



Empowerment of rural women ending of hunger & poverty: International treaties: Fatima Nagdee-Hajaig, in presence of Minister

Summary:

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig, addressed the Multi-party Women's Caucus, also attended by the Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, on empowerment of rural women. The theme of the UN Commission's International Women's Day on 8 March had been "Empower Rural Women - End Hunger and Poverty". In South Africa, as in other African countries, women constituted the majority of the population yet were still sidelined, especially in rural areas. One of the main problems raised at Codesa, and which still presented challenges today, was the fact that customary law and traditional leaders hindered the granting of real rights to women. The background to the International Women's Day of the United Nations was described and the importance of this year's theme was emphasised. Rural women were leaders, decision makers, producers, workers, entrepreneurs and service providers. They contributed to local and national economies, rural development, agriculture and household livelihoods. Such contribution to economic growth and development was a pre-requisite for economic growth and development. All too often, their contribution was not recognised, either in South Africa or Africa. It was noted that globally, more than one-third of the female workforce was engaged in agriculture, but most also bore the burden of domestic work and family care. Although in theory they could export the food produced to other markets, in practice the lack of subsidies to farmers in South Africa meant that they were unable to compete. 55% of the world's population lived in rural areas, with women constituting a large portion, and close to 1 billion were suffering from hunger, whilst 1.4 billion lived on under \$1.25 per day. Rural poverty was often attributed to a lack of assets, limited economic opportunities, poor education and capabilities, and social and political inequalities. The challenges to empowerment of rural women were broad, and encompassed lack of educational opportunities, lack of access to resources and financial resources that would enable them to engage in non-agricultural activities, customary laws that prevented them from accessing credit without their husband's consent, their exclusion from decision-making, and lack of access to land. Few institutions addressed the social, political and economic structures limiting the empowerment of rural women, and most rural associations were male-dominated and had few women in leadership positions. The only international instrument that directly addressed rural women was Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination, also Millennium Development Goal 3 called for eradication of gender inequality in rural areas. There was a need for enabling legislation locally to empower rural women and for national policies promoting their rights. Government, international and regional organisations, rural and women's and farmers' organisations all bore responsibility to ensure rural women's empowerment. A number of suggested measures were outlined, and some examples were cited of communities in China and India who had managed to achieve empowerment for rural women. Members commented that NGOs did not tend to focus on rural women, and needed to do so, and made the point that although there were projects in rural areas, they lacked finance, and so the budget had to specifically address these issues. Another Member suggested that audits should be done on any programmes that were running to assess their

progress and isolate problems that may be hindering further progress. Policy should be articulated on rural women alone, as they were too often included in the “poor women” category although they faced specific issues. Continuity was needed, and women in positions of power should not isolate themselves from ordinary women. The point was also made that gender units should submit reports, and that, in turn, the reports to international bodies should be more widely circulated.

Minutes:

Chairperson’s opening remarks

The Chairperson welcomed all delegates and said that they had returned from a meeting honouring the sixteen days of activism against violence on women and children, where she had delivered a paper. Although the events were well-represented in Gauteng, this was not so apparent in Mpumalanga, because of a clash in events. Each provincial legislature had its own programme. She also noted that although an invitation had been given to attend the sixth United Nations (UN) session on the status of women, the invitation came very late, and only one week of that conference was attended. A report would be drawn, but she stressed that this Parliament should not again be in a position that it could not report in full.

Apologies were read out, and the Chairperson noted that written apologies would be required.

International treaties and protocols and empowerment of rural women: Presentation by Fatima Nagdee-Hajaig

Ms Fatima Nagdee-Hajaig, Head: International Relations, Inter-Parliamentary Union, tabled three documents and explained that the first related to key international instruments on the rights of women; the second to the empowerment of women, and the third was a case study on how rural women in a particular country had managed to organise themselves. She noted that in South Africa, 52% of the population was female, yet women still tended to be side-lined, especially in rural areas, despite agreements at Codesa that women’s issues would be specifically given a focus. One of the main problems at Codesa was the fact that customary law and traditional leaders were opposed to women being given real rights.

Background

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig outlined the background to the empowerment of rural women. In December 1977 the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming a United Nations Day for Woman’s Rights and International Peace, to be observed on any day of the year by member states, in accordance with their historical and national traditions. It was believed that this would recognise active participation from women was required to secure peace, social progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It would also acknowledge the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security. Although this resolution had been adopted in 1977, the UN had actually begun to celebrate International Women’s Day on 8 March 1975. The global theme for International Woman’s Day altered each year, and often was developed internationally to serve as a guide towards the national events and debate. The theme for International Woman’s Day 2012 was “Empower Rural Women - End Hunger and Poverty”. As suggested by the title, this would address the empowerment of rural women, for poverty and hunger eradication, sustainable development and accelerated progress towards achieving internationally agreed development goals such as the Millennium Development Goals.

