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**Statement for High-Level Panel on Rural Women, Food Sovereignty, Conflict and Peace  
Commission on the Status of Women 56 Side Event | 1 March 2012**

First, I would like to thank the organizers for the inviting me to participate. Unfortunately, I am not able to attend in person, but I hope that my remarks can contribute to your discussion.

Since I assumed the mandate in May 2008, I have been emphasizing consistently the need to consider women's right and gender in the context of the realization of the right to food. The right to adequate food is recognized most explicitly in article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in its General Comment No. 12 notes that Government policies to realize the right to food "should give particular attention to the need to prevent discrimination in access to food or resources for food. This should include: guarantees of full and equal access to economic resources, particularly for women, including the right to inheritance and the ownership of land and other property, credit, natural resources and appropriate technology; measures to respect and protect self-employment and work which provides a remuneration ensuring a decent living for wage earners and their families (as stipulated in article 7(a)(ii) of the Covenant); maintaining registries on rights in land (including forests)."

The right to food is recognized in other international conventions protecting specific groups, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<sup>1</sup> The Convention most fully protects women's rights, and highlights the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles that rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy (art. 14). The Convention obligates States to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas to ensure that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, protects women's equal access to land, credit, income and social security – all essential elements to realize the right to food. For example, article 14(g) demands equal treatment in land and agrarian reform and article 16(h) ensures equal rights in terms of property ownership.<sup>2</sup>

Women's rights also are protected under provisions on equality and non-discrimination in a number of international legal instruments, including the conventions of the International Labour Organization.<sup>3</sup> In the context of economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to food, the obligation of non-discrimination is immediate and is, therefore, not limited by the provision for progressive realization applied to other obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 2(2)).

Although international human rights law has made significant progress in developing legal protections for women, including protection of the right to food, a gap remains between principle and practice in many contexts around the world. Even where national legislation exists, women do not always have access to justice or the laws may not be enforced, and legal equality does not

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, article 12(2), which recognizes the right of pregnant and lactating women to nutrition.

<sup>2</sup> See *Gender and Law – Women's Rights in Agriculture*, Lorenzo Cotula for the FAO Legal Office, FAO Legislative Study 76, Rome, FAO, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Convention (No. 111) concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation, 1958 and Convention (No. 100) concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value, 1951.

always amount to substantive equality. While advances have been made in women's formal rights, this has not been accompanied by sufficient attention to making these rights meaningful and substantive so the real impact of international instruments on women's lives remains limited.<sup>4</sup> Women continue to suffer de facto discrimination in access to and control over food, land, and incomes and other resources.

Women are affected disproportionately by hunger, food insecurity and poverty, largely as a result of marginalization – economically, socially and politically. The global food economy has undervalued women's roles in land use; production, processing and distribution of food; market access; trade; investment; and food availability. Yet women play a vital role in the production, processing, distribution and preparation of food; in contributing unpaid and in earning incomes to feed their families. On average, 43 per cent of agricultural labourers in development countries are women who also are the majority of food providers.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, closing the gender gap in agriculture would increase agricultural output by 2.5 to 4 per cent, thus reducing poverty and hunger.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, more has not been done to link women's rights to the right to food, despite the reality that women's rights are central to achieving the right to food. The violations of women's rights, gender inequality and the lack of women's empowerment are major factors explaining poor nutritional outcomes. Improving women's access to productive resources, including access to land; allowing women to make decisions regarding the household budget; and protecting women from pressure, including economic pressure, to abandon optimal breastfeeding practices would contribute significantly to positive nutritional outcomes and the realization of the right to food. In this regard, a large number of people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies, with women and children being affected disproportionately.<sup>7</sup> For example, between four billion and five billion people suffer from iron deficiency, including half of pregnant women and children under 5 in developing countries.

