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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME OF ACTION FOR THE SECOND HALF
OF THE UNITED NATIONS DECADE FOR WOMEN

National experience relating to the improvement of the situation
of women in rural areas

Note by the Secretary-General

1. At its thirty-seventh session, the General Assembly, inter alia, requested the Economic and Social Council, the Commission on the Status of Women, the regional commissions and other bodies of the United Nations system, in particular the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, to devote greater attention to the problem of elevating the status of women; and requested the Secretary-General to consider holding, within the framework of the Programme of Action for the Second Half of the United Nations Decade for Women, as a matter of priority, an interregional seminar on national experience relating to the improvement of the situation of women in rural areas, with special emphasis on the problems of developing countries.
2. The Economic and Social Council, at its first regular session of 1983, endorsed the recommendation of the Commission on the Status of Women acting as Preparatory Body for the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, that the report of the interregional Seminar should be included among the background documents submitted to the World Conference.
3. In its resolution 39/126, the General Assembly, inter alia, requested the Secretary-General to compile the observations and comments made on the report of the Seminar at the World Conference and to submit them with the report of the Seminar to the Assembly at its fortieth session.

* A/40/50/Rev.1.

4. The Secretary-General, in response to that request, hereby transmits the report of the Interregional Seminar on National Experience Relating to the Improvement of the Situation of Women in Rural Areas, which was held at Vienna, from 17 to 28 September 1984, as called for in General Assembly resolution 39/126. The observations and comments to be made at the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, which is scheduled to be held at Nairobi from 15 to 26 July 1985, will appear as an addendum to this note.

ANNEX

Report of the Interregional Seminar on National Experience Relating
to the Improvement of the Situation of Women in Rural Areas

CONTENTS

	<u>Paragraphs</u>	<u>Page</u>
I. INTRODUCTION	1 - 3	4
II. RECOMMENDATIONS	4	4
III. ORGANIZATION OF THE SEMINAR	5 - 10	8
IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE SEMINAR	11 - 12	9
V. GLOBAL ISSUES	13 - 24	9
VI. WAYS TO IMPROVE THE PRODUCTIVITY OF WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS	25 - 38	12
VII. WAYS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S STANDARD OF LIVING	39 - 59	15
VIII. WAYS TO IMPROVE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL AREAS	60 - 70	18

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Interregional Seminar on National Experience Relating to the Improvement of the Situation of Women in Rural Areas was held at Vienna from 17 to 28 September 1984. The Seminar was held pursuant to General Assembly resolution 37/59 of 3 December 1982, which requested the Secretary-General to convene an interregional seminar on the situation of rural women, with special emphasis on the problems of developing countries.
2. In addition, the Commission on the Status of Women acting as the Preparatory Body for the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, at its first session, recommended to the Economic and Social Council that the report of the Seminar should be included among the background documents submitted to the World Conference (see A/CONF.116/PC.9 and Corr.1).
3. The Seminar was attended by representatives of the United Nations system and specialized agencies, observers from Member States, international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations and by 15 experts from all regions of the world (see appendix 1).

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

4. The Seminar formulated suggestions for action in various categories, as follows:

Global policies

- (1) Improvement in the situation of women in rural areas should be reorganized as dependent on the achievement of socio-economic and political equality, development, stability and peace.
- (2) In view of the current food crisis in some developing countries, resources should be more equitably allocated between the rural and urban areas and between industry and agriculture.
- (3) Women's contributions to agricultural and other types of production in rural areas should be recognized, promoted and rewarded. This calls for:
 - (a) Improving research and the collection of information on women's economic contribution to productivity and food security at the household level and on the correlation of increased productivity and national development;
 - (b) Paying greater attention to the needs of rural women in macro-economic and sectoral planning, including establishing focal points where none exist;
 - (c) Expanding women's participation in positions of decision-making at all levels of planning institutions and executing agencies. In the countries in which this has not yet been done, women should be granted political and civil rights on a par with men;

(d) Providing training information and organizational arrangements to rural women to ensure their participation in planning, formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

(4) To overcome prejudices against women, who perform productive, reproductive and other societal roles, it is essential that:

(a) Information should be made available to women and men on the implications of certain socio-cultural norms existing in some countries on women's conditions;

(b) The levels of education should be raised;

(c) Basic education should be redirected to recognize the rights and new roles of women in society and in the family;

(d) All means, educational systems, mass media, women's organizations, should be used to achieve these aims.