She outlined the importance of this theme, stating that rural women were leaders, decision makers, producers, workers, entrepreneurs and service providers. They contributed to local and national economies, rural development, agriculture and household livelihoods. Such contribution to economic growth and development was a pre-requisite for economic growth and development. All too often, their contribution was not recognised, either in South Africa or Africa.

Studies had shown that, on average, women in most African rural areas worked for longer hours than their male counterparts, and in Benin and Tanzania, for instance, this amounted to 17.4 and 14 hours longer per week than rural men. Globally, more than one third of the female workforce was engaged in agriculture. Recent statistics released by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations showed that 60 % of employed women in Sub-Saharan Africa were in the agricultural sector, either as farmers on their own account, as unpaid labourers on family farms and as paid or unpaid labourers on other farms. In most African countries rural women were the primary food farmers and therefore grew food for subsistence and food for local and international markets. At the same time, women in most rural areas also bore the burden of domestic work and caring for their families.

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig pointed out that women produced between 60% and 70 % of the food security of a state, but most of the exports went to Europe. Although in theory all Europe markets were open to African producers, women farmers from Africa could not compete with huge subsidies paid to European farmers, even though they worked harder and for longer hours, making it impossible for them, in practice, to export to Europe.

She noted that the population of the developing world was more rural and urban. 3.1 billion people, or 55% of the world’s total population, lived in rural areas, and women comprised a significant proportion of that rural population. About 1.4 billion people were living on less than US\$1.25 a day, and close to 1 billion people were suffering from hunger. At least 70% of the world’s very poor people were living in rural areas, and women were the worst affected. Rural poverty was often attributed to a lack of assets, limited economic opportunities, poor education and capabilities, and social and political inequalities.

Challenges to the Empowerment of Women

The empowerment of rural women meant providing rural women with the education and means to enable them to fully participate, as equal citizens, in the economic and political development of society, as well as in the development and implementation of macroeconomic policies, national development plans and poverty alleviation strategies. It had been the subject of much debate in international forums (see attached presentation for details), where countries were encouraged to promote the economic independence of women through the creation of employment, access to resources and credit for the eradication of the persistent burden of poverty, malnutrition, poor health and illiteracy.

The first problem that rural women faced was lack of access to resources. They could not apply for credit because they could offer no collateral, and it should be possible for them to get loans at a low interest rate. This had been done in Bangladesh, with good success since most did not renege on those loans. Another constraint was lack of access to decent and productive rural employment and non-agriculture income generating activities. More than one-third of female workers were engaged in agriculture, and most were employed in low productivity jobs, working on small farms as paid or unpaid labourers, or running small enterprises. They could not become involved in non-agricultural income-generating activities or decent employment because there were policy, legal and cultural barriers, including customary laws that prevented women from accessing credit without their husband's consent.

This issue was discussed at Codesa, and she noted that although in theory, women had the right to contract in their own right, the implementation was problematic. Although women had a right to own land, in practice communal land was handled by the traditional leaders. This caucus had a mandate and responsibility to women to ensure that they were properly protected.

Rural women further lacked access to formal and non-formal education in many parts of the world, through religious, political, social and economic factors. Girls and women in rural areas often had more limited access to education than boys and men because of their added household responsibilities, which then later on limited them to taking only informal employment, as they lacked basic skills like literacy, numeracy and negotiating power. Although more girl children attended primary schools, more girls than boys tended to drop out of high schools. They had to assist with domestic chores, particularly in the rural areas, and would be kept out of school when crops had to be gathered.

Rural women were still excluded from important decision making roles, and often did not have representation in local decision-making bodies.

Rural women, as mentioned already, often did not have access to land, which was not only an economic and productive resource, but also a source of status and recognition. The main barriers to rural women's access to land were institutional and cultural barriers. The extent to which they were involved in technology, research and development, and had access to new technologies, was another challenge. There were few institutions addressing the social, political and economic structures limiting the empowerment of rural women. Farmer associations and groups were effective forums for knowledge sharing, but tended to be male-dominated and had few women in leadership positions to represent the interests of women, which were very different. It was therefore necessary to achieve institutional change.

Empowerment

Article 14 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1979, was the only text that specifically addressed rural women. Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) on gender equality also calls for the eradication of gender inequality in rural areas. However, there was still a need for national enabling legislation to recognise empowerment of rural women, as well as national policies to advocate for rights of rural women to access resources and services to ensure their genuine and effective empowerment. Without this, the international commitments in CEDAW would mean little. Responsibility for ensuring that rural women were empowered lay not only with government, but also with international and regional organisations, rural organisations, women's organisations, farmer organisations, cooperatives and the private sector.

