

SPEECH

BY COMMISSIONER NEVEN MIMICA

**at the High-Level Event at the
Food and Agriculture Organization**

**“Step It Up Together with Rural Women
to End Hunger and Poverty”**

Rome, 16 December 2016

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is often said that **if you educate a woman**, you educate a **whole generation**.

Indeed, the **same is true** when we empower women across the board - not only through **access to knowledge**, but also to **resources**, to equal opportunities, and by giving them a **voice**.

But the **figures** currently show a **very different picture**.

Globally, women make up **over 40%** of the agricultural workforce. And yet, they own **less than 5%** of the land in some parts of Africa and Asia.

They have **half the amount of livestock** - generally smaller 'back-yard' animals - and a **fraction of other inputs and services** compared to men, including finance, training, and technology.

They spend **twice as long** as their male counterparts collecting fuel and water, and on invisible and unpaid domestic work.

So shouldn't we **dare** to consider an **alternative vision for the world**?

We know that women **spend up to 90% of their income** on their families, where men spend **just 30-40%**, even when household needs are not met.

We know that agricultural yields would **rise by almost a third if women had the same access** to resources as men. As a result, there would be up to 150 million fewer hungry people in the world.

And we know that **children have significantly better prospects** for the future when their mothers are healthy, wealