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Statement submitted by Centre Africain de Recherche Industrielle (CARI), 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](#).

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Characteristics of rural areas in developing countries

Rural areas — which, in poor countries, are often remote or very remote — account for close to three quarters of the surface area of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While the majority of the population is caught in an unrelenting cycle of grinding poverty, women and girls, whose lives depend on male relatives and spouses, are especially affected. Rural women are extremely vulnerable and marginalized. The political authorities' failure to implement development programmes is partly to blame for this state of affairs. Government-supported development programmes tend to focus on urban areas, neglecting rural areas despite their wealth of natural and human resources. This is what has happened in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rural areas lack such critical infrastructure as roads, schools, hospitals, industry, recreational facilities and access to manufactured goods.

Situation of rural women

Women in rural areas work in traditional and subsistence agriculture, sometimes on poor land. To ensure a good harvest, they must either walk far from their villages to find fertile soil or work on larger plots. As a result, their work is sheer drudgery. In some cultures, a wife's labour belongs to her husband, who owns and manages what she produces. For this reason, men in such societies prefer to have several wives. Furthermore, having more than one wife demonstrates abundant wealth. Despite their status as the producers of wealth, these women are often treated poorly by their employer-husbands. Young girls who accompany their mothers to work in the fields suffer the same treatment. Sometimes they are married off at a young age. After working in the fields all day, a woman returns to the village and must still do the housework, because she is responsible for feeding her family and taking care of her spouse. Her responsibilities do not stop there. At night, she has other, no less onerous, duties in the conjugal bed. The rural woman gets little respite. She is the mother of several children and, ultimately, her health is jeopardized. Her status remains inferior to that of a man. Certain religious practices dictate that women live their lives differently, including from other women. In addition, women continue to be subjected to everyday social stigma, including sexism, occupational discrimination, unequal wages, harassment and manipulation, and domestic violence.

As the women's rights movement expanded in the 20th century, women achieved a higher status. The movement began in 1791 when Olympe de Gouges, the first woman feminist, demanded political equality for men and women in the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen", the first article of which states: "Women are born free and equal to men in rights".

In Europe, women started to rise up in the late eighteenth century. They took to the streets in England and France to demand their rights and put an end to their inferior status. The birth of the women's rights movement thus coincided with the demise of the old order.

The movement has evolved over time and now encompasses individual responsibility, women's empowerment and gender equality.

It should be noted that our statement gives short shrift to gender equality because we believe it to be impossible. God created man and called him “man”. He then created a similar being, but not an identical one, from the man’s rib: the “woman”. He thus created two different beings who shall never be equal. A woman will never impregnate a man, just as he will never experience motherhood. For a Christian to affirm the equality of the sexes is a rebellion against God. We can, however, discuss equal opportunities, equal responsibilities and equal rights, since some women have achieved the same level of education as men. Since 1875, when Madeleine Brès became the first woman to earn a doctoral degree in medicine, women can become doctors; they can obtain doctoral degrees in the sciences, like Marie Curie in France, who received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903; they can be drivers, political leaders and lawyers, having been admitted to the bar and having pleaded in court since 1900. In short, women are capable of performing the functions that had been once reserved for men and can earn wages that are equal or greater than those of men. They participate in socially useful work. This involvement serves as the true basis for establishing women’s de facto equality in all areas, for ensuring their economic and social independence and contributing to their cultural development. The scientific and technical revolution has made profound qualitative changes in the work of women and girls in rural areas. Their work has become more mechanized. Women can drive tractors and combines, and can work as agronomists, animal scientists, farm heads and so on.

We must make the most of this opportunity to empower women.

The challenges ahead

In the short term, greater value must be attached to the work done by women and girls in rural areas so that they can earn an income and become less dependent and vulnerable.

The value of agricultural products can be increased by storing them for long periods of time and bringing them to market during shortages. In countries where agriculture is mechanized, women’s drudgery has become a thing of the past.

In the medium term, women and girls in rural areas must receive education and training. This work should be done by non-governmental organizations that have demonstrated their effectiveness in various areas, such as women’s entrepreneurship, training in income-generating activities and careful management of their resources. CARI is prepared to take up this work and has appealed to trustworthy partners to fund the project.

With appropriate education and training, women and girls in rural areas will become capable of managing their output and will learn that they can be autonomous and take their own decisions. They would be able to demand shared responsibility and equal opportunities.

Women’s organizations, associations and networks have sought to work together in international, national and regional forums in order to speak with one voice and to form a core group that lobbies national policymakers to ensure development programmes benefit all communities, whether urban or rural.

The annual sessions of UN-Women provide an appropriate forum for this purpose.

Following the example of UN-Women, we suggest that EU-Women, OIF-Women and AU-Women, among others, be established and tasked with doing the

lobbying necessary to press policymakers (especially in the so-called developing countries, where the situation is critical) to implement equitable development policies for all segments of the population, with particular emphasis on the training of women and girls. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this type of programme is already under way in the form of the “All Girls to School” project, which is being supported by UNICEF in some urban areas. We believe that one day it will reach the hinterland.

We also recommend establishing nurseries, day-care centres, monitored study groups, canteens for women and girls, summer camps and laundries in rural areas in order to free women from arduous housework. States should assume full responsibility for improving the status of rural women and should guarantee the full enjoyment of their rights.
