

**Opening statement for the 62nd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women**

**Date:** Monday, March 12, 2018

*As delivered*

Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women,

Secretary-General of the UN, in absentia,

President of ECOSOC,

President of the General Assembly,

The Ministers represented here are most welcome, including a former minister, Åsa Regnér of Sweden, who is now UN Assistant Secretary-General designate at UN Women,

Women and girl activists from rural areas, as well as representatives of activists who work in rural areas,

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome to the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

This year's focus on the women and girls who live in rural areas has got to be one of the most important areas you have ever focused on.

It is integral to the ambition of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It speaks to our commitment to fight some of the biggest challenges of our time: poverty, inequality, intersectionality and an end to violence and discrimination against women and girls, no matter where they live, or how they live, so that we 'leave no one behind'.

Worldwide, almost one-third of employed women work in agriculture. There are 400 million women who are farm workers. They mainly work as smallholder farmers and agricultural and informal workers with little or no social protection, and almost no visibility. The world eats every day because they toil.

Across the world, millions of women and girls in rural areas provide unpaid care in their homes, nurturing their families, but losing opportunities for their own growth.

This Commission hopes to change that.

Our recent, flagship research on SDG implementation, and the report prepared for this session, both show how women in rural areas are lagging behind on every gender and development indicator for which data is available.

While women in many regions constitute up to 60 per cent of the agricultural workforce globally, only 13 per cent of women own the land they work, with power imbalances that deprive them of control over their income, over their lives and over their bodies.

And in nearly two-thirds of countries, even as food growers, women are more likely than men to report food insecurity and hunger.

Only 20 per cent of women in rural areas have access to clean drinking water, against 68 per cent of their urban counterparts.

Half of all rural poor women in developing countries have no basic literacy, and 15 million girls of primary-school age will never, never get the chance to learn to read or write in primary school.

A rural girl is twice as likely to be married as a child compared to her urban counterpart. Without adequate education and knowledge, her authority and ability to control her life and escape from violence are critically diminished.

Above all, it is the women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination who bear the brunt of prejudice and exclusion.

They are elderly women, but they are also young women and girls, they are those living with disability, with unaccepted sexual orientation, they are indigenous women and they are women who are human rights defenders.

Motherhood and being a refugee both put women at increased risk.

These problems and others pre-occupy women's organizations. But their limited capacity means they cannot deliver far-reaching solutions at the scale required and bring about the changes desired.

Partnership with you, who are also preoccupied with the same issues, is essential.

Our new monitoring report on the implementation of the SDGs has underlined the visible danger that progress is slowing and even reversing some of the gains that we have made.

It follows the World Economic Forum's 'Global Gender Gap Report' for 2017, which reported that the parity gap across health, education, politics and the workplace has widened for the first time since records began in 2006.

It predicts that it will take—and listen to this—217 years before we achieve gender parity. Not under our watch. I repeat, it will take 217 years before we achieve gender parity.

It has never been so urgent to hold our ourselves and leaders accountable for the promises to accelerate progress.

Today, as we open this year's session of the Commission, we should see this forum as a most timely opportunity to secure and accelerate much-needed progress, build consensus and share the best practices that allow the Commission to serve the poorest of the poor, with urgency and maximum accountability to those who need it most.

This is a tipping point moment.

It is a time to take action that responds to the size of the problems faced by women who live in rural areas.

Women are fighting to take steps that change their lives, and they are refusing to accept the practices that have normalized gender inequality, sexual misconduct, exclusion, and discrimination across all walks of life.

All over the world, we are witnessing an unprecedented hunger for change in women's lives, and a growing recognition that when women band together they can bring about far reaching changes.

They believe 'the Time is Now' for change, and accountability to end impunity. Women also have been able to demonstrate that the actions they take together are able to impact the actions that others will take.

Last week, Google released new data from its global search engine. In 2017, the world searched for "women's rights" more than ever before, spiking by + 700 per cent in January.

This Commission does not need to search for the meaning of women's rights. We know the definition of women's rights; we just need action.

Our part is to act with common purpose, shared urgency, and with bold steps to bring the promises and words to lived reality.

And we need to find the nexus between rights and development. Like all of us, people in rural areas need both, and they deserve also to live in peace.

I urge this Commission: to find answers; to pull together diverse views in a mutually respectful process; to agree to conclusions that show we are here especially for the 1 billion people living in extreme poverty.

Women in rural areas need innovative technology and connectivity; infrastructure that brings sanitation, clean drinking water, energy and transport, and that supports productivity and mobility. They need access to credit, climate justice, markets and high value agrifood chains. They need an end to discriminatory laws and norms that sustain harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation and early and forced marriages. They need respect for sexual and reproductive health and rights. And they need an end to violence in all its forms.

That is true in all communities and institutions including the United Nations, where the Secretary-General has made it clear that there is no room for gender-based violence and harassment of any sort.

All over the world, millions are displaced from their homes, and exposed to sexual violence in conflict, even from the security forces intended to protect them. This is also a critical issue and again an area where women are expecting action from our side. They experience sex trafficking, and femicide.

We welcome therefore a major new boost to tackling the leading forms of violence, the recently launched Spotlight initiative of the EU and the UN, under the guidance of the Secretary-General and Deputy-Secretary-General.

It provides significant investment to fight violence against women and girls in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. And this will be done in collaboration with UN Agencies including UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP and ILO. Together with our key allies in civil society we should be able to turn the tide around. This is a welcome development.

Reversing trends and sustaining progress takes strong leadership. Here in the United Nations, the Secretary-General has shown us what can be achieved with decisive leadership, and targeted action.

As we have heard, for the first time in the UN's 72 years, there is gender parity in the senior management team. This demonstrates that change is possible with strong leadership. And it underlines how important it is to have leaders who lead from the front.

The UN also underlines that men and boys everywhere are part of this journey of change too.

It underlines that radical change is sometimes the only way.

The 'Me Too' movement and 'Time's up' has also showed us change can happen fast. And that women must be believed.

This is a moment that we intend to sustain for all.

Due process is important, but we must remember that only a handful of men have so far experienced the consequences of their actions, while one billion women still live with the long-lasting after-effects of violence.

Their story has to be told.

This CSW offers us a historic platform for a new dynamic of change.

It has the most grassroots representation ever, thanks to those delegations who responded positively to the request to include women and girls from rural areas in their delegations and in the Youth Summit.

We have an opportunity to hear from rural women directly, and to speak to them, so that we do not only speak about them and for them. They are here because this session is about their lives, and our shared future.

When the UN Charter refers to 'We the peoples', it means all these women and all voices.

Like any of us, they want to choose when to have a child, how many in a family, and who they love.

They too want a life without violence, and to be heard, and to be free of hunger.

They are survivors, they are resilient, they are brave and they are full of dreams.

Do not ask them to settle for less or wait any longer.

This is their time for 'We the Peoples'

They need you to unite around a common cause, as set out in the principles of the equality of all in our founding Charter.

I respectfully urge you to make this a moment of real acceleration, change and accountability.

Thank you.