

Ecumenical Women at the United Nations (EW), a coalition of Christian denominations and ecumenical organizations, welcomes this year's discussion of the needs and rights of rural women around the world.

We uphold women and girls as whole persons, acknowledging that women and men are created equal in God's image. Therefore, we condemn all forms of gender-based violence, discrimination, oppression, and affirm the promotion of gender justice and equality from a human rights perspective. Our organizations and many local faith communities denounce gender-based discrimination and violence and the misuse of religious teachings to justify them. We commit to scaling up these efforts by building multi-sectoral partnerships, engaging faith leaders, strengthening our advocacy, developing codes of conduct and policies that empower women and work with men and boys, and challenging harmful and discriminatory interpretations and practices.

We work to promote the economic and spiritual empowerment of women and girls. Locally, we initiate farming and small business ventures, work to eradicate hunger, care for the sick (particularly those living with HIV/AIDS), promote peace and leadership development, and continue to address the scourge of human trafficking and violence against women and girls. Ecumenical Women emphasizes that the empowerment of women of all ages and girls is fundamental to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We are concerned by the increasing misuse of religious identity as a tool for popular mobilization, leading often to fundamentalist discourses not linked to a particular faith tradition. In this context, women's rights often become a contentious issue, misidentified with an ideology promoting the destruction of traditional values and threatening the family, the very core of the society. Yet faith and religious practices or institutions can and often do play a leading role in the discussion on gender equality by cooperating positively toward a redefinition of roles and structures, and by ensuring inclusiveness and the participation of women as actors of change.

Key areas of concern for rural women specifically include: land-grabbing and lack of access to land; the impact of climate change on agriculture and rural areas; the privatization of critical public services; and the corporate appropriation of the world's bio-diversity, particularly regarding indigenous resources.

Women's access to critical resources, including health, education, transportation, rural economic development, security, and other concerns, is not possible without addressing key systemic global trends. These include: the intensification of climate change undermining rural economies, resulting in climate migrants; macro-economic and trade policies that are systematically undercutting the livelihoods, food sovereignty, access to services, and autonomy of rural women; and conflict, including intense resource wars for domination of agricultural lands, water and

fossil fuels, has caused massive dislocation for women and girls in rural communities, intensified by abuse and violence.

Rural women's potential to contribute to the fulfilment of the SDGs can only be fully realized if the U.N. and Member States address the following barriers:

Climate Change, Farming and Food Sovereignty

Despite advances, hunger and malnutrition persist. Communities that once had abundant resources now struggle to provide adequate food. Drought uncertain rainfall, deforestation, rising sea levels--causing salination of water supply--and the prevalence of natural disasters, due to environmental degradation and climate change, contributes greatly to global food insecurity.

In communities where our coalition members are present, rural women engage in small-scale agriculture and food production but lack access to ownership and control of arable land, seeds, sustainable fertilizer, fishing sites, efficient equipment and farming methods, markets, and financial resources. Large agribusiness rather than local farms dominates food production access to clean water, often preventing effective irrigation methods.

Rural women's role in expanding agriculture and food production is vital in eradicating poverty and hunger, and must be supported in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Access to Education

Education is a basic human right, increasing the ability for girls and women to participate in society and impacting the welfare of their families and communities. Primary, secondary and tertiary education and training of rural women and girls is essential.

Reports from women around the world indicate that high rates of illiteracy persist, especially among poor rural women and girls. Due to gender discrimination, harmful cultural practices continue. Child, early and forced marriage, restricted access to sanitary products, and sexual harassment in schools and on transit, prevent women and girls from taking full advantage of educational opportunities as well as from engaging in development and income-generating activities for their families.

Transportation and Access to Resources

Rural areas around the world suffer from a lack of infrastructure and transportation, thereby hindering the exchange of goods and resources. Environmental conditions, which make roads inaccessible during rainy seasons or following natural disasters, also contribute to the problem.

The lack of safe, public and commercial transportation affects food distribution, and prevents people from accessing medical and social services, which are concentrated in urban areas. In

addition, women and girls are often forced to walk long distances, making them vulnerable to violence, sexual assault.

Access to Medical Care, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Rural communities lack access to adequate medical care, as well as to information and services that would support the sexual and reproductive health and rights of rural women. Rural women experience high rates of maternal and infant mortality. With insufficient medical care, limited nutritional supplements, and the continued spread of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and other diseases, many women and girls are left to serve as caregivers for their families and community members, often without proper protection. Moreover, women's caregiving work is not valued or paid. Increasing access to trained medical care would provide women caregivers the opportunity to contribute other skills to their communities or to be paid adequately for the caregiving skills they provide.

Lack of sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls is a major contributor to gender inequalities, discrimination, and violence. In addition, the issue of access and the absence of SRHR for rural women particularly, as well as harmful traditional cultural practices, misinterpretations of customs and/or religious adherence violate women's reproductive rights. It can lead to continued dis-empowerment with regard to family planning choices, promote gender-based violence, and inhibit the ability of women to participate in public leadership.

Women's Empowerment in Governance and Structures

Women and girls in rural areas often experience isolation due to factors related to agriculture, small business ventures, lack of access, and continued violence against women. Although women contribute to their communities in important ways, including farming the land, producing food, supporting families, and caring for the sick, their work is often not acknowledged. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure and transportation hinder women from participating in local, regional, and international decision-making processes and economies. Member States should prioritize women's contributions, inclusion of women at all leadership levels and gender-sensitive policies and programs.

Recommendations for the United Nations and Member States

Ecumenical Women urges Member States to:

- Consider faith communities as integral partners in the protection and promotion of the human rights for all people, particularly in the prevention and elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls.
- Fully implement the Beijing Platform for Action and apply a gender lens to all SDGs.

- Encourage all people, especially men and boys, to actively participate in the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls and to advocate for public policies that uphold penalties for violent acts against women.
- Increase women and girls' access to education
- Address environmental degradation and climate change and their disproportionate effect on rural women.
- Increase women's access to land, protecting small-scale farms and cooperatives, and creating access to finance for women farmers for the improvement of agriculture and better nutrition for women and families.
- Affirm women's rights to own land, obtain loans, market goods and access other resources.
- Increase their ability to transport goods and to access agricultural extension training.
- Challenge programs that prioritize agro-exports and debt-repayments over food sovereignty, particularly food grown by women small-scale farmers.
- Dismantle privatization schemes that undermine fundamental social services, including education, health care, transportation, and jobs.
- Address fundamentalism as a threat to realizing women's human rights, particularly affecting women from vulnerable groups, such as rural women.

Ecumenical Women believes that all people, regardless of gender or location within a State, should have access to basic human rights including nutritious food, education, transportation, protection, and medical care. The time is now to prioritize the rights and needs of rural women and girls.