In 2006 at the FAO International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, Member States emphasized the essential role of agrarian reform in the realization of human rights and food security. They also reaffirmed that wider, secure and sustainable access to land, water and other natural resources related to rural people's livelihoods, especially for women inter alia, was essential to hunger and poverty eradication. Indeed, security of land tenure is clearly linked with the right to adequate food, which needs to be promoted and protected, especially for women who face great difficulties in gaining secure access to and control over land and other resources.

Women own less than 20 per cent of agricultural land globally.<sup>8</sup> Most land titles are in the name of men and, where laws protecting women's access to land exist, they are often ignored and gendered social norms prevail. Secure land tenure and access to credit are often denied to women because they are not officially recognized by the authorities as food producers or agricultural workers. Without access to productive resources, women's economic independence and ability to feed themselves are limited. A number of countries have extended formal legal recognition to

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<sup>4</sup> Recognizing this gap, the Human Rights Council in its resolution 15/23 established the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice. For more information, see <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WGWomen/Pages/WGWomenIndex.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> FAO, *State of Food and Agriculture 2011: Women and agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development*, 2011, accessible from: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. vi.

<sup>7</sup> See A/HRC/19/59 on the adequacy of diets and the right to food to be presented to the 19th session of the Human Rights Council in March 2012.

<sup>8</sup> "Women Farmers: Change and Development Agents," 2011. Prepared by World Rural Forum with Alexandra Spielfoch for World Conference on Family Farming.

existing customary rights, including collective rights, as an alternative to individual titling. While formal legal recognition of customary rights provides effective security, there is a high risk that recognition of customary forms of tenure may further legitimize traditional, patriarchal forms of land distribution in violation of women's rights.<sup>9</sup>

As noted by the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, the proportion of women in agricultural production and post-harvest activities ranges from 20 to 70 per cent, and their involvement is increasing in many developing countries. This is often linked with the development of export-oriented farming, which has precipitated a growing demand for female labour. Women workers, however, are often subject to gender-based discrimination, including lower wages.

Women have less access to contract farming arrangements than men. The ability of women to benefit from contract farming is determined by their rights over land and by the power relationships both within households or, when the contract is negotiated through representatives of the community or the farmers' organizations, within these groups. Indeed, even where most of the work is in fact performed by women and other family members, it is not unusual for the contract to be signed by men, as head of the household. Moreover, women lose control over decision-making when crops are produced for cash rather than for local consumption. While women decide about the use of food produced for self-consumption, they do not decide how the income of the household is spent. Therefore, unless the framework for contract farming respects women's rights and is gender sensitive, it will undermine gender equality. Strengthening the position of women is not only a matter of guaranteeing the right to equality of treatment, but also a means of improving productivity, since women receiving a greater proportion of the crop income will have a greater incentive to increase production. Moreover, household food security and children's health, nutrition and education all gain from improved income for women, in comparison to the gains that result from improved income for men.<sup>10</sup>

Investments in women in agriculture are necessary and sustainable production and agroecology is an alternative model (to external input intensive and highly mechanized production) that could support women's empowerment. Agroecology reduces smallholder vulnerability and dependency, improves climate-friendly practices and crop diversity, and supports job creation in the rural sector.<sup>11</sup> For women in developing countries who cultivate less than two hectares of land and lack access to resources, including needed inputs for production, this model is sensible: it supports diversified production; facilitates resiliency; erodes dependency; and prioritizes women's knowledge and experiences as farmers.

The right to food places obligations on the State to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food. In so doing, States must understand existing obstacles confronting women, account for gender differences, and seek to improve the situation. The progressive realization of the right to food must go in tandem with advancements in women's rights. Given the importance of the issue I intend to devote my next report to the Human Rights Council in 2013 on the nexus between women's rights and the right to food.

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<sup>9</sup> See A/65/281, report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food on access to land.

<sup>10</sup> See A/66/262, report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food on contract farming and other business models.

<sup>11</sup> See A/HRC/16/49, report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food on agroecology.