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The Empowerment of Rural Women and their Role in Poverty and Hunger Eradication, Development and Current Challenges.

Statement by H.E. Ms Penny Williams Australia's Global Ambassador for Women and Girls

(Check against delivery)

Introduction

It is my great pleasure to address the Commission. In 2011, I was appointed Australia's first Global Ambassador for Women and Girls. The creation of this position reflects Australia's commitment to helping shape global responses to the challenges faced by women and girls.

Australia has a long history of working to address the specific needs and challenges faced by women in its rural and remote communities. Of Australia's population of over 22 million, about 15 per cent live in rural areas. While relatively low compared to most countries, the vastness of the Australian continent – almost 8 million square kilometres – and the isolation of our rural areas present unique challenges for women living in the deserts and farmlands of Australia. Our rural and remote women – many of whom are Indigenous – have made a strong contribution to Australia's development in economic and social terms. Given the global significance of these issues, we welcome the Commission's focus this year.

Madame Chair

Rural women face particular pressures and challenges in accessing services and achieving gender equality. From the remote communities of the Australian outback to schoolrooms in Uruzgan Province in Afghanistan and beyond, Australia is supporting programs to empower rural women and girls to enable them to achieve greater economic security, education and skills training, increase their participation in decision-making and leadership and live in safe and sustainable environments.

Sustainable Development & Food Security

Australia is committed to international efforts to ensure vital livelihoods for rural women and their communities are maintained for future generations. We welcome the outcomes from the UN climate change conference in Durban, which build on extensive action underway across the world. This year's Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, and ongoing climate change discussions, provide crucial platforms to take effective international action on issues that significantly affect rural and remote women.

Food security is one of the most noteworthy global issues affecting women. Last year, leaders of Commonwealth countries affirmed, through the Perth Declaration on Food Security Principles, the important role that women play in sustainable development and the need for their effective involvement in driving climate-smart agriculture and the food security agenda. Rural women play a significant role in food security but are particularly vulnerable to the challenges of food insecurity. Women make essential contributions to the rural economy of all developing countries, comprising around 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries. Yet women in rural areas have less access than men to productive resources and opportunities.¹

Support for women smallholder farmers and subsistence producers is essential to achieving global food security, including through national development programs, better access to credit mechanisms, land and property rights such as inheritance rights, and access to technology and markets.

In Bangladesh, Australia's support to local NGO BRAC's Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction program has lifted more than half a million extremely poor families out of poverty since 2008. Targeting extremely poor female-headed households, almost all the women who participate in this program remain above the poverty line with sustainable income changes four years after completion.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, increased yields on their farms could lift up to 150 million people out of hunger.²

This is why Australian aid is supporting the Global Agricultural Food Security Program which provides funding targeted at women and men smallholder farmers to support

¹ FAO (2011) *The State of Food and Agriculture Report 2010-11: Women in Agriculture -Closing the Gender Gap in Development*, FAO, Rome.

² FAO (2011) *The State of Food and Agriculture Report 2010-11: Women in Agriculture -Closing the Gender Gap in Development*, FAO, Rome.

agricultural productivity, link farmers to markets, reduce risk and vulnerability, and improve non-farm rural livelihoods.

Education & Training

Rural women also play important roles as educators and entrepreneurs in business, science and innovation. However, women and girls make up two-thirds of the one billion people in the world who lack basic literacy skills. Removing the barriers to rural women's access to education and training will secure better employment opportunities, decent work and economic empowerment; helping to lift them out of poverty.

The Australian Government is achieving education excellence by addressing educational disadvantage and investing in priority areas such as quality teaching, literacy and numeracy. Through the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions, we aim to have 90 per cent of students complete secondary schooling by 2015 and to halve the gap in Indigenous Year 12 or equivalent attainment by 2020.

