

Union Women's Views  
at the 56<sup>th</sup> UN CSW,  
27 February – 9 March 2012



The economic empowerment of rural women workers through rights at work, education and public investment

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Education  
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# UNION



## Join the cause:

**Empowerment of rural women: Through rights at work, education and public investment**

*Share your views and experiences for an agenda of change* - to ensure the economic, social and political empowerment of all rural women workers. This is most urgently needed: out of the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty (i.e. on less than US\$1.25 per day), 1 billion are in rural areas.

*Take part in an Interactive debate* - with women activists and leaders from trade unions and civil society

**When:** 12:30pm to 2:00pm - on Friday, 2 March 2012

**Where:** Main Auditorium room of the Salvation Army  
221 East 52nd St. (between 2nd and 3rd Avenues),  
New York

**Languages:** English, Spanish and French

### **Sponsored by:**

International trade union movement, representing 70 million women workers worldwide. Particular sponsors: Education International (EI), International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Public Service International (PSI), International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations (IUF).

# The economic empowerment of rural women workers through rights at work, education and public investment

Statement of Union Women (PSI, EI, ITUC and IUF)  
for the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the UNCSW



Recognising that today 1 billion people are living in hunger, Public Services International, Education International, International Trade Union Confederation, and the International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations pay tribute to the contribution of women to growing, processing and preparing food and, in particular, the contribution of women on family farms to ensuring global food security, and the contribution of the rural women to the welfare of their families, households and communities.

We welcome measures to ensure that women have access to and ownership of land and have access to credit, markets, technology and all measures that empower and assist them in eradicating poverty and hunger. The situation of rural women workers, in particular in agriculture, also needs to be addressed. They are all too frequently ignored by researchers and academics, policymakers and legislators.

The global trade union movement calls for specific measures to ensure the economic, social and political empowerment of all rural women workers, including access to public goods, legal and social protection, and public investment in social and physical infrastructure and effective service delivery. This is most urgently needed: out of the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty (i.e. on less than \$1.25 per day), 1 billion are in rural areas.

## Employment of women in agriculture

Agriculture remains a significant employment sector. In 1991, 45.2 per cent of total employment was in agriculture, but by 2007 that share had fallen to 34.9 per cent. Women make up 41.3 per cent of the total and work across all agricultural sectors. They work as day labourers, seasonal workers and migrant workers, on plantations and in pack houses, glasshouses and cold stores. In the tea sector, which employs millions of workers globally, women are the largest segment of the workforce. In the banana industry they are mainly confined to pack houses. In newer crop industries, such as cut flowers and export horticulture, women make up a majority of the workforce in both harvesting and packing.

## Current challenges

Agriculture is, regrettably, characterized by significant decent work deficits or appalling working conditions. Agricultural workers are often denied access to even the most basic of rights covered in the core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), on freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, equality at work and the elimination of child labour, as well as bonded and forced labour. According to the 2008 ILO report entitled “Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction”, labour inspection is often non-existent or weak. Women all too often are only offered short-term contracts and it is not unheard of for employers to demand a pregnancy test before offering employment. Women agriculture workers often cannot exercise their right to maternity benefits.

Further, agriculture ranks as one of the most dangerous industries. Injuries and fatalities are common, often leading to incapacity or death, which plunge families deeper into poverty. Women working in pack houses and the cut flower industry often contract upper limb disorders through repetitive work and poor workstations. Evidence gathered by trade unions indicates that sexual harassment is widespread, especially when women are on temporary contracts or piece rates. Employers often demand sexual favours before renewing contracts and/or paying full entitlements.

Use of child labour in rural areas is widespread, with agriculture being the biggest user across all sectors.

***The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 60 per cent of all child labour is in agriculture. This means that 132 million girls and boys aged 5 to 14 are working in agriculture, often doing work that is hazardous to their health and/or interferes with their education.***

The severe decent work deficits of women and men rural workers, as well the existence of child labour, need to be effectively addressed in rural employment and poverty reduction programmes and policies.