(5) Rural women's organizations should be promoted by Governments with financial and technical assistance and, if appropriate, by channelling rural development projects through rural women's organizations.

(6) Rural women's organizations should be evaluated for their effectiveness and, if necessary, reoriented to development rather than welfare work. Regional commissions and other organs of the United Nations are requested to mobilize resources for undertaking evaluation of national machinery for the advancement of women. Women's participation in the teams that evaluate and reorient programmes for rural women should be ensured.

(7) Development projects and programmes for rural women must be designed to reduce rather than increase the demand for women's time, or be accompanied by measures for reducing the time women spend on productive and domestic activities.

Improving rural women's productivity

(8) For women to take advantage of relevant existing legislation, it is essential that information and education should be provided to women on their rights, and legal-aid centres should be established to assist women to exercise those rights.

(9) The United Nations system is urged to study this issue and provide technical assistance in establishing local legal-aid centres.

(10) Women's intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations are urged to make policy-makers and financial institutions aware of the important contribution of women to socio-economic and political development and to encourage policy-makers to take appropriate action to promote it.

(11) Agricultural and rural development programmes should have a comprehensive approach for women's access to land, water and other necessary means of production.

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(12) Since access to credit is crucial for women to fully play their economic role, the following actions are recommended:

(a) The practices of credit institutions should be modified to satisfy the needs and means of women by decentralizing branches, providing financial advice and market research, changing criteria for opening credit, and devising new credit mechanisms;

(b) Practical experiences of viable innovative credit extension should be shared;

(c) Where necessary, women should be encouraged to organize themselves into groups that would be considered to be more credit-worthy than individuals by financial institutions;

(d) Educational courses should be developed to enable women to use the credit system;

(e) Studies should be conducted on the role and importance of credit for women.

(13) In national development plans, adequate resources should be allocated to developing transport and marketing facilities in rural areas in view of their importance for promoting the contribution of rural women to development.

(14) Governments are urged to ensure that extension services make no discrimination against women extension workers, particularly when introducing the use of new techniques and technology to rural communities.

(15) In view of the vital role of non-agricultural activities for the income and employment of rural women, knowledge on this sector should be increased in order to enable planners to protect and promote it. This would also contribute to creating new jobs for women in rural areas.

(16) Women and men should be equitably provided with training opportunities in entrepreneurial skills (managerial and technical) to facilitate their income-generating activities.

(17) International agencies should adopt and implement measures to improve the situation of rural women displaced from their land for various reasons, and who have no access to means of production or a voice in decision-making. These include refugee and other displaced women.

Ways to improve women's standards of living

(18) A more equitable distribution of resources to projects and programmes in rural areas should be attained to improve the infrastructure and to enable rural women to participate fully at all levels of national life.

(19) Rural women should have access to all types of education and training (technical and vocational) relating to their roles, particularly in the production, marketing and use of agricultural products and crafts.

(20) Linkages and co-ordination should be made between the different ministries, institutions and organizations in promoting, planning and implementing research and other development activities.

(21) Collective efforts should be encouraged and supported to evaluate home economics, health, nutrition, family planning and income-generating activities.

(22) The national system of social security should be improved for wage earners and self-employed workers in rural areas, in line with the principles that are laid down in the charter adopted by the International Council on Social Security.

(23) Social security opportunities, educational, medical and health facilities and services should be improved and increased, particularly in rural areas.

(24) Income-generating activities should be made available to rural women in order to increase their family income. To ensure the long-term viability of these programmes account should be taken of the financial needs of women, the cost of agricultural inputs and marketing.

