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Statement submitted by the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW International), 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 and of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

STATEMENT

The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges

BPW International and Rural Women in the Economy

The International Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW International) develops the business, leadership and professional potential of women on all levels and enthusiastically welcomes the focus of CSW 56 on rural women. In making this statement BPW International draws on our rural women initiatives from across the 90 countries in 5 continents where we are represented.

BPW International has been experiencing significant expansion of interest in our work on **women in the economy from women in countries with large rural sectors**. Our Africa Region is the fastest growing, almost doubling in size during the last three years. BPW International has played an influential role in the women's leadership of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting (APEC) on ICT and women's economic empowerment. Other recent developments include:

- Co-leadership of the Commonwealth Business Council - Commonwealth Business Women (CBC CBW) '*Strengthening the Commonwealth, Building Businesses, Advancing Women, 54 Economies, One Platform*', with the engaged support of Australian Prime Minister and Commonwealth Chair, the Hon. Julia Gillard
- Working in partnership with the International Trade Centre on the Global Platform for Action on Sourcing from Women Vendors in Chongqing, China, 2011
- Increasing representation in the Balkan- Mediterranean region by working with our federations and associates in Turkey, Greece, Italy and North Africa.

APEC, The Commonwealth and the Mediterranean-Balkan region member countries have significant rural sectors in both developing and advanced economies. BPW believes there is rich opportunity for rural women, especially those involved in agriculture and directly in food production, to come together and share their industry expertise for mutual benefit and growth globally. **In this BPW supports the advocacy for participatory approaches that both empower and learn from women, and bring women together for mutual learning**, understanding that the agricultural economies vary enormously both externally and internally and require gender-informed, locally matched programs and responses. **BPW believes that women are experts in their own realities, their multiple roles, and will contribute in effecting positive social and economic change, their input enhanced the more gender inequalities are eradicated.**

Inequality and Rural Women.

Rural women in all countries experience a greater gender inequality than their city based sisters. Data that averages or does not disaggregate on gender **and** on rurality understates the inequality of rural women. Rural women experience a compounded inequality resulting from more traditional attitudes that limit or prevent participation (political and economic) or threaten their lives (e.g.increased violence and abuse; young marriage and child bearing). Their health is threatened by physical as well as economically inaccessible services, especially medical assistance and essential infrastructure such as good transport. Numerous women in the world are forced to walk ten to fifteen kilometers every day, often barefoot, in

order to find water and they frequently suffer physical attacks. To illustrate what women do to fulfill their traditional duties, despite waterborne diseases and the weight of water they carry, it is estimated that the sum total of the distance covered by women walking to find water in South Africa is twelve times the distance between earth and the moon. **BPW International strongly advocates for improved infrastructure investment, guided by participatory planning that listens to women's expertise on priorities and models of delivery matched to locational need.**

Women in the developed and developing countries all carry disproportionate domestic responsibilities but where attitudes to women are more traditional, and this is greatest in the rural areas of the least developed countries, the inequality of work burden through combined domestic and agriculture/ workforce labour is at its highest.

BPW International advocates for integrated responses for rural women that recognises their responsibilities are both social and economic. Investment in infrastructure that ensures a clean water supply saves the health of women's families, and prevents the economic costs of premature deaths. It is also an essential resource for efficient agricultural production. The time and energy saved in not walking for water is converted into greater economic production. Infrastructure investment, developed through participatory contribution of local knowledge, though a gender focussed process attacks the economic and social inequality and the double responsibility carried by women.

BPW International seeks approaches that develop the leadership of women at all levels and most of our rural programs which have a primary focus on income generation or health improvement deal with attitudes and the need for women to have a voice, to be able to exercise leadership, to achieve lasting change. All programs that include training and education, that bring women together, provide opportunities for leadership development. Similarly BPW recognises the importance of access to ICT mediums which more than anything else collapse isolation, bringing the wider world to rural communities, making it possible, as members in some of the least developed countries advise, for women to see or hear that women's lives can be and are different elsewhere: that their circumstances are not inevitable. **Access to ICT is an essential tool for economic development, to open up access to wider markets and to access resources, but also to break down discriminatory practices.**

BPW notes that rural women are disproportionately affected by natural disasters as a result of gender inequalities. Rural women have high death rates in disasters as they often do not receive warnings or other information about hazards and risks. Their mobility in disasters may be restricted or affected due to cultural and social constraints. Gender inequality can complicate and extend the time for women's recovery, for example, if women do not receive timely care for trauma experienced in disasters. Denial of the right to play a leadership and rebuilding role is depowering of women, leaving them dependant on others and cut off from managing their own disaster recovery, which women will do well. **BPW International advocates for women to be able to take on leadership roles in disaster management and recovery.**

Discriminatory attitudes to women, more powerfully held in traditional rural communities, disable economic and social development. **BPW strongly supports MenEngage, a alliance of NGOs and UN agencies that seek to engage boys and men to achieve gender equality, and change male attitudes to women.**