Apart from the multiple roles women have as household managers and family carers, as organisers and providers of community services and in the economy, rural women workers in particular have the longest working day. The unequal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men and the absence of quality public services lead to excessive hours of paid and unpaid work for women and limit women's access to paid work. The low participation and representation of women in decision-making in rural areas, a problem more acute in rural areas than in urban areas, inevitably leads to biases in priorities, policies and programmes.

Providing rural workers with access to social protection must be a priority. It is an important step towards the formalisation of their working situation. As a minimum, the Commission on the Status of Women must express support for a Social Protection Floor, which comprises basic income security and universally available and accessible public services, such as health services, primary education, housing, water and sanitation. In

this respect, the trade union delegation refers governments to conclusions of the report of the ILO Social Protection Floor Advisory Group chaired by Michelle Bachelet, entitled “*Social protection floor for a fair and inclusive globalization*”.

***Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [/herself] and of his [/her]family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [/her] control. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.***

Source: Article 25 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights

## Empowering rural women through public investment

Privatization and the reduction of the role of the State in economic life have had an acute impact on the lives of women in rural areas. Because of their specific productive and reproductive roles and position within society, rural women have been among the worst affected by cuts in social spending, where substantial costs have been shifted from the State to the household.

There are few rural areas where the demand for health and care services, including for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, water, sanitation and transport services and access to energy supplies is met by existing provisions. As a consequence, rural women have been forced to take on an increasing burden of unpaid work (care tasks, obtaining food, collecting water and firewood, etc.).

***In absolute numbers, more people living with HIV reside in rural areas. The epidemic is spreading with alarming speed into the remotest villages, cutting food production and threatening the very life of rural communities. [...] Women and girls also face the greatest burden of work; given their traditional responsibilities for growing much of the food and caring for the sick and dying. In many hard-hit communities, girls are being withdrawn from school to help lighten the family load.***

Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

A World Bank study found that women in rural Africa spend 65 per cent of their time on journeys on foot. Other studies show that rural women work 12 to 13 hours a week more than men.

Improvements in rural infrastructure, such as affordable and safe water, sanitation and energy near the home, and accessible and affordable modes of transport could dramatically improve the “time poverty” and health outcomes of rural women and their families.



***The prevalence of mental illness, in particular depression, in rural areas is high. Access barriers to treatment include lack of mental health providers, lack of transportation, lack of child care, poverty, and lack of health insurance.***

Source: US Rural Assistance Centre ([www.raconline.org](http://www.raconline.org))

The provision of public services in rural areas is also a key driver in the creation of quality jobs for women and men, rural development and the expansion of social protection, which remains non-existent or inadequate in rural areas.

The Monterrey Consensus noted that investments in basic economic and social infrastructure, social services and social protection, including education, health, nutrition, shelter and social security programmes, which were gender sensitive and fully inclusive of the rural sector, were vital for enabling people to adapt to and benefit from changing economic conditions and opportunities.

The United Nations Millennium Project, and other UN agencies, have emphasised the importance of expanding rural access to vital public services and infrastructure in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

***In 2004, more than three out of every five rural people, over 2 billion, did not have access to a basic sanitation facility. Although 73% of rural dwellers have access to an improved source of drinking water, only 30% have access to piped water in the home.***

Source: "Meeting the MDG Drinking water and sanitation target: the urban and rural challenge of the decade" - 2006, World Health Organisation & UNICEF

Governments must make the necessary political and financial commitments to ensure the necessary investment in essential goods, services and infrastructure that will help alleviate poverty levels and sustain human, social and economic development in rural areas. Signing up to a global tax on financial transactions would be a good first step.

### **YES to a Global Financial Transaction Tax (FTT)**

***A tax of just 0.05% on risky and speculative financial transactions will raise hundreds of billions of dollars per year, at least initially, that should be used to fund quality public services to support equitable social policies and job creation, fight poverty, and mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change. It will contribute to reducing public deficits and debts and avoid the blind alley of austerity and public spending cuts, which are having such a high human cost in both rural and urban settings***

For more information on the FTT (aka Robin Hood Tax), see: <http://robinhoodtax.org>

## Education is key to the empowerment of girls and women in rural areas

There is universal agreement that economic and political empowerment of women and girls through education is the key to development.

***793 million adults – 64% of whom are women – still lack basic reading and writing skills. In 2009, the global adult literacy rate was 83.7 per cent, compared to 89.3 per cent for youth. A further 67 million children of primary school age are not in primary school and 72 million adolescents of lower secondary school age are also missing out their right to an education, running the risk of creating a new generation of illiterates.***

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EFA goal: to improve adult literacy levels by 50% between 2000 and 2015

Education of women and girls is the most effective means of eliminating child labour, the best remedy against child marriage and the best medicine for improving maternal health. Despite the obvious benefits of education, data show that in particular poor girls from rural areas and from ethnic minority or indigenous groups have the lowest education and literacy levels: rural location compounds wealth and gender disadvantages, reflecting the impact of cultural attitudes and the unequal burden of household labour. According to *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2010, among indigenous peoples, poverty and gender discrimination further exacerbate education deprivation. The Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in her message on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2011, stated that globally, two thirds of the 796 million illiterate adults are women.

***Gender equality is both a basic human right and a multiplier for development but the world is not on track to meet the goals set for Education for All (EFA). Women's literacy and girls' secondary education are the weak links.***

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Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director General

## Rural and indigenous women and the environment

Rural and indigenous women's lives and livelihoods are directly threatened by climate change, environmental degradation, militarization, ethnic and religious discrimination and economic policies that make small-scale subsistence farming unsustainable.

Women are affected more severely and are more at risk from natural disasters and extreme weather events, including during post-disaster response efforts. Women's exclusion from decision-making and limited access to and control over resources impede their rights. In the case of climate change, it means that women's voices are absent





from decisions about environmental management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, with long-term consequences for the well-being of women, their families and the sustainability of their communities. It is therefore important to articulate rural and indigenous women's critical role and capacity in the nurturing of a sustainable ecological system.

## Rural domestic workers

Millions of women work as domestic workers. In rural areas it is not uncommon for the wife or girl child of an agricultural worker to be expected to "help out" in the employer's household. Their work goes unrecognized, unacknowledged, in particular because it takes place in private households. Governments fail to extend to domestic workers the rights and benefits that other workers enjoy. Global unions campaigned successfully for the adoption of a new ILO Convention 189, Domestic Workers Convention, 2011. In 2012, their "12 by 12" campaign will aim at the ratification and the implementation of ILO Convention 189 in 12 countries.



## Conclusions

Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, supported by International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, call on Member States at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- i. Ensure that the concept of decent work and the creation of decent jobs are fully incorporated into rural development strategies and strengthen rural labour inspection
- ii. Invest in building the necessary social infrastructure, including health, education, social care, water, sanitation, energy, transportation and other social protection mechanisms, in order to ensure sustainable economic and social development in rural areas
- iii. Review, extend and effectively implement national legislation that covers all rural women workers, including agricultural workers, and ratify and implement ILO Conventions<sup>1</sup>
- iv. Ensure that gender-responsive budgeting, gender mainstreaming and gender-sensitive employment policies are systematically integrated into the design and the implementation of rural development policies, programmes and budgets
- v. Ensure the provision of public quality education free of charge and with adequate facilities, qualified teachers, good sanitation and safe transportation, in order to increase the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and reduce child labour. Incentives for families to send their girls to school, gender-sensitive relevant curricula and textbooks, opportunities for further education and training, and access and entry to the labour market make a difference
- vi. Provide incentives for qualified female teachers to work in rural and isolated areas and introduce measures to ensure their safety and
- vii. Develop and combine rural vocational educational training opportunities and qualifications with employment promotion, which is a recognized link between rural employment, poverty reduction and food security
- viii. Establish consultative processes that call for social dialogue with trade unions; create opportunities for rural women to participate fully and effectively in decision-making processes, including development planning.

