

## Politicize CEDAW Article 14(a): Rural Women and the Triple Crisis

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Among the long-standing questions we are facing is how best to fully implement commitments in Article 14 of the CEDAW. CEDAW's Article 14 placed special emphasis on rural women's lives. The recommendations in Article 14 may be grouped into three broad areas, which are: participation and organizing, social security and services, and access to finance and assets. This requires from governments the formulation of rural development strategies and agricultural policies take into provisions in Article 14. What we are doing today is discussing this issue at a time when the UNFPA reports<sup>1</sup> that more than half of the world's population is now living in urban areas. This population shift would seem to make the concerns of the rural poor less significant, especially if the concerns of the urban poor captures the attention of policy makers.

The potential urban bias resulting from population shift may actually be a result of decades of policies that have neglected agricultural development, and, by extension, neglected the obligations of CEDAW's Article 14. Let us note, in particular, economic growth strategies that rely on export-orientation and especially manufactured exports, which has been the symbol of industrialization. This not to say that export-orientation has not reached agriculture and the rural areas because, after all, there are high value-added exports of agricultural commodities as well as mining and natural resource extraction. Recently, agricultural production in some areas have shifted to biofuels. I would argue that these policies have not substantially increased rural women's access to finance and assets as required in Article 14, paragraph (g) even if these policies can claim to have opened up opportunities for employment.

The opening up of domestic markets to imported goods has created additional challenges. In the years before the 2008 global economic crisis, import volume surges were recorded in developing countries for cereals and in animal and vegetable fats and oils creating competitive conditions against domestic, perhaps, even rural producers threatening their livelihoods. Net food importing countries recorded import surges of 18 per cent of total import volume during this period, according to the South Centre<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps an even sadder occurrence is that developing countries are relying on the importation of food to meet their needs rather than supporting domestic production.

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA (2007), State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth. (<http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/introduction.html>, accessed 1 March 2012)

<sup>2</sup> South Centre (2009), "The extent of agriculture import surges in developing countries: what are the trends," South Centre Analytical Note SC/TDP/AN/AG/8 (November 2009), Geneva: South Centre.

Thus, the global crisis came at a time when conditions were already tough. Indeed, I would argue that the global economic crisis deepened existing crises in rural areas.

It is not only import surges that have been worrisome. Food prices have also been very volatile. The FAO Food Price Index in February 2011 was nearly double its value in 2006. While there is considerable debate on the extent to which financial speculation contributed to food price hikes, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in a Briefing Note released in September 2010<sup>3</sup> offered recommendations that included a comprehensive reform of all derivatives trading.

Article 14, paragraph (g), also obliges governments to give rural women equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes. Many countries report progress in this area and, yet, again, we need to be conscious of intervening factors that can undermine women's claims and entitlements. There are concerns over desertification that make living in arid and semi-arid lands even more challenging. Think of the pastoralists, for example. In other communities the threats come from flooding, especially where surrounding forests have receded or disappeared.

A different type of threat to land ownership is a phenomenon called land grabbing. Timothy Wise and Sophia Murphy identified land grabs as a threat that demands specific action from policymakers<sup>4</sup>. Reports vary on the extent of land grabbing but there is agreement that this phenomenon has seen a recent acceleration driven by investors, including sovereign wealth funds, biofuel producers, as well as natural resource speculators. So that while land titling efforts might have redistributive consequences benefiting rural women, incentive structures change with the entry of land investors. These investors create an additional layer of complexity in unending struggles over who owns and controls land. After all, land symbolizes power in the many places that we come from. This is especially true in settings where customary law and colonial legacies of administration continue to befuddle contemporary reform efforts<sup>5</sup>.

Struggle is not a word to be taken lightly. Rural women have burdens of care that often define what they do and what they can do. And struggle is what these women undergo to fulfill social expectations. They struggle to survive in order for others, their children and their household, to survive. CEDAW Article 14, paragraphs (b), (c), (d), and (h) are obligations for rural women's access to social security and a variety of services.

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<sup>3</sup> de Schutter, Olivier (2010). "Food commodities speculation and food price crises: regulation to reduce the risks of price volatility," Briefing Note 02 (September 2010). Geneva: Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

<sup>4</sup> Wise, Timothy and Sophia Murphy (2012). "Resolving the food crises: assessing global policy reforms since 2007", Medford, MA: Global Development and Environment Institute and Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, Sara (2002). "Debating the land question in Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44: 638-668.

Somehow, I imagine, that on the rare occasions that these women are able to access these services, improvements in their well-being are appreciated only as an instrument for growth and development. Rural women's intrinsic value is lost to the development industry.

In very broad strokes, I tried to illustrate how institutions are embedded in other institutions creating a complex setting that often overwhelms us in the search for solutions. We end up spinning in circles over tools, markers, methodologies, and formulas hoping that politics will somehow disappear. Institutions do not change without politics. There was the food riots before the Occupy movement. There is a much longer history of agrarian movements and their transnational efforts today aim directly at changing the structural imbalances that I have outlined today.

CEDAW Article 14, paragraph (a), which is an obligation for rural women to participate in development planning at all levels and paragraph (f) an obligation for participation in all community activities. When the G-20 Agricultural Ministers met for the first time in Paris last year, there was the promise of giving special attention to women smallholders in developing countries. They seem to have missed Article 14(a) that demands participation and not just attention. It seems to me that a politicized interpretation of CEDAW Article 14 is very desperately needed in this age of crises, in this fierce new world.