Education is a central focus of Australia's new aid policy. Between 2010 and 2015, Australia expects to have invested AUD 5 billion in education in developing countries, making us one of the largest bilateral donors in this sector. With emphasis on addressing the financial and social barriers for girls' education, our aim is to increase the number of children in school, keep them there for longer, and help them to learn more while they are there. In Afghanistan, Australia is working with partners to implement a health and education program in Uruzgan Province. This program enhances the quality, access, and demand for education. Funding will build schools, train women as teachers and community educators, establish literacy groups, and educate women and children about health, nutrition and sanitation. In 2010 we are pleased to have helped lift school enrolments for girls to over 2.5 million. In Pakistan, Australia's support has resulted in a 14 per cent enrolment at the middle and secondary school level in 2010 in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

We also know that in some communities, improved access to information communication technology can be a force multiplier. In Australia, we are working hard to roll-out high-speed internet access in rural and remote areas, which will improve rural women's ability to access educational opportunities as well as business and networking opportunities.

Globally, Australia's aid program delivers much needed investment in women and girls' education, training and leadership and in providing the resources to allow them to enter into new business ventures, access credit and enter markets. For example, Australia's partnership with the United Nations in the Pacific Financial Inclusion Program is delivering the benefits of modern communications technology to help poor rural women in the Pacific participate in the financial system –improving their financial literacy and providing a safe, secure and affordable place to save money.

Leadership & Decision-making

It is also important that rural women have a voice in shaping the policy responses that affect them. Promoting women's participation in decision-making and leadership potential is key to this. Australia is working in partnership with national governments,

civil society, NGOs, international partners, and men and women in the community to improve women's access to decision-making.

In Papua New Guinea, Australia has helped to boost the number of women village court magistrates from 10 in 2004 to more than 600 by the end of 2011 through programs that have increased the recruitment and training of women to those roles.

The Australian Government also supports rural women's leadership through funding activities that will build the leadership and representative capacity of women and girls living and working in rural, regional and remote Australian communities. One of the six National Women's Alliances supported by the Australian Government, the National Rural Women's Coalition and Network, engages with and advocates on behalf of Australian rural women. The Alliance recently launched a program that provides rural women with online leadership training and links participants with highly skilled mentors from across Australia.

Similarly, the Government supports the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance. This alliance promotes Indigenous women's leadership and their contribution to policy making.

Violence Against Women

Women in rural areas often face multiple disadvantages. Access to justice, healthcare, safe housing and other support services can be especially difficult in rural areas, particularly for Indigenous women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Women from rural and remote communities who experience violence also face the added burden of social isolation and lack of support services. Eliminating violence against women improves their ability to contribute socially and economically to the development of their community and country. Comprehensive national responses are required.

Australia has targeted its responses to violence against women in rural and remote communities in its National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, which was launched last year.

We are increasingly active internationally on this issue. In November 2011, Australia hosted the 'Australia-US Pacific Women's Empowerment Policy Dialogue: Stopping Violence Against Women', in partnership with the United States as part of the Global Women's Empowerment Initiative.

In collaboration with our Pacific neighbours we are providing counselling and support services to nearly 4,000 women in Fiji, we are improving women's access to justice in Papua New Guinea and we are supporting the Vanuatu Women's Centre to deliver counselling and support services to over 3000 women.

Internationally, the Government has committed over 100 million dollars over four years to initiatives that eliminate violence against women and help women affected by violence in developing countries. The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women is one

important mechanism by which the international community can take a proactive role in reducing and preventing violent attacks against the most vulnerable women. This is why today we are announcing our 2012 commitment of \$1.6 million to the Trust Fund to support the next round of projects

Conclusion

Madame Chair

Working together to improve the lives of rural women will help lift families and communities out of poverty, contribute to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals and empower rural women to contribute to sustainable development. International dialogue is essential to sharpen the focus on these issues. This needs to include the voices of civil society and National Human Rights Institutions. We believe that the inclusion of National Human Rights Institutions in the Commission on the Status of Women, with independent standing, could further improve the prospects for securing gender equality and empowerment of women around the world.

UN Women also has a key role to play in promoting gender equality and empowering women. Australia remains a strong supporter of its advocacy and development operations world wide and is pleased to advise it is providing AUD 9.2 million in 2012 as core funding to support the work of UN Women.

Renewed commitment is essential to better promote and protect the rights of women internationally. Australia remains firmly committed to this goal.

