and United Nations (2009). *World Survey on Women in Development: Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance*. New York.

²⁸ United Nations (2010). *The World's Women 2010*. New York

²⁹ United Nations (2008). *Women2000 and Beyond. Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges*. New York.

³⁰ A/64/190

³¹ E/2010/4-E/CN.6/2010/2

³² E/2010/4-E/CN.6/2010/2

³³ A/64/190 and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007), *Indigenous Women and the United Nations system: good practices and lessons learned*, New York.

These and other issues that impact the empowerment of rural women, including specific groups of women such as girls/young women, indigenous, older women or women with disabilities, need to be further examined. Lessons learned from various contexts that have produced tangible results need to be better shared and good practices scaled up.

IV. Format and outcome of the panel discussion

The panel will take the form of an interactiv