(25) Family policies and plans and family life education should be included in national development plans.

(26) Increased involvement on the part of men should be advocated in women's development programmes, especially in understanding and accepting their joint responsibilities in family planning.

(27) Information on the nature and range of choices available in family planning should be made available to women and men.

(28) The specific needs and priorities of communities, that is, access to drinking water, sanitation, fuel, improved transport, appropriate low-cost technology for domestic and agricultural use, should be satisfied, and women should be trained as extension workers.

(29) Consideration should be given to the labour protection of women in formulating and implementing development programmes in rural areas, keeping in mind the need to improve the working conditions of women in particular.

(30) Policies should be adopted to ensure cultural and recreational activities for rural women that would improve their health and ability to work.

Ways to improve women's participation

(31) Legislation limiting women's and men's political rights should be repealed where it exists.

(32) Women wishing to join formal organizations, such as trade unions and co-operatives, should be trained in relevant legislation, management and organizational skills presentation of demands and conflict resolutions.

National and international decision-makers had to take those differences into account when planning for the improvement of the situation of rural women. The recommendations made by the Seminar would have to be interpreted by policy-makers in the light of the conditions and priorities of their countries.

14. In particular, the experts from African countries south of the Sahara held the view that priority in agriculture should be assigned to food security at the household level, and that involving women in rural development programmes was essential to the attainment of that goal. In the current crisis of food production, that was a pre-condition for, and went together with, increasing food production and improving nutritional levels.

15. Also, the participants pointed out that women in rural areas belonged to different occupational strata, with special needs that required different amounts and types of resources to satisfy them. There were women farmers, women organized in state farms and agricultural co-operatives, wives of farmers, women heads of families, landless labourers, women employed in small industries and in crafts, and women engaged in forestry resources, women traders, fisherwomen and women employed in communal activities. Often women were engaged in several of those activities simultaneously or in succession.

16. The participants emphasized that improving the unsatisfactory situation of rural women called for several global strategies to be implemented before, or in conjunction with, the sectoral and specific policies listed under the three themes for discussion at the Seminar. Those strategies referred to resources, training and information, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, organization, attitudes, use of time and research. (Owing to insufficient time the item on training and information was not discussed.)

Resources

17. The participants agreed that to improve rural women's productivity and standard of living, more resources must be made available over an extended period of time to developing countries, particularly to their rural sectors. International financial and trade policies, including prices for agricultural and non-agricultural products and commercialization policies, were important factors in determining the situation of women in rural areas. Also, greater priority should be given to rural sectors in the national allocation of resources for socio-economic progress. That was especially so in view of the current food crisis and of the increasing food dependence of developing countries. Resources should be made available to the women components of rural development projects and sectoral programming in agriculture, fisheries and forestry at the local and national levels. Policy-makers should be made aware that women contributed to production and income, and that improving their health, education, training and access to the means of production would increase women's productivity and national production, and improve living standards.

Planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation

18. The participants considered that several aspects of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation were in need of change. Development strategies for rural women had exaggerated the importance of their social situation and reproductive

tasks. Women's share in agricultural production should be recognized, their productive activities supported and benefits equitably shared with them. That called for changes in the organizational set-up of planning for rural women by shifting its emphasis from micro- to macro-planning and from an exclusively social orientation to an economic orientation of a sectoral nature integrated in national planning. Women's groups, it was said, had seldom participated in designing and formulating development strategies and managing rural development projects. Those strategies had not responded to women's needs nor had they taken advantage of women's skills. Rural women seldom occupied positions in which decisions were made affecting their situation. That was notably so when it came to setting priorities, allocating resources, and planning and monitoring national rural development projects, especially training and extension. Decision-makers sometimes forwent long-term objectives in the process of improving women's situation. Limited improvements in technology and marginally greater access to credit, inputs and social services for rural women were often considered as the final goal of policy-making instead of being intermediate measures towards the full exploitation of women's economic potential and full realization of their rights. The administrators of intermediate measures at national and local levels were not always trained to understand women's needs, problems and skills. Well-designed policies might fail through the resistance of those administrators. Public services in the productive and social spheres were often centralized in cities and were not available in rural areas. Finally, many projects for rural women were carried out without establishing monitoring mechanisms and evaluating their effectiveness, and women seldom belonged to monitoring and evaluation teams.

