



Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organisation in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council in advance of the 56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

“The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development, and current challenges.”

With a name like ‘Soroptimist’ it should not be surprising that we, representing 90,000 women and girls in 124 countries, are hopeful – hopeful that we are truly on the precipice of a global paradigm shift. The world is waking to the realisation that sustainable development must be the cornerstone of international policy setting, and that genuine sustainable development means economical and ecological equality. Soroptimist International, as a global voice for women, calls upon civil society, governments, and the private sector to ensure that this paradigm shift becomes a reality and not just another point on the ever-growing list of unrealised international commitments.

With so many international meetings, policy setting forums, and conferences focussing on preparations for the Earth Summit 2012 (Rio +20), we must vigilantly and steadfastly ensure that the role of women and girls, above all rural women and girls, is at the heart of these debates and decisions.

“Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.” (Principle 20 of the 1992 Rio Declaration)

“Women now represent 40% of the global labour force, 43% of the world’s agricultural labour force, and more than half the world’s university students. Productivity will be raised if their skills and talents are used more fully. For example, if women farmers were to have the same access as men to fertilizers and other inputs, maize yields would increase by almost one-sixth in Malawi and Ghana. And eliminate barriers that discriminate against women working in certain sectors or occupations.” (statement made during the Open Forum on Gender during the 2011 Policy Forum at the Annual World Bank and International Monetary Fund Meetings, reported by Soroptimist International’s representative)

“Investing in small scale farming, particularly through women, is a vital step towards meeting the challenges of food production in the future. Governments are not living up to their international commitment to protect women from discrimination, as the gap between de jure and de facto discrimination persists. Rural women still find it more difficult to get access to a range of resources

such as credit, land, agricultural inputs and extensions, with obvious consequences for their food security. Land ownership is a particular issue for women.” (excerpt from statement given by Soroptimist International representative on International Women’s Day at the FAO, 2011).

Soroptimist International demands that governments commit to the education, empowerment, and enabling of those most affected by ecological and economic degradation and destruction, namely rural women and girls, to meaningfully participate in decision-making and policy setting for the achievement of sustainable development at local, national, and international levels. The Soroptimist International model of educating women and girls by increasing access to skills, empowering women and girls with increased confidence, and enabling opportunities in the wider community to ensure they have choices, has proven to be most effective in the context of rural women’s needs and sustainable development.

With this in mind, Soroptimist International brings the following recommendations to the participants of the 56th Commission on the Status of Women, based on first-hand knowledge and experience from our worldwide network of grassroots, community-based clubs in both the Global North and the Global South. These recommendations are grouped into three categories. First, we provide our recommendations based on our work in action, advocacy, and awareness-raising to empower rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development, and current challenges. Second, we note with interest that many of the recommendations we made for the 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, in the context of access to education, are still relevant in the context of rural women. We have reiterated these recommendations specifically towards rural women. Finally, we have included relevant excerpts from the Women’s Major Stakeholder Group for the Earth Summit 2012 (Rio+20), in which Soroptimist International is an active participant. These recommendations are critical to this year’s CSW priority theme and we believe warrant attention.

I. Soroptimist International urges governments, civil society, the private sector, and other relevant partners to:

- Recognise the increasingly important role of women as the primary producers and purchasers of food, and the heretofore lack of adequate protection and support of their rights.

- By the year 2022, implement domestic legislation and policies which ensure the full realisation of the commitments made in Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration, including the establishment and funding of appropriate audit mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency.
- Ensure that actions taken to empower rural women are systems-based and horizontal, rather than project-based and vertical.
- End any and all approaches, activities, or policies which promulgate the victim/saviour dichotomy and ensure meaningful, respectful, and human rights based approaches to empowerment.
- Recognise that macro-economic policies, originating from an antiquated and inherently patriarchal hierarchy, tend to discriminate against or ignore the gender-specific needs of women and girls. Development and implementation of appropriate micro-economic policies and programmes, in consultation with those affected, must be actioned to ensure the protection and realisation of the human rights of rural women and girls.
- Implement with urgency policies and programmes which provide rural women and girls with security in the following areas: financial security, employment security, land security, food security, freedom from violence, secure access to education and training, and a secure place in decision-making forums.
- Encourage more female leadership in international organisations pertaining to food and agriculture through mentoring opportunities and training. The Soroptimist International representative to the FAO noted with concern that there were no female candidates this year for the Director General elections. SI notes with appreciation that the current Executive Director of the WFP is a woman.

II. Soroptimist International recalls the following relevant recommendations made to the 55th session, placed in the context of the 56th session's priority theme:

- Ensure that policies and programmes take a life-course approach to education and employment for rural women and girls, recognising and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages, and that women and girls living in rural areas have different needs at different times in their lives.
- Improve and prioritise appropriately disaggregated and internationally comparable data collection, encompassing process and outcome indicators, which shift away from purely

economic factors, such as GDP, to holistically examine development. A Soroptimist representative in Geneva noted, after the 2011 ECOSOC annual meeting, that there is growing criticism of the focus on the G20, which is not a UN-based organisation, nor does it address issues outside of economics.

- Work with local partners to improve facilities so that women and girls living in rural areas are afforded education that is accessible, acceptable, available, and of good quality. This includes gender appropriate and sensitive sanitation facilities, safe environments, dormitories for girls, and other aspects as required.
- Take a human rights based approach to sustainable development, bringing particular attention and focus to the participation of women and girls in decision-making and policy setting in a broad range of settings including both the public and private spheres.
- Ensure that traditionally 'female' dominated work in agriculture, farming, and food production is not undervalued or restricted to informal economies.
- Approach sex or gender based quotas with careful planning and ensure that rural women, from an early age, are fully equipped with all of the knowledge and skills necessary to take on leadership roles for which there may be allocations or other similar mechanisms. Otherwise, we are creating a system that inadvertently sets rural women up to fail, reinforcing sexist perspectives.

III. Women's Major Stakeholder Group Recommendations for the Earth Summit 2012 (Rio+20)

- Commit to gender-sensitive development of binding international and national measures for both sustainable and equitable economies and governance of sustainable development
- Commit to targets and indicators for women's involvement
- Include gender equality in the Sustainable Development Goals
- Address the following emerging issues:
 - Food security and food sovereignty
 - Women's land rights and ownership tenure, and prevention of land grabbing
 - Privatization and commodification of commons
 - Clean renewable energies
 - Women and migration
 - Water burdens for women
 - Health risks to women and girls posed by new technologies and development