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<sup>1</sup> In particular Conventions C87, Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention; C98, Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention; C110, Plantations Convention; C111, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention; C129, Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention; C131, Minimum Wage Fixing Convention; C141, Rural Workers' Organizations Convention; C156, Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention; C138, Minimum Age Convention; and C182, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention; C183, Maternity Protection Convention; C184, Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention; and C189, Domestic Workers Convention"



## 70 million women workers have joined a union for more and better rights at work!

- Unions play a crucial role in organising women, negotiating better working conditions, and providing women with fair access to decent jobs. Labour representation gives working women the power to advance their rights both in the workplace and society.
- Unions negotiate more and better rights for women workers in law and in practice, from the local to the global level. Women in unions are represented as leaders and decision-makers within their unions, regional bodies, and international institutions, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW).
- The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the ILO Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work set out principles designed to ensure that women are not discriminated against in their workplaces, and that they have the right to join trade unions and engage in collective bargaining.
- Given the current need to monitor and address the impacts of the economic crisis on women, two further policy instruments, adopted by the ILO at its 98th International Labour Conference in June 2009 are of special significance. These are: the ILO Global Jobs Pact and the ILO Resolution concerning Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work.
- Many women work in the informal economy without legal protection. Trade union federations and confederations are working to have labour legislation applied to the informal economy, to formally recognize the rights of these vulnerable workers and to provide social security coverage for them.
- 70 million women workers around the world are members of a union. They are represented at the UN CSW56 by EI, PSI, IUF and ITUC (see next page):



## Education International (EI)

is a global union federation of unions representing 30 million teachers and education workers, through affiliates in 172 countries and territories. EI stands up for quality public services, most especially the right to quality public education for all, particularly girls in deprived areas. Ensuring that teachers are qualified and schools are safe for children and teachers guarantee the provision of quality education. EI's First World Women's Conference On the Move for Equality took place in January 2011, in Thailand, with a focus on achieving gender equality in education, unions and society.

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## Public Services International (PSI)

is a global union federation representing more than 20 million women and men working primarily in public services across the globe. Two-thirds of our members are women, many of whom work in the health and social care sectors. PSI believes in affirmative action to achieve gender equality and promotes a "50/50 policy" amongst our affiliates, encouraging equal participation in leadership between women and men. PSI campaigns for the strong, quality public services that are key to empowering women, and advocates on specific issues including the need for pay equity, maternity protection, and an end to violence against women.

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## International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations (IUF)

is a global union federation representing 12 million workers throughout the food chain. Many are women working in plantations, in pack-houses, in food preparation and food services, and as domestic workers. IUF is committed to campaigning for the right to food and for rights for workers in the food chain. Gender equality is one of the statutory priorities of the IUF and special projects have been developed to promote women's participation in their unions. Particular attention is paid to women workers in precarious employment including in the informal economy.

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## International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

is the overall global union organization representing over 168 million workers, through affiliated members in 155 countries and territories. At the first ITUC World Women's Conference in October 2009, delegates expressed deep concern at the negative impacts of the global economic crisis on women, and affirmed that the commitment to advancing gender equality must not be eroded by the crisis. Strong support was given to the recently adopted International Labour Conference resolution on gender equality at the heart of decent work, which emphasizes that "crises should not be used as excuses to create even greater inequalities nor undermine women's acquired rights".

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## Decent Work

As stated in the ILO's 2008 Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization, Decent Work encompasses four strategic objectives: employment, social protection, social dialogue and tripartism, and fundamental principles and rights at work. In its efforts to achieve gender equality, the ILO has adopted a holistic approach, to ensure that gender equality is cross-cutting through all four objectives.

*Source: ILO Resolution 2009 concerning Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work – para 13.*



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