Rural Women and the Economy

Agriculture

BPW believes that when we liberate the economic potential of women, we elevate the economic performance of communities, nations, and the world. Evidence shows that women are responsible for half of the world's food production and in most developing countries; rural women produce between 60–80 per cent of the food. Women have an important role in establishing sustainable use of resources in small-scale fishing communities. In short, women are involved in every stage of food production. Although men usually plough the fields and drive draught animals, women do most of the work involved in sowing, weeding, fertilizing and harvesting the staple crops – such as rice, wheat and maize – which allows for more than 90 percent of the rural poor's diet. Women's contribution to secondary crops, such as legumes and vegetables, is even greater. Most of these crops are grown in home gardens, tended almost exclusively by women. Moreover, in developing economies, food security is often dependent on women's subsistence production to feed the population. For example, in Kenya, women are 75-89 percent of the agricultural labour force. In Tanzania, women are 80 percent of unpaid family labour in agriculture. Labour Survey of Pakistan 2006-07 disclosed that stall feeding of animals is carried out by 31% of females, whereas, milking, milk processing carried out by 58% and preparing dung cakes are carried out by 90% of females. 90% women are involved in shed cleaning and 85% in collection of farm yard manure. Watering is also performed by the 69% of females. It is evident that the women are playing a dominant role in the livestock production and management activities. Despite this most of the women suffer from malnutrition.

In the EU countries the number of the people who are working either full-time or part time in agriculture was 13.7 million in 2000. 12.2 million of them are the family workforce and 38% of them are women. Women working for companies in the Agricultural sector has the highest percentage in Italy at 34%. For Spain and Greece it is 13%, and 9% for Portugal and France. In Asia and Africa, studies have shown that women work as much as 13 hours more per week than men. A study in Africa found that, over the course of a year, women carried more than 80 tonnes of fuel, water and farm produce for a distance of 1 klm. Men carried only one-eighth as much, an average of 10 tonnes for 1 klm each year. **All this is evidence of the need to recognise the centrality of women to food security worldwide, and the need to unleash their economic potential.**

Access to Resources

In developing economies women's contribution could be much greater if they had equal access to essential economic resources and services, such as land, credit and training. Of particular importance is the legal enshrinement of these right, it having been noted that women own less than 2% of the world's private land and that when their enterprises become successful they are prone to male takeover. **BPW International is of the view that without legislative based access to and protection of resources economic improvement cannot be sustained.**

BPW through its advocacy for the UN Women/UN Global Compact Women's Empowerment Principles- *Equality Means Business* supports the central role played by opening up opportunities for women in the supply chain and women in the value chain. Rural women currently have difficulty accessing domestic and international markets. Major contributing factors are: lack of business awareness and lack of knowledge as to where these markets are, lack of communication systems and lack of transport. Most women entrepreneurs are small business owners, operating businesses from homes and many have low levels of education and technical skills and as important low levels of confidence and information on possibilities. Evidence from our own Federations and Associations is that women are strong on initiative once given the opportunities. BPW International is aware from the Global Platform for Sourcing from Women Vendors 2011 of the barriers for women in smaller or less developed

enterprises to be able to reach the point of accessing the larger supply contracts and is currently working on programs to provide development training. **BPW Advocates for training opportunities that can fit women vendors and women in the value chain across the enterprise development continuum.**

Despite progress made in national and international policies since the first world conference on women in 1975, urgent action is still necessary to implement gender and social equity in AKST [Agricultural Knowledge Science and Technology] policies and practices. Such action includes strengthening the capacity of public institutions and NGOs to improve their knowledge of women's changing forms of involvement in farm and other economic activities. **It requires giving priority to women's access to education, information, science and technology, and extension services to enable improving women's access, ownership and control of economic and natural resources.** To ensure such access, ownership and control legal measures, appropriate credit schemes, support for women's income generating activities and the reinforcement of women's organizations and networks are needed.

Rural Non Agriculture Income and Food Security

One of the results of the economic insecurity of food production for the rural sector worldwide is the increasing proportion of income earned from non food production or off-farm activity. Women in particular have turned to off-farm employment to provide for their minimum economic security. BPW International does not advocate for lessening the breadth of opportunities for rural women but is concerned to raise the point that if food production does not provide economic security for women producers, they must inevitably take on greater and greater burdens to provide for their families. If off-farm employment provides better remuneration their skills and knowledge of food production will be lost to the sector. **BPW International wishes to alert the risk of skills shortages in Agriculture due to poor economic return** and again stresses that this will be resolved only when the potential economic power of women realised. For that to occur, in addition to infrastructure, ICT and Education and training investment and legislative asset access and protection, **women in agriculture need access to finance from micro finance right across the continuum of the supply chain.**

Business and Professional Women considered like FAO that we need to ensure urgent national, regional and global action to fully realize the target of Millennium Development Goal 1 and the 1996 World Food Summit goal, namely to reduce respectively the proportion and the number of people who suffer from hunger and malnutrition by half in 2015. If women are marginalized we will not reach this MGD N°1. **BPW believes that when we liberate the economic potential of women, we elevate the economic performance of communities, nations, and the world.**