Organization

19. It was considered that belonging to women's groups raised the consciousness of women and enabled them to better articulate their demands. Also, it was often through women's groups that certain projects, for credit, land allocation, extension or training, were most effective.

20. Women could be better mobilized around common interests of an immediate nature. Such interests had been found to be better catalysts of women when they were related to improving the income and food security of their households.

21. The experts felt that national women's machinery ought to be reviewed to provide policy and programme redirection and to ensure that local organizations were associated with national planning. Non-governmental organizations and national women's machinery should be linked and their activities co-ordinated.

Attitudes

22. The participants considered that prejudices about women's contribution to production, women's skills and cultural norms on sex and reproduction hindered women's productivity, level of living and participation in development. Those prejudices needed to be overcome gradually, but that was seldom the case. In some countries, policy-makers had failed to take strong action to accelerate the change process, while in others they had intervened too forcefully, with unintended negative feedbacks. Also, the lack of awareness of the implications of some of those prejudices for rural women on the part of men and, sometimes, of women themselves, had slowed the process of attitudinal change.

31. It was stated that caution had to be exercised in evaluating new land settlements. While such schemes had been a clear success in some countries, they had failed in others. The causes of failure included the settlers' ignorance of the new environment and over-fragmentation of the land. Often, too, new settlements were not provided with adequate services (water, schools, transportation, medical services etc.). In addition, it appeared that some categories of women were excluded from those projects, because they were oriented towards accommodating disadvantaged groups such as minorities and urban migrants.
32. Improving productivity in agriculture was not always a solution to the problem of poor women in rural areas. Many women did not and, owing to population pressure on land, would not have access to resources sufficient for efficient farming. The plight of landless women, which was already dire, would most likely be worsened, despite rural urban migration, by increasing demographic pressures on a limited and by and large constant supply of land. Alternative uses of available resources, including land, must be designed to improve the situation of those women.
33. It was stated that in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages of agrarian reforms and land resettlement projects, there was a need to involve women. Also, the effects of those projects on women should be studied.

Access to credit

34. Credit was essential to increase women's productivity and self-reliance, but women had a very limited access to it. Sometimes, they were discriminated against because they were not heads of households nor co-exploiters of a farmhouse, had no right to land and no collateral. Hence, they could not obtain credit. Moreover, where credit was available, it was seldom sought by women, due to lack of information on its availability and on their right to it, and due to other constraints, such as women's lack of familiarity with administrative and bureaucratic procedures. The problem was common to all women, but particularly acute for rural women.
35. From the discussion, it appeared that there were three main obstacles or limitations for women to obtain credit. The first was a lack of entitlement to credit on account of women's failure to be recognized as economic actors in their own right; the second was a lack of information on credit availability; and the third was the procedure or design of institutional credit and banking services.

Access to technology, training and extension services

36. The introduction, development and adaptation of improved or new technologies were important elements for increasing productivity and providing income-generating opportunities. However, they did not always respond fully to the needs of the rural communities. Those technologies were seldom adapted to the skills available in the rural areas. In some cases, they had displaced women and deprived them of their sources of income. In addition, appropriate technologies had seldom been extended to women in their food production work, their work in cash crops and in the household. One of the reasons for the situation was the insufficient recognition of women as productive agents by training, extension and other support services.

Access of rural women to other activities outside the agricultural sector

37. The participants discussed the situation of rural women engaged in activities other than agriculture. It was found that many women were engaged in various activities such as cottage industries, transport and petty trade. Their economic contribution went unrecorded because official statistics did not take them sufficiently into account, but they were very important, and development planners should promote them. To that effect, greater understanding of the contribution and role of those activities in economic growth was necessary.

