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Statement submitted by Femmes Solidaires, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Femmes solidaires is a secular, feminist popular education movement. Our activist members, who belong to 190 chapters and committees throughout France, have very different life situations. Some 40 per cent of them live in rural areas and encounter the difficulties characteristic of such areas.

In the countryside, financial self-sufficiency, access to employment or one's own educational choices, and access to public services or transportation are particularly limited. Social breakdown and isolation are the commonest threats to country dwellers, and women especially find themselves ever poorer and lonelier.

Rurality and a climate of extremism

Such isolation can foster the development of reactionary ideas. That is apparent on the ground in our rural areas, where posters of the president of the Front National (a far-right political party) were omnipresent during the recent presidential election campaign. Today, society, and women in particular, are caught between two extremely worrisome movements:

- The extreme right's fascist and racist ideas, which set women one against the other and hew to a policy of national preference as a societal model, one that is flatly contradictory to the republican covenant.
- Communitarian movements, driven by religious or pro-religious dynamics, which thrive in anti-colonialist circles and sometimes posit an otherness based exclusively on hierarchical differences between skin colours and origins, rejecting the universal model, which they stigmatize as "white" or "European" (and therefore, in their eyes, colonialist).

The weight of isolation

Fundamentalist and extremist movements thrive on the unravelling of the social fabric, as they give people the illusion of belonging to a group. Our association, which is present in every geographical setting, is working at its own level to oppose the disintegration of social bonds. We see women, even very elderly women, constrained by dire poverty to take menial jobs (housework, sewing) to supplement very inadequate pensions. Retired women farmers, whose status has been very slow to be recognized, are hard hit by that phenomenon. The poorest among them risk becoming indigent following a separation or the death of their spouse.

Violence against women

Rural women find themselves gradually excluded from public spaces and confined to the domestic sphere, all the more so when they are victims of violence. When violence occurs in the home, these women are less able to escape it, given the many geographic and financial constraints they face. Between 44.6 and 55.5 per cent of femicides take place in rural areas.

When violence occurs in other settings, women are still at a disadvantage owing to social and geographical isolation that restricts their freedom of speech and makes it difficult for them to access to medical facilities staffed by specialists to whom incidents of violence, including rape, can be reported.

Rurality and health

Overall, there is limited access to health care in rural areas, particularly as regards sexual and reproductive health. Family planning centres are few and far between. Information on sexual and reproductive health is available mainly from school nurses (if any) or family physicians, who are sometimes reluctant to share certain information with their patients, and whom rural women in any event seldom consult, on the whole, owing to the cost and the distance they must travel.

In the department of Indre, our members report a shortage of family physicians. Getting an appointment with a specialist can take a very long time: from six to eight months depending on the specialty. Maternity hospitals and family planning centres are closing and public transport is scarce and difficult to reach.

Auvergne is a medical desert. In Ambert, the maternity hospital has closed; in the countryside around Saint-Étienne there are virtually no gynaecologists any more. Because there are so few physicians (and patients must travel an average of 25 km to see them), emergency care is possible only with helicopter medical assistance, at a very high cost.

Employment for women

In rural areas, the jobs available to women are often unskilled and/or on an undesirable part-time basis and/or seasonal and/or on a piecework basis (for example, domestic help with multiple employers, tens of kilometres apart, with whom the employee must sometimes travel).

When both partners (in a heterosexual couple) become unemployed, the man is the first to look for work. The woman remains at home and cares for the children, in a return to the housewife model. We see more and more mother's helper and nanny jobs: for women, that means going back to, or staying in, the domestic sphere. Internet access is problematic for rural women: the network does not reach every part of the country. That further isolates rural women and puts even greater community pressure on them.

Access to recognized, well-paid employment is crucial, in particular for women's empowerment. In the countryside such access suffers a number of constraints: few jobs are available, and those that do exist are lacking in variety; childcare is expensive, for those with children, as is travel, for everyone. When there is a financial sacrifice to be made, women bear the brunt of it: there is strong community and family pressure on them to quit paid work to look after the children, so their freedom of choice is compromised.

Mobility

For women, mobility is a key to self-reliance: wherever there is accessible public transportation, there are women. The frequency and scheduling of public transportation, where it exists, currently does not meet women's needs. Owning and operating one's own vehicle is quite costly, and particularly unaffordable for low-earning women. Hindrances to women's mobility have an impact in every area: access to health care, education, employment, recreation, public services, etc.

Outlook

Historically, rural women have been the pillars of their community. In the Dordogne, rural life has been driven by women, through farm upkeep, maintenance

of henhouses or vegetable gardens, contribution to family income and participation in local social movements, including women-only movements.

To help rural women deal with the challenges they face, the solutions are clear: the State must invest in public services, expand the transportation network, provide assistance for local job creation and the reopening of schools, and contribute to the creation of intercommunal health centres with sexual and reproductive health units, so that women can achieve an independent livelihood. Tackling rural women's difficulties means confronting the problem of their hardships and isolation. That isolation urgently needs to be overcome. Social bonds must be encouraged by restoring funding for grassroots popular education associations, including feminist associations, in which rural women are involved and which do remarkable but undervalued work.
