



Written Statement to the 62nd Session of the
Commission on the Status of Women
March 12 -23, 2018
on the priority theme:
'Challenges and opportunities in achieving
gender equality and the empowerment of rural
women and girls.'
(Statement submitted October 17, 2017)

The Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd welcomes the priority theme “Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls” for the 62nd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The greatest challenges faced by rural women and girls are multidimensional poverty, gender-based violence, intersectional discrimination, climate change, and conflict, coupled with lacking provision of infrastructure and services. Often girls in rural areas are unregistered at birth, vulnerable to being stateless, not protected by law, and discriminated against in education, resulting in low literacy rates, and fewer years of school attendance. When compared with urban girls and women, rural girls and women have restricted access to health care, and experience especially high rates of maternal mortality. Rural women often do not have equal access to land, resources, and credit, leaving them marginalized, isolated, excluded, and vulnerable to exploitation.

The level of poverty in rural areas is greater than in urban areas, and it disproportionately affects rural women and girls when compared to men. Even though rural women make up a significant percentage of the agricultural work force, their labour is undervalued, with little or no pay. Rural women do more part-time, seasonal or low-wage work than rural men. Besides limitations in work, rural women’s control and ownership of land are limited. In many areas, customary practices limit women’s inheritance of land. When a father dies, instead of girls and women, male children tend to inherit land. When girls marry, before leaving the household they must leave the land behind. Women’s limited control of land restricts their access to credit. Unequal male land ownership leads to a false assumption that men should dominate agricultural production. Female-headed households tend to greatly suffer from poverty, often pressuring girls to drop out of school and marry early. Because rural women are expected to handle both agricultural and household obligations, they cannot focus on income-generating activities.

Gender equality for rural women is encouraged to further countries’ economic development and fulfillment of human rights obligations, yet it still fails in implementation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women constitute a majority of the agricultural labour force. If rural women were given equal

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access to resources, it is estimated that national outputs would increase by about 4%. However, resource allocation for agriculture rarely addresses gender issues, reinforcing rural women's experience within the cycle of poverty, and making rural women one of the poorest groups of people in the world.

Rural businesswomen in developing countries face multiple challenges: remoteness from markets, inadequate access to suppliers, lack of skilled labour, poor degree of financial freedom, inadequate infrastructure and mobility constraints. Balancing household obligations and income-generating work often hinders rural women in their business activities. Illiteracy or low levels of education can also be obstacles when dealing with legal and financial documents. These educational disadvantages result in difficulties in accessing and using market information and extension services, applying for credit, and complying with importing countries' product standards.

Cultural stereotypes and negative social norms segregate activities along gender lines, socializing women do small-scale and less income-generating work. In agricultural activities, women specialize in planting, harvesting, livestock activities, and selling eggs, poultry and milk. Rural women are bound to small-scale retail trades, and are obligated to do domestic work at the same time. Whereas rural women are constrained in time and mobility by their obligation to perform unpaid care work, rural men are given opportunities to focus on capital-intensive and long-distance trade with transport and construction work. Female-headed households often sell less livestock and livestock products, inducing more poverty than male-headed households. Women workers in agro-businesses are generally low-skilled, and engage in labour-intensive work, such as packaging. There are limited opportunities to develop higher-paying skills, and wages are low. In order to give more work opportunities to rural women, gender norms that discriminate against women workers, confining them to repetitive and labour-intensive tasks should be challenged.

Good Shepherd Sisters run mostly urban-based programs, but there are exceptions. Good Shepherd Sisters in India address the empowerment of vulnerable women through human rights education and economic development in four locations across three states, Garratola in Madhya Pradesh, Mulakalapally in Telangana, and Mangalagiri and Amravati in Andhra Pradesh. These programs are implemented against the backdrop of multiple systemic barriers to women's human rights and sustainable livelihoods, including systemic violence against women, the globalization of neoliberal economics, trade deals, and climate change.

According to the Government of India's Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012–2017), agriculture can no longer absorb more workers, and may indeed have to shed some of the existing workforce, thus further disadvantaging women. Lower caste and tribal women are among those who will continue to experience the greatest level of economic exclusion. Employment of women, which is an important determinant of social inclusion, remains a major challenge.

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The women within Good Shepherd programs are among the most marginalized in Indian society. They live in multidimensional poverty, and are impacted individually and within the family and local community by systemic and structural injustices and gender-based violence. Coupled with a lack of access to education, skills, income, land, capital, and productive assets, these experiences impact levels of self-esteem and confidence, render the women highly vulnerable to labour exploitation and high levels of debt to unscrupulous landowners and creditors, and silence their voices in political matters.

The Good Shepherd program seeks to challenge the discrimination against vulnerable, lower caste and tribal women through increased social and economic inclusion. This is undertaken through enterprise developments by (i) facilitating access to government schemes which support enterprise development; (ii) increasing knowledge and skills in financial management and enterprise building; (iii) identifying commercially-viable enterprises for building co-operative structures; and (iv) empowering women for greater political engagement to redress discrimination exploitation, violence and abuse of marginalized women.

The Good Shepherd program has adopted a theory of change (Duncan Green's *From Poverty to Power*) which centers on holistic economic empowerment processes whereby the participating women's lives are transformed from a situation where they have limited power to a situation where their power is enhanced through knowledge (power within), economic decision-making (power to), access to and control over resources (power over) and ability to organize with others (power with). The overall approach to the theory of change is consistent with and reinforces Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 5, and 8.

Economic empowerment is only possible and sustainable if there are concurrent changes on multiple levels: within the individual (capability, knowledge, and self-esteem), in communities and institutions (including norms and behaviors), in available resources and economic opportunities, and in the wider political and legal environment. The provision of loans will not resolve the barriers to social and economic exclusion of lower caste and tribal women. The provision of counselling, and social outreach, including life skills education, are essential to raising self-confidence and self-esteem so that women are able to engage in all aspects of enterprise development. Training for business development must be more holistic in its approach, and address skill development in literacy and numeracy as well as financial management and saving. This must be combined with education in labour rights and access to legal aid to redress exploitative practices in the work place. Access to business startup credit, business knowhow, and startup support and mentoring are key elements for successful enterprise development and should be an essential part of training programs.

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Recommendations:

We urge Member States to fulfill their commitments to allocate resources as outlined in Paragraph 24 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Resources must target those furthest behind in holistic ways, engaging rural girls and women in their personal, family, and community situations in order to challenge the obstacles they experience.

- Implement national floors of social protection as distinct opportunities towards upholding human rights, providing services, empowering rural girls and women and recognizing unpaid care work.
- Create enabling environments for the meaningful participation of rural women and girls in political, economic and social decision-making spaces. Rural girls and women are the main protagonists in designing, implementing and monitoring policies that are based on dignity, and the upholding of human rights, and must be central to processes that impact them.
- Collect and analyze data disaggregated by sex, age, and geographical location as vital for the creation of sustainable and evidence-based policies to benefit rural girls and women.

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