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**FAO Participation in Panel Discussion**  
**On the occasion of the International Day of Rural Women,**

**15 October 2008, New York**  
**Rural Women and Food Security.**

**Ms. Sharon Brennen-Haylock,**  
**Senior Liaison Officer, FAO Liaison Office**

FAO is pleased to participate in this first ever observance of International Day of Rural Women (IDRW). Permit me also to bring greetings from the Head of the FAO's Gender and Population Division, who had hoped to join you all on this occasion, but could not do so because of other commitments.

My remarks will be brief, without going into extensive analysis of the problems faced by rural women, since they are well known. A more detailed text will be made available. In the time allowed, it would serve us well to use this first ever IDRW to speak about the role of rural women in food security and how some of the challenges currently confronting the global community impact them and steps that can be taken to address these issues.

**Both women and men play critical roles in agriculture throughout the world**, producing, processing and providing the food we eat. Women make up half the rural population and they constitute more than half of the agricultural labor force. Rural women in particular are responsible for half of the world's food production and produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food in most developing countries. Yet, despite their contribution to global food security, **women farmers are frequently underestimated and overlooked in development strategies**. FAO's work in this area recognizes and supports their contributions to rural development. Sustainable agriculture and rural development and food security cannot be achieved if half the rural population is ignored. Therefore, women and men's equal participation in agricultural and rural development is essential in order to eradicate food insecurity and rural poverty.

From this perspective when we look at the **global food crisis**, we see that while many sectors of society have experienced adverse impacts, rural women are amongst those who have been hit the hardest. Rural women tend to have fewer resources, assets and income needed to respond to increasing food prices, and their already weak access to food at the household level is further diminished. The food price crisis provides the opportunity to highlight the importance of rural **women's contributions** to agricultural production and household welfare. The view is further substantiated by the Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA), which recognises that *“Smallholder farmers in developing countries, the majority of whom are women, are among the most vulnerable to food insecurity. Enabling them to respond to the demands of food assistance programs may turn the threat of high food prices into an*

*opportunity for producing surplus food and raising the family income. Higher incomes are likely to improve access to education and health services with long term developmental benefits for these communities.”*

IDRW thus presents the opportunity to remind ourselves of the importance of addressing **gender inequalities** to facilitate agricultural productivity and rural development. Women are a **necessary** part of ensuring food security, but they are agricultural producers with **specific challenges and constraints such as** lesser access to land, to credit, to education and training, to extension services, to technology and to rural organizations, agricultural inputs and assets, fewer benefits under customary or statutory legal systems and greater time burdens). There needs to be gender analysis in discussions of the current food price crisis. Additionally, policy and decision makers, in designing national and international plans, need to give adequate treatment to gender issues from conceptualization to implementation.

Very briefly, on the issue of **climate change**, we know already that it will affect all four dimensions of food security: - food availability, food accessibility, food utilization and food systems stability. People who are already vulnerable and food insecure are likely to be the first affected. Agriculture-based livelihood systems that are already vulnerable to food insecurity also face risks such as crop failure, new patterns of pests and diseases, lack of appropriate seeds and planting material, and loss of livestock. If agricultural production in the low-income developing countries of Asia and Africa is adversely affected by climate change, the livelihoods of large numbers of the rural poor will be put at risk and their vulnerability to food insecurity increased. Therefore, it will be necessary to strengthen the resilience of rural people in general and rural women in particular, to help them cope with this additional threat to food security.

IDRW thus provides us with the opportunity to reiterate the call for a gender sensitive approach, at all levels, in dealing with climate change. Such an approach, for example, can take into account factors such as:

- The need to address pre-existing inequalities in access to resources that make women more vulnerable to negative effects and limit their capacity to cope with climate variability.
- The likelihood that climate change will prompt **mass migration** as the natural resources become less able to sustain the family and more difficult to access. Men migrate more often than women leaving the household to be led by them. Female-headed households left behind are often the poorest and the workloads of these women, their children and the elderly increase as a result of male out-migration.
- The role of rural women as traditionally the carriers of local knowledge about the properties and uses of wild plants, and the keepers of seeds for cultivated varieties, they thus have an important role in protecting biodiversity, and therefore by providing appropriate compensation for this service could guarantee a sustainable livelihood to these women, many of whom belong to vulnerable and food-insecure groups.
- Changes in the variability of prevailing weather conditions that may shorten time windows for field work, leading to higher demand for human labour, animal traction or mechanized farm power to carry out the activities in shorter periods. Where there is a shift from labour to mechanization, men and women whose livelihoods depend on employment can

lose those livelihoods and consequently have less access to income, thereby reducing their capacity to buy food. In this process, women are likely to suffer disproportionately.

