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Empowering young rural women: Inspiring futures

International Women's Day (IFAD/FAO/WFP)

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Statement by José Graziano da Silva, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Mr. Kanayo Nwanze, President of IFAD,
Ms. Sheila Sisilu, deputy executive director of WFP,
Ms. Ertharin Cousin, US Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies in Rome
and soon to be colleague at WFP
Ms. Angie Motschekga, Minister of Basic Education of South Africa,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to join Kanayo in congratulating women for their day. FAO considers empowering women and girls a key to eradicating hunger, extreme poverty and promoting development. This is especially true in rural areas.

Throughout the world women play a key role in many, if not all, aspects of life. They head households, in most cases are still the primary provider of care in families and have an important role in the rural workforce. As last year's edition of the State of Food and Agriculture - SOFA - shows, closing the gender gap in agriculture could lead to important gains in agricultural productivity.

However, sometimes this work starts too soon and is not the work we would like to see women doing.

According to the International Labour Organization, 61 million girls between five and 14 years old work in agriculture. In many parts of the world, rural women are far from finding decent work. They are usually underpaid, socially unprotected and temporary jobs.

We are working to allow rural women to have access to better, decent jobs. There is a lot to be done, but we are not starting from scratch. The understanding of women's role in economic and social development and the need to empower them is just a beginning.

We must work to close the gender gap, by developing **policies** that are gender sensitive; implementing **legal reforms** that give women full economic rights; building equal access to **knowledge and education** among women and men and girls and boys; supporting strong, equitable and inclusive **rural institutions**; and encouraging women's full, meaningful **participation in decision making**.

The promotion of decent rural work, beyond agriculture, is also an important way for empowering young women and girls.

FAO is currently working to promote decent rural employment among the rural unemployed and underemployed, particularly women and youth working as subsistence farmer. In Malawi and Tanzania, for example, we use an integrated country approach, which links the technical work of FAO on areas such as youth employment promotion or child labour prevention in agriculture, with support to strategic planning, policy formulation and national capacity development processes.

A component of this program is the Junior Farmer Field and Life School approach. In the past nine years, FAO has helped implement these schools in 17 African countries, training 20 thousand young people and two thousand facilitators. My colleague Marcela Villarreal will discuss this programme in more detail later on.

At FAO, we will continue to improve the ways in which we address gender and women's issues in our work. And I am proud to announce that today FAO launches its Policy on Gender Equality: Attaining Food Security Goals in Agriculture and Rural Development.

The FAO gender policy underscores the organization's commitment to addressing gender and women's issues, both in its work to eradicate hunger and poverty and in its own organizational policies and practices.

It puts gender as a central and cross-cutting issue of what we do. This is essential. Gender cannot be a concern of only one single unit; it has to be integrated into all our work.

We have a lot ahead of us and a lot to do together. FAO and I are committed to continue to work collectively with our sister agencies IFAD and WFP to empower rural women and girls.

To end, I would like to thank IFAD for hosting the event this year, which I am sure will be fruitful and inspiring. Thank you.