38. Sometimes the industrialization process and the introduction of new technology had a negative effect on women's employment and income. That was because many countries, instead of refining the existing techniques that were sometimes adapted to the local environment, had been quick to adopt new heavy technologies without prior analysis of their effect on the income of women and the living standard of families. However, the course of technological advancement could not be reversed and it was necessary to look for alternative sources of income and employment for women.

VII. WAYS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S STANDARD OF LIVING

39. In order to improve the social status of women working in rural areas, the extent to which social requirements, such as access to water and fuel, education and training, health services, the improvements of social infrastructure and social security, were met had to be increased. Insufficiencies in those areas were linked to a lack of material resources and to shortcomings in designing and executing social policies. In addition, access to services and work-load were unequally distributed between the sexes. Women's work-load in rural areas was generally greater than men's, and their access to services less.

40. Measures carried out to deal with those problems had included the provision of services on an equal basis, and the improvement of agricultural and domestic technology to reduce women's work-load. They had been less than effective because the supply of those services and the access to them were biased against rural populations in general and against women in particular.

41. Questions that were raised included:

Whether gender-specific policies aimed at improving agricultural and domestic technology responded to the needs of women, and if they did not, would women's participation in the planning of those policies contribute to their improvement?

What measures could be devised in order to change existing pooling and sharing patterns in the household?

Access to social services, health, education, social security and training

42. Social services should be provided to women in rural areas to lighten their burden, increase their productivity and promote their self-realization. However, many obstacles made the provision of those services quite difficult, the main ones

57. The success of family-planning policies and programmes was directly related to the change in the status of women in education, in employment opportunities and in their power in the family. Knowledge and the availability of the means of family planning was not enough, as women might not use them because of social pressure and their inferior status in society. In some communities and societies it had been found that the fear of not having enough children was often greater than the desire to space and limit births. Some other cultural factors were serious obstacles for family-planning policies. In many societies, having children was fundamental for a family. Maternity and femininity were related in the minds of people, as are virility and fertility. Another important obstacle to family planning was the deep-rooted preference for male children in some societies. The supposed superiority of men and inferiority of women were accepted by those societies, and in some of the worst cases girls and women were mistreated. There, an effort to raise people's consciousness and to change their attitudes was urgently required.

58. The size of the family was inextricably related to the stage of development and socio-economic conditions of rural people. Children were a good investment for some families and therefore family-planning policies should be related to the upgrading of the socio-economic situation of the rural poor.

59. The need to stress the involvement of men in women's development, especially in family planning, was recognized. It was found that male opposition to family planning in some countries was mainly due to their lack of knowledge of their joint responsibility in that matter.

VIII. WAYS TO IMPROVE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL AREAS

60. One of the primary objectives of effective policy-making in rural areas should be to improve the access to decision-making of women in the household in socio-economic institutions, such as co-operatives, in rural development projects, in local and national administration, and in political institutions. The issues of the mobilization, organization, solidarity and awareness of women in rural areas were essential in achieving that goal. The experts were invited to assess the importance of mobilization and organization for the improvement in the situation of women in rural areas, and to provide suggestions on how to strengthen them.

61. Relevant questions included the following:

What determined the desire of women to participate in collective activities for economic, social and political purposes in rural areas, and what measures should be carried out to increase such participation?

Under what conditions would it be advisable to promote the access of women to decision-making; for instance, by creating all-women organizations, or promoting women's participation in rural collective organizations, such as mixed co-operatives and trade unions?

What should be done to improve the efficiency of women's organizations in rural areas?

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62. The participants agreed that it was essential that women in rural areas participated in decision-making processes at all levels in the household, economic institutions, and local and national organizations. To reach this goal and to ensure that they played an important role in the development process, appropriate legislation, organization and training for participation of rural women were essential.