Furthermore, in non-mechanized farming systems, where women provide the bulk of farm labour, the increased burden of agricultural work during the shortened growing seasons could have adverse consequences for women's health and ability to provide adequate care to their families, owing to a variety of factors such as lack of nutritious food and inadequate and inappropriate health care. In addition, women may not be able to produce enough to feed everyone in the family, so they will eat last, after the men and the boys. Agricultural mechanization and gender-appropriate machinery can provide some relief.

Looking briefly at **HIV and AIDS**, there are many issues that impact women and food security. For example, because of their role as care givers many women experience a decrease in their productive activity, thereby resulting in decrease in their contribution to the household incomes. As the asset base dwindles, women's access to scarce resources further diminished, thus exacerbating existing gender based inequalities. **Property grabbing** becomes more visible as more husbands are dying of AIDS-related illnesses. Pressing concerns for short term survival may lead women to engage in "**survival sex**" for food or money. Women's **lesser access** to crucial resources such as land, credit affects their ability to cope with the impacts of infection.

FAO works in a number of ways to address issues related to rural women. The Socio-economic and Gender Analysis (SEAGA) Programme, is FAO's key programme for capacity development in socio-economic and gender issues. SEAGA guides have been used to get a better understanding of gender and women in agriculture and rural development. SEAGA has also been used to promote **integration** and **mainstreaming** of HIV and AIDS and gender into its policy and programme work.

**Also, FAO has helped to raise awareness** among policy makers and donors about relationship between HIV/AIDS, gender and access to productive resources and to develop a consensus on way forward for research, programming and advocacy. The Gender, Property Rights and Livelihoods in the Era of AIDS, FAO Technical Consultation, 2007, for example, illustrate how this has been done. **We have helped to mitigate** the impacts on women, men, boys and girls - promotion of labour saving technologies, Farmer Field Schools and Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools.

To better monitor and evaluate FAO projects and activities, gender sensitive indicators have been developed in areas such as animal health and production, plant protection, water and land management, climate change, emergency operations, forestry, fisheries, rural infrastructure and agro-industries, rural employment, nutrition, trade and markets and energy. At the same time technical assistance has been provided by to several member countries helped to improve the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data in their agricultural census.

With respect to natural resources, the Gender, Biodiversity and Local Knowledge Systems for Food Security (LinKS) project is an example of a tool being used by development practitioners in eastern and southern Africa to enable them to better recognize farmers' local knowledge, practices and skills. The project developed a training manual entitled Building on Gender, Agro-biodiversity and Local Knowledge, which focuses on the linkages between gender roles and relationships, local knowledge systems, agro-biodiversity, conservation of

plant and animal genetic resources and food security. The manual is currently being used by local NGOs and universities in eastern and southern Africa.

Also, other activities have included the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) hosted in collaboration with the Government of Brazil and the First World Congress on Communication for Development (WCCD) in collaboration with the World Bank and the Communication Initiative. Both events succeeded in raising awareness on the importance of gender issues in sustainable development. ICARRD focused on identifying sustainable options that would contribute to reducing rural poverty and hunger, and included two special thematic sessions on “Enhancing women’s leadership and transforming organizations for sustainable rural development” and “Land Rights of Indigenous Women.” The Conference highlighted the key principle that a number of fundamental rights of women (as well as indigenous peoples, pastoralists, and vulnerable groups) should be better recognized in policies, institutional patterns and plans, including their rights to land and natural resources, and food sovereignty. Along the same lines, gender sensitive methodologies to land access and land distribution programs have been produced by FAO, as a step forward to promoting gender-balanced rural sustainable development.

During the WCCD, FAO highlighted the importance of communication in sustainable development while giving specific emphasis on gender issues and indigenous people.

FAO has produced guidelines for reporting on Article 14 of CEDAW, in which context the Organization assisted many Member Nations in locating and organizing relevant information on rural women, thereby facilitating their reporting to the Committee.

Finally, I take this opportunity to introduce to you Sourcebook on Gender in Agriculture, which was launched today in Rome. It contributes to FAO’s **Gender and Development Plan of Action 2008-2013**, and will be an invaluable **tool** in assisting FAO technical divisions to integrate gender issues into their respective areas of expertise and fulfil the gender outputs they committed to in the Gender PoA.

Gender issues are still **inadequately addressed** in agricultural projects and programmes. Often cited reasons: practitioners lack know-how, training, and good practices to integrate gender. The Sourcebook was developed to respond to some of these needs. Compiles good practices and innovative activities that successfully integrated gender into project and programme design for **sharing and learning**.