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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development
and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of
strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern
and further actions and initiatives**

Statement submitted by the *Asociación de Familias y Mujeres del Medio Rural*, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Rural women: future challenges

The *Asociación de Familias y Mujeres del Medio Rural* [Association of Rural Families and Women] stresses the universal importance of the past, present and future role of rural women, and the need to pursue policies that will promote true equality of opportunities and empowerment for women living in rural areas.

The rural population today accounts for 47% of the total world population, which exceeds 7 billion people. We are speaking, then, of a rural population of around 3.2 billion persons, of whom more than 1.6 billion are women living in the rural areas of the world. In the European Union, the rural population represents 26% of the total population, with around 66 million women living in the countryside, a figure that rises to something over 120 million if we take into account all 47 countries that are part of the Council of Europe. In Spain, nearly 6 million women are living in a rural setting.

In light of these figures, it is clear that when we speak of rural women we are speaking of a very significant segment of the population, not only from the demographic viewpoint but also in terms of the role that rural women play in the economic, social and cultural development of millions of the world's people.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995, marked a watershed in the life of women in general and of rural women in particular, for it was at that Conference that countries agreed to designate 15 October as International Rural Women's Day, and rural women were included within the 12 spheres of the Platform for Action.

Since that time, we have taken some small but important steps toward real equality of opportunity for rural women, but that progress has been uneven across countries, and it has not always been achieved in the same way or within the same timeframe.

Spain has seen significant progress: in recent years there have been great legislative gains, with the approval and entry into force of Organic Law 1/2004 on Integral Measures of Protection against Gender Violence; Organic Law 3/2007 on Effective Equality of Women and Men, which also makes specific provision for rural women; and Law 35/2001 on Shared Ownership of Farming Operations.

Nevertheless, despite these legislative advances, rural women in Spain are still faced with inequalities that must be overcome, such as:

- Problems in entering the labour market.
- The wage gap, which stands at around 60%.
- The difficulty of reconciling family, working and personal life, as women are still the principal caregivers for the elderly and for children, and they shoulder the bulk of household chores, in addition to their farming and livestock tasks.
- The scarcity of rural women in decision-making bodies. Women represent only 25% of the membership of cooperatives, 3.5% of the members of the governing boards of first-tier cooperatives, and 2.2% in the case of second-tier cooperatives, and they have virtually no presence in professional farming organizations or in local action groups.

- Gender violence, which rural women tend to suffer in greater silence and with fewer resources than urban women.

Consequently, continuing efforts in the following areas are needed:

- Take specific actions to meet the needs of rural women in order to achieve progress toward intelligent, sustainable and integrating development.
- Continue to speak out against all types of inequalities that rural women still face.
- Reinforce the role of women in sustaining the rural population, and in preventing its masculinization and ageing, recognizing that without women there is no future for the countryside.
- Promote the leading role of women as a driving force for the economic development of rural people by encouraging female entrepreneurship and the introduction of new economic activities complementary to agriculture and animal husbandry.
- Take steps to facilitate the reconciliation of family, working and personal life and to bring about the change of mentality needed to make the shared responsibility of women and men a reality in the home.
- Improve access to the new information and communication technologies as essential tools for powering rural women.
- Continue to promote the presence of rural women in decision-making bodies in order to give them the level of representation they deserve, recognizing that they are half the population and that we must not waste their potential.
- Step up the battle against gender violence in the countryside and improve the resources devoted to caring for the female victims of such violence.

Nearly 20 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, we have yet to address the challenges and achieve the targets proposed in the Platform of Action. Hence the need for all of us — governments, international organizations, social and economic agents and society in general — to pool our efforts to ensure that rural women occupy their proper place as a fundamental and vital element for the support and sustenance of our peoples.