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig outlined some measures that needed to be taken to ensure that rural women were fully empowered, as follows:

- (a) Integration of a gender sensitive approach or perspective into rural governance processes, such as policy making, public administration, service delivery, and all rural development and agricultural policies and programmes.
- (b) Revision and amendment of laws and policies that discriminated against rural women and girls, including those relating to land and natural resource ownership, family, marriage, inheritance, housing, property rights and legal capacity.
- (c) Design and implementation of policies for rural areas, including those on poverty and hunger, must consider the perspectives of rural women
- (d) Establishment of strong and adequately resourced gender equality units at senior level in the relevant ministries. This should be coupled with good reporting on what the gender units actually did, and specific budgeting for women in agriculture.
- (e) Development of outreach programmes to ensure that rural women and men were aware of their rights and the role and responsibilities of national and local government in safeguarding these rights.
- (f) Support to women in the agricultural sector, including facilitating access to infrastructure, including transportation, information and technology.

- (g) Increasing access of rural women to financial services, and specific design of financial products targeting this sector, as well as access to financial literacy training.
- (h) Establishment and development of cooperatives and other structures to ensure knowledge sharing and dialogue among rural women.
- (i) Expansion of opportunities for decent agricultural and non-agricultural employment for rural women
- (j) Full participation of rural women and rural women leaders in key decision making and budget allocation processes at all levels
- (k) Increasing the number of women in leadership positions in agricultural organisations and other rural based organisations.
- (l) Allocation of adequate financial resources in national budgets for the economic empowerment of rural women.

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig concluded by reasserting that rural women were key to food security because they made up a large share of the world's agriculture producers and played a crucial role in feeding their families and nations. Their crucial contribution to economic growth and development must be recognised. If their needs at all levels were recognised, this would inevitably increase their productive capacity and desire to make an even greater contribution to development of their communities. She noted that a rural village in China, recognising that agriculture was very seasonal, established small factories to package materials to provide the women with income in winter. India, which remained a very patriarchal society, had also managed to empower rural women. South Africa needed to do the same, and examine the obstacles and formulate plans to take this further.

Discussion

The Chairperson noted that time was too short to allow for much discussion, but agreed that women's issues should be placed firmly on the agenda in all Parliamentary work, and there should be strong implementation and monitoring of the laws. She compared the situation in Mauritius, Uganda and India.

Members of the caucus raised the following issues:

- a) Despite a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) operating in urban areas, they did not really represent women in rural areas.
- b) Women's issues were crosscutting in nature, and although there were projects taking place in rural areas, they lacked finance. The challenges relate to marketing and mentoring. She wondered whether the budget truly addressed the issues of women, and whether it was gender friendly.
- c) The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries was running a programme on women in agriculture and rural development of the Department of Agriculture.
- d) The address was noted, and a Member asked what the speaker suggested should be the responses to the problems. She believed that an audit should be done to assess any progress on the programmes that were running, as also to isolate problems and allow the Caucus to come up with strategies.
- e) Another Member questioned whether policy actually articulated anything on rural women, as a special category, and pointed out that it was necessary to separate poor women and rural women, as rural women faced additional barriers.
- f) It was stressed that continuity and commitment were needed, and there should be announcements on any progress made. This Member also agreed that there was a need to interrogate the budget. The AU had declared 2010 to 2020 as the Decade of Women. She noted that some areas were not purely rural, as they had no arable land, and others were not purely urban, as they lacked infrastructure. She urged that women in positions of power should not isolate themselves from ordinary women.
- g) Another Member thought that this was a provocative topic. Monopolies raised further barriers.
- h) The final comment was that some progress had been made, but not enough, as many people were in the same positions as they were prior to the democratic South Africa. She agreed that most NGOs operated for urban women, and urged this Caucus to look into the issues.

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig noted these comments and not questions. She agreed that there was a need to interrogate the budget and ask the specific question as to what it did for women and their empowerment. It would also be necessary to look at the legislation, to see whether it could better the lives of women. Continuity was very important. The Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities was working with the gender units in other departments, but the main problem was that reports were not forthcoming, and the heads of the gender units must explain what was happening. The country reports to international bodies were not widely circulated, and should be.

The Chairperson noted that there was a need to monitor the situation. Some NGOs were taking on these issues. In the forthcoming meeting, the Ministers who participated in discussions at the United Nations would be asked to report back, and reports on the UN Conference must be adopted by Parliament. Many local governments were also launching their own Multi-party Women's Caucus, and

this would assist this Caucus in becoming more actively involved.

Ms Nagdee-Hajaig explained that an invitation to the UN Conference had been extended to the Minister, who then requested that some other Parliamentarians accompany her, to the first week of meetings, which was intended for politicians, whilst the second week (which was not attended) was geared to officials. She suggested that the Multi-party Women's Caucus focus on one or two issues for the year, and agreed that it would be ideal to focus on rural women in this year. This Caucus did not have oversight over the work of the Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities.

The meeting was adjourned.

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