63. The processes of mobilization, organization and power acquisition were complex and there were no simple ways to speed them up. There was a need for careful preparation, a wide diffusion of information and a great deal of co-ordination between the different institutions and organizations that were concerned with women's issues.

64. Many obstacles to the mobilization and participation of rural women were identified: the dispersion of the population, which was greater in rural than in urban areas, the non-recognition of rural women's role in productive activities, the lack of time to participate, the relatively lower levels of education, the fact that rural women were less accustomed than men and urban women to participating in new institutions and some cultural attitudes that scorned women's activism.

65. The participants stated that in efforts to mobilize rural women, there had been a tendency to impose on them, often from the outside, forms of organization that had proved to be inadequate for their needs. Understandably, those initiatives had not aroused much interest and often they were rejected altogether. Also, appropriate legislation promoting women's participation was often absent. There was obviously a need to learn what was of interest for rural women because mobilization was towards concrete objectives and common needs and interests, such as access to services, e.g. water, mutual help for building community centres, schools, child-care centres and agricultural tasks, and interchange of goods and services.

66. Along with training and education, the mobilization of rural women should be accompanied by changes in attitudes. Women's and men's attitudes must be changed to allow women to participate fully in political activities.

67. The participants said that it was necessary to identify local women leaders who would mobilize rural women, represent national organizations at the grass-roots level and co-ordinate sectoral efforts at the local level. Those leaders should be chosen by the women themselves.

68. Women's organizations played a crucial role in the mobilization of rural women. National organizations were not always in touch with rural women's realities. They were often aimed at and directed by urban women and therefore were less accessible to rural women. Existing national organizations might sometimes no longer be representative of women's concerns at the rural community level, and reassessment of the role of such organizations, especially with regard to rural women, could be important.

69. However, they also might be ineffective and lack access to national political structures. There was a need for national structures to provide a global framework for the various women's organizations, and to organize grass-roots associations in a national federation.

70. The participants were unanimous in stating that co-ordination between different sectoral ministries or departments at all levels of the administration was essential to improve the participation of women in socio-economic and political institutions and to promote the adoption of global policies for improving the situation of women in rural areas.

Notes

a/ See Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, 19 June-2 July 1975 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.76.IV.1).

b/ See Report of the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, Rome, 12-20 July 1979 (WCARRD/REP).

Appendix I

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

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Kate Kamba (United Republic of Tanzania), Secretary-General, Union of Tanzanian Women

Salwa Masri (Jordan)

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Hajjah Rauf (Malaysia), Community Development Division, Ministry of National and Rural Development

Aminata Traore (Ivory Coast)

Gertrudes Vitorino (Mozambique), Organizacao de Mulher Mocambicana, Secretario Nacional da O.M.M.

Deepa Weerapana (Sri Lanka), Deputy Director, Sri Lanka Women's Bureau

S. Zambagà (Mongolia), Vice-Chairman, Committee of Mongolian Women

States Members of the United Nations represented by observers

Argentina
Canada
France
Indonesia
Philippines

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
Venezuela
Yugoslavia
Zimbabwe

United Nations Secretariat

Department of International Economic and Social Affairs
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Economic Commission for Africa
United Nations Industrial Development Organization

Specialized agencies

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
World Health Organization
World Bank

Other intergovernmental organizations

Council of Europe
European Economic Community

Non-governmental organizations

Associated Country Women of the World
Baha'i International Community
Consejo Nacional de los Derechos de la Mujer A.C.
Co-ordinating Board of Jewish Organizations
Institut für Agrarentwicklung
International Alliance of Women - Equal Rights, Equal Responsibilities
International Catholic Migration Commission (Caritaszentrale)
International Federation of Business and Professional Women
International Federation of Social Workers
International Federation of University Women
International Planned Parenthood Federation
International Social Service
Medical Women's International Association
Romani Union
Sociedad Mexicana de Técnicas y Profesionistas
Society for Women's Studies and Development
Women's International Democratic Federation
World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts
World Federation of Democratic Youth
World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations
