



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
7 December 2017

Original: English

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

12–23 March 2018

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by Priests for Life, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls is critically important and needs to be addressed for all phases of a woman's life.

A rural woman can face violence and discrimination throughout her life as she is treated unequally, denied access to nutritious food and education and in the case of sex selection abortion loses her life through deadly sex discrimination. The Beijing Platform of Action opposed this practice in paragraph 38 where it recognized that son preference in a number of countries leads to the practice of prenatal sex selection, to higher rates of mortality among very young girls and to lower rates of school enrolment for girls as compared with boys. It expressed concern that son preference does not only curtail the access of girl children to food, education and health care but to even life itself.

Son preference often occurs in rural settings and can result in the destruction of girls through infanticide or abandonment; this anti-girl discrimination from the earliest stages of a girl's life grossly undermines rural women's equality and empowerment. Failure to protect girls in law from prenatal sex selection as recommended to governments in paragraph 283d of the Beijing Platform which called for countries to enact and enforce legislation protecting girls from all forms of violence, including female infanticide and prenatal sex selection, begins the cycle of discrimination and violence.

A long-term impact of sex selection abortion, skewed birth ratios, has led to increased violence and abuse against women and girls as they are kidnapped, forced into sex trafficking and prostitution, bought and sold as brides, and forced into child marriage.

The lives of rural women and girls are empowered when their human dignity is affirmed by measures that protect them from sexual exploitation and violence, including in daily life. Girls should not fear sexual assault while collecting firewood or while walking to or attending school, nor should women fear taking public transportation to work. Laws that prevent trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation or forced labour as well as programs to rescue victims of trafficking need to be enacted and enforced in rural settings.

The number of elderly rural women is increasing reflecting the global increase in women's life expectancy along with their increasing need for health care, including for dementia. The necessity to protect them from abuse and neglect and care for their basic needs is also increasing as rural birth rates plummet reducing the number of caregivers.

Rural women carry a heavy work burden primarily in agriculture. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, women farmers account for 43 percent of the worldwide agricultural workforce, are an estimated two-thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock keepers, and account for 48 percent of all economically active women worldwide. Rural women working in agriculture need to be acknowledged for their contribution to food security and nutrition for the benefit of families, communities and country and affirmed with equal compensation while assisted with access to resources that provide them with guidance on modern farming techniques.

Credit loans empower rural women with the means necessary to improve farming or to begin small businesses. Opportunities for training and job skills, both within and outside of agriculture, help rural women to improve their lives and rise from poverty.

Empowering rural women through education, land ownership or inheritance, and access to improvements in farming methods to increase crop yields reduces poverty and improves their and their families' lives. Empowering women with innovations for water and fire wood collection and food preparation and storage reduces the burden of work and enables young women and girls to attend school.

Education not only empowers women with reading, writing, and math skills but results in self-confidence and empowerment which helps women assume leadership roles in their communities. Women who receive educational opportunities are healthier and their children are healthier. Education empowers rural women to make nutritious food choices for their children helping to reduce malnutrition and stunting. When rural women and girls have access to education, it is not only their lives that improve, but the lives of their families and community.

Health care throughout the life cycle is needed not only for rural women's empowerment but to save their lives. All women and girls living in rural areas, regardless of country, need access to timely medical care. Due to reduced access to health care, the rate of women dying from pregnancy-related complications in the United States according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data was 64 percent higher in rural areas than in large U.S. cities in 2015 compared to the year 2000 when the rate was higher in cities.

Pregnant rural women need transportation to health clinics to ensure delivery with a skilled birth attendant who is able to recognize the signs of obstructed childbirth. They need access to clean blood, antibiotics, treatment of complications and policies and programs to help them and their children survive and thrive. According to UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2016 report, children born in rural areas are 1.7 times more likely to die before age 5 than children in urban areas.

Access to nutrition during rural women's child-bearing years is needed for their health and empowerment and for future generations who can be freed from the cycle of malnutrition and stunted growth. When women of child-bearing age are well-nourished they are healthier and better able to provide nourishment for their children in the womb helping to ensure healthy physical and cognitive development.

Twenty years ago, the Beijing Platform recognized the need for women and girls to have access to nutritious food, an area that has intensified in urgency as evidence demonstrates the critical importance of adequate nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, from conception to the second birthday, in saving lives, enhancing healthy outcomes, and improving the prosperity of a country. When children thrive, they are empowered to become healthy adults who are better equipped to make meaningful contributions to their families, communities, and country.

The Beijing Platform also recognized that extra measures are needed to ensure that women have equal access to health care and to specialized maternal care; this is especially applicable to rural women. Negative attitudes against pregnancy and motherhood persist despite paragraph 29 of the Beijing Platform which admonished that maternity, motherhood, parenting and the role of women in procreation must not be a basis for discrimination nor restrict the full participation of women in society.

A majority of Member States recognizes the inherent procreative ability of women as the bearers of a country's future, its children. They seek to protect the lives of girls and boys equally, and their mothers, from the violence of abortion in a universal desire for healthy reproduction in which both mother and child survive pregnancy and childbirth.

In conclusion, continued progress around the world is needed to empower all women, especially rural women, in the role of mother with the maternal health care they need during pregnancy and childbirth to ensure that they and their children survive and thrive. Employment practices which discriminate against pregnant rural women and which fail to provide safe working conditions must end; pregnant women must not be threatened with job loss.

Recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of rural women throughout the life cycle will help achieve gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls. Cultural practices which de-value the life of the girl-child must end and the dignity of a rural woman affirmed during all stages of life, from conception to natural death.

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