

STATEMENT BY MRS. NEELA GANGADHARAN, SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF WOMEN & CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND LEADER OF INDIAN DELEGATION ON EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN AT THE 56<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN ON FEBRAURY 29, 2012

**Madam Chair,**

I would like to convey our warmest felicitations to you and other members of the Bureau on your election and to assure of our full cooperation in the work of this Commission.

2. India signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1980. We are meticulously pursuing the Millennium Development Goals and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Our efforts for holistic empowerment of rural women are sought to be achieved taking into account convergence of their social, economic and political identities.

3. Let me put in context the situation of rural women in my country. As per our latest census conducted in 2011, an estimated 405 million women lived in rural areas, constituting 69 percent of total women population of the country. Contribution of rural women to our GDP growth and their central role in poverty reduction has been a key guiding factor in framing our policies. A staggering 81% of rural women workers are engaged in agriculture as labourers and cultivators.

4. To address the urban rural divide in income and opportunities, Government focus on expansion of income opportunities in the farm sector and a progressive absorption of rural women into non-agricultural activity as one of the most important measures for reducing feminization of rural poverty. Expansion of non-farm income opportunity in rural areas has enormous potential and a great deal of this is related to farm activity. The virtuous cycle inter-connecting the expansion of farm economic activity and that of rural non-farm income opportunities can work for the benefit of rural women. However economic development and growth have also opened up opportunities for them to explore non traditional skill centred vocations.

5. Emphasising the importance of women's economic empowerment, the National Agriculture Policy has incorporated gender issues in the agriculture development agenda. It recognizes women's role as farmers and producers of crops and live stock, as users of technology, as active agents in marketing, processing and storage of food and as agricultural labourers. The policy accords a high priority to the recognition and mainstreaming of women's role in agriculture. A National Gender Resource Centre in Agriculture has been set up to promote gender concerns. A scheme of Promotion and Strengthening of Agricultural Mechanization for Women aims at reducing drudgery of women farmers.

6. India has a vibrant women's Self Help Group movement which has been encouraged through government interventions. Recognizing that rural women can leverage their strength, increase bargaining power and enhance capacities and skills through joint action, the approach of the Government of India has been to encourage organization of SHGs and to channelise resources to these groups. There are around 6 million SHGs of which 80% (4.8 million) are women's groups, covering over 97 million beneficiaries. Women's Self Help Groups have, thus, become a very important vehicle for economic empowerment.

7. For economic empowerment to succeed women must be provided access to financial resources and services. To facilitate this public sector banks have been advised to earmark 5% of their net bank credit for lending to women. About 24 million poor households have gained access to formal banking system through Self Help Groups-bank linkage programme and 90% of these groups are women only groups. A National Credit Fund for Women set up in 1993 also meets the credit needs of asset-less and poor women especially in the rural areas and unorganised sectors.

8. While Self Help Groups are aimed primarily at encouraging women to take up self employment, wage employment is the focus of the flagship scheme, launched under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in 2005. This is a gender sensitive nationwide employment scheme ensuring that at least one-third of the beneficiaries are women. So far, almost 50% of the total person days of employment provided under the scheme have gone in favour of rural women. The scheme is sensitive to working conditions of women workers as it advocates providing accessible worksite (within 5 kms of workers' residence), crèche facilities for women with children below six and, above all, gender parity of wages. It has created "green jobs"- as nearly 70% of works relate to water and land conservation, drought proofing etc., which are predominantly executed by women.

9. Yet another important initiative to address the security of livelihoods in rural areas is the National Rural Livelihood Mission also called Ajeebika under which about 60% of beneficiaries are women. Under awareness generation projects for rural and poor women grants are provided through NGOs to benefit women labourers, primarily in the unorganised sector. Other steps for social protection include health insurance and old age pension schemes.

10. Recognising that ownership of assets is essential, if economic empowerment of women is to be sustained, under the flagship scheme of Indira Awas Yojana, houses are provided to families below the poverty line in rural areas. These houses are allotted in the name of the female member of the household. A Rural Housing Fund has been set up to extend housing finance at competitive rates. More than 90% of the beneficiaries are women.

