



## Fifty-sixth session of the Commission for the Status of Women 29 February 2012

# 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 as 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 facing 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. With a 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 situation of these issues, one of the Commission's focus this year

Madame Chair

rural women and patriarchal pressures and challenges in accessing services and achieving their goals. The Australian Outback to Schoolrooms in UNIZOAN project 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 a crucial platform to take effective international action on issues that significantly affect rural and remote women.

Women are central to global issues affecting women. Last year, Australia signed the Perth Declaration on Food Security, which recognizes 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 and 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.<sup>1</sup>

Supporting women smallholder farmers and subsistence producers is essential to achieving global food security, including through national development programs, better 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 2007. Yale's extremely poor female-headed households, almost all are 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.<sup>2</sup>

This is why Australia is supporting the Global Agricultural Food Security Program which involves initiatives targeted at women and men smallholder farmers to support

<sup>1</sup> FAO (2011) *The State of Food and Agriculture Report 2010-11: Women in Agriculture -Closing the Gender Gap in Development*, FAO, Rome.  
<sup>2</sup> 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 entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs in business, science and innovation. However, women and girls make up two thirds of the world's poorest 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 increasing education expenditure 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 school, closing the gap in Indigenous Year 12 equivalence attainment by 2020.

Education is a central focus of Australia's new aid policy. Between 2010 and 2016, Australia's aid program has supported 10 million in additional and improved education, making us one of the largest bilateral donors in the world. With a focus on addressing the financial barriers to education, we are helping to keep children in school, keep them there for longer, and help uneducated women and girls there. In Afghanistan, Australia is working with partners to implement a health and education program in Uruzgan Province. This program addresses the unmet 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 of girls to over 2.3 million. In Pakistan, Australia's support has resulted in a 14 per cent enrolment at the primary and secondary school level in the Pakhtunkhwa province.

We also know that in some communities, providing access to information and 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 women's ability to access educational opportunities.

Globally, Australia's aid program delivers much needed investment in women and girls' education, training and leadership and in providing the resources to start and grow new businesses, access credit and enter markets. For example, Australia's partnership with the World Bank in the Pacific Financial Inclusion program is delivering the benefits of modern communications technology to help rural women in the Pacific participate in the financial system, improve their financial literacy and providing a safe, secure and affordable place to save.

### Leadership & Decision-making

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



diversity. We work with 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 front-representative capacity of women and girls living and working in rural, regional and remote Australian communities. One of the six National Women's Leadership Alliances is managed by the Australian Government, the National Rural Women's Leadership Alliance. This Alliance runs 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 services is 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 Australian-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 4000 women in Fiji, we are improving women's access to justice in PNG. We are also 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 support the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. This 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 realization 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, will help to improve the prospects for securing gender equality and empowerment of women around the world.

UN Women also has been able to increase its operations world wide and is pleased to advise it is providing AUD 9.5 million in 2012 as core funding to support the work of UN Women.

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

