



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by Mother’s Union, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

Mothers' Union is an international grassroots membership movement, rooted in the Anglican Church, with over 4 million members in 83 countries around the world. Mothers' Union seeks to transform communities, and the lives of families, women and men, through practical support, empowerment, and by challenging systems which perpetuate injustice at the local, national and international level. We work to support family life, empower women, combat gender inequality and gender-based violence, and promote the participation and representation of women in decision making.

### **The feminisation of poverty and women's economic empowerment:**

In addressing the challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls; it is vital to address the fact that women and girls continue to be left behind in all aspects of development. Women are adversely affected by many of the issues which impact rural communities throughout the world, and face a unique set of challenges, which must be addressed in order for them to reach their full potential. Rural areas remain at an economic disadvantage, compared to their urban counterparts, with 80% of undernourished people in the world living in rural communities. Whilst rural women produce more than 55 per cent of all food grown in developing countries, they are less likely to own the land they farm.

The lack of economic empowerment; inequalities in accessing education and skills training; decent paid work; as well as discrimination within the workplace and the global gender gap in income and employment, which currently stands at 59%, mean that women bear the brunt of poverty. As one of our members in South Africa stated: "poverty...bears the face of a woman".

Girls in rural communities are more likely to drop out of secondary education sooner than boys, and literacy rates of rural women are significantly lower than their urban counterparts. Through Mothers' Union's Literacy and Financial Education programmes, it is apparent that when women gain skills in literacy and numeracy, outcomes for themselves, their families and communities are significantly higher, including reductions in domestic violence and abuse.

### **Lack of access to services and infrastructure:**

The lack of infrastructure and services in rural areas means that women in these areas are often isolated and cut off from essential services and resources, including access to health amenities, and skilled health workers. Maternal mortality rates are higher in rural areas, and Mothers' Union members in the UK, are concerned about the exacerbation of the isolation of rural women, by central Government cuts to transport and health services.

Concern was raised about the lack of water and sanitation services in many rural communities around the world, leading women and girls, who still carry out the vast majority of unpaid care and work, to spend extended time travelling to gather essential resources, such as water and fuel. Members reported increased vulnerabilities and rates of violence, particularly sexual violence as a result of the lack of accessible resources.

Women experiencing gender-based violence are increasingly vulnerable in rural communities due to the lack of specialist support services in these areas, and the isolation caused by a lack of transport links.

**Unpaid care and work:**

Throughout the world, women and girls take on the majority of unpaid care and work, which is often not acknowledged for its essential economic and social contribution. In the UK, women who look after their children in rural areas, whilst their partners participate in paid employment away from the home, are increasingly isolated, a situation which is exacerbated by the lack of transport, affordable childcare and infrastructure in rural areas.

The educational and economic empowerment of women and girls is also limited by the lack of access to further and higher education, and career advancement in rural areas. The expectation placed on women and girls to care for family members and children, means it is often women who remain in rural communities where opportunities are limited, whilst men are more likely to migrate to urban areas, in order to seek advancement. This limits opportunities for women and girls, and is a universal experience reported by Mothers' Union members in many countries, from both the global north and south.

**Inequality, discrimination and harmful attitudes towards women and girls:**

Regressive and harmful gender norms and attitudes are key obstacles to the empowerment and equality of women and girls. Members from both the global north, and south reported that these attitudes were more prominent in rural areas. One member from the UK stated: "In some rural communities the traditional background of male dominance by the nobility, the village squire and farmers can restrict women being able to play their full part in rural communities". Additionally, one member from South Africa stated that: "Patriarchal society still confines women to the background and their issues are not considered important".

**Participation and Representation of Rural Women:**

Throughout the world women are excluded from decision making processes and their voices blocked at all levels, and this seems to be particularly the case in rural areas. Women's participation in the formal and informal architecture around peacebuilding, whilst invaluable, is seriously lacking, with less than 4% of signatories to peace agreements, between 1992 and 2011, women. Women on the whole are uniquely affected by violence and conflict, and rural women in particular, who are unprotected, isolated and vulnerable bear the brunt of this.

**Recommendations:**

Mothers' Union is calling on member states to recognise and value the vital contribution of women to rural communities, and wider society, and to create and implement policies which address the unique challenges that they face, including by:

**The economic empowerment of rural women**

- Creating and implementing policies which address the feminisation of rural poverty, by investing in women's economic empowerment, through safe access to quality education, skills training, and decent paid work; and ensuring that gender-based violence and discrimination within these settings is addressed.
- Creating and implementing laws and policies which give women equal rights within the law, including ownership of land and property; inheritance rights, including for widows; and access to financial capital and institutions.

### **The universal and gender sensitive implementation of agenda 2030**

- Ensuring that the universal nature of the sustainable development agenda is taken seriously, and that no one is left behind, by implementing a coordinated and gender sensitive approach to policy and decision making; and ensuring that marginalised groups of women who experience intersecting vulnerabilities, such as those with disabilities, the elderly, widows, and indigenous groups, are consulted, included and represented.
- Creating and implementing policies which recognise, and value the unpaid care and work undertaken by women and girls, as well as making provision for the choice of a more equitable distribution of this.

### **Women's meaningful participation and representation**

Ensuring the meaningful representation, inclusion and participation of women and girls in rural areas, in decision making processes and political life at all levels, particularly in the planning of rural infrastructure and development processes, and in mechanisms around peacebuilding and conflict resolution, ensuring the universal implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

### **Gender-Based Violence and harmful practices**

- Outlawing in local, customary and national laws and policies, all forms of gender-based violence and harmful practices, including (but not limited to) domestic violence and abuse; female genital mutilation; child, early and forced marriage; so called honour-based violence; sexual violence; human trafficking; and elder and widow abuse.
- Ensuring access to specialist support services; protection and justice for survivors of gender-based violence in rural communities.
- Recognising the unique experiences of women in settings of violent armed conflict, and ensuring that laws and policies are created which adequately address these needs.

### **Access to services and infrastructure**

Creating and implementing laws and policies which ensure investment in infrastructure and essential services in rural communities, including adequate maternal, neonatal and healthcare; safe access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities; essential resources such as food and fuel; roads and transport links which reduce isolation, and connect rural areas economically.

### **Addressing attitudes towards women and girls**

Ensuring that policies and laws are created and implemented, which challenge and address harmful attitudes towards women and girls in rural communities, and support the sensitisation in communities of gender equality.

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