11. Food security for citizens of the country has been engaging the attention of the Government of India. In order to ensure this the Government have introduced the National Food Security Bill in the Parliament in December 2011. This Bill seeks to

confer a legal right to cheaper food grains to 63.5 per cent of the country's population impacting rural women in a big way. The Bill has a unique feature on women empowerment with long term policy and legislative implications for achieving gender equality and gender justice. It provides that only a woman can be treated as head of household for the purpose of issue of ration cards, the food entitlement document, to get benefits of cheaper food grains.

12. Our focus has been on inclusive growth and access to opportunities. Skill development and skill up-gradation of rural and marginalized women are priorities for us. A National Skill Development Council with our Prime Minister as the Chair has been set up. Skills training in emerging sectors and entrepreneurship development programmes are being run not only for rural women but also for adolescent girls.

**Madam Chair,**

13. I would now, like to talk about some of the measures for political empowerment of rural women. The concept of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution. As an affirmative action in favour of women, our Constitution has been amended to bring in one-third reservation for women in the 3rd level of democratic institutions (*Panchayats* in rural areas and local bodies in urban areas). More than one million elected rural women leaders at grass-roots levels of governance of our country bear testimony to a large-scale mobilization, perhaps, unprecedented in the world. Several State Governments have amended their respective laws providing 50% reservation in Panchayats for rural women.

14. Towards improving access to entitlements and effective service delivery the historic Right to Information Act was passed in 2005. This also had an empowering effect on rural women by improving grassroots governance and service delivery. In 2010, to ensure citizens their right to live with dignity in a healthy environment we enacted the National Green Tribunal Act. It is aimed at providing effective legal protection for environment, forests and other natural resources. These provisions have positive implications for rural women including indigenous people.

15. India is witnessing high rate of growth of urbanization and concomitant challenges in the rural-urban continuum. Migration and related issues of vulnerability of the poor migrants in the urban setting especially of women are recognised. Trafficking is an issue which is addressed through a three-pronged strategy, covering prevention, rescue and rehabilitation through legislative measures and programmes. Several measures have been taken to address violence against women. This includes enactment of a special law, 'The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005.' To provide women a safe and secure environment at work place the Government have introduced in the Parliament, the 'Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill-2010' covering both organized and unorganized sectors of rural and urban areas.

16. Education is a fundamental tool for empowerment. In addition to helping the current generation it also helps to break the inter-generational cycle of discrimination. Government have strengthened various programmes female literacy and education. Between 1999-2000 and 2007-08, female literacy rates in rural areas have increased from about 34% to about 50%. The Net Attendance Ratios of girls in rural areas, at Primary and Upper Primary Levels have also increased. In 2010, Government have enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act making education a fundamental right.

17. Another area in which Government has overcome many challenges is in the Health Sector. The flagship National Rural Health Mission has a synergistic approach by relating health to determinants of good health that significantly impact women. Large investments in health sector have lead to drop in IMR, MMR and TFR. The number of newly detected HIV positive cases has dropped by over 50% in the last decade.

18. Nutrition is a challenge before us. Our Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme represents one of the world's largest and unique programmes for early childhood care development covering pregnant and lactating women also. Provision of supplementary nutrition is a major focus. Convergence with national rural health mission and total sanitation campaign is an ongoing effort for achieving nutrition security.

19. Government of India have, as a Policy, adopted Gender Budgeting as a tool for mainstreaming gender. Through this, Government aim to ensure the translation of Government's policy on gender equity into budgetary allocations. To institutionalise this process, the Government have initiated the formation of Gender Budget Cells within all Central Ministries/Departments. Moreover, we have also recently launched the National Mission for Empowerment of Women which will work towards the convergence of policies and programmes with a focus on rural and marginalized women.

20. The National Commission for Women, a statutory body established under an Act of the Parliament has the mandate to safeguard women's legal and constitutional rights. It looks into complaints and takes *suo motu* notice of matters relating to deprivation of women's rights and facilitates redressal of grievances.

21. With increasing right based approach in policies and programmes implemented by Government and with democratic decentralization deepening further we are confident that meeting the goals of holistic empowerment of rural women will accelerate substantially.

**Madam Chair,**

22. India stands ready to work with the international community for the empowerment of rural women for inclusive and sustainable growth and for engaging

young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality and women's empowerment both within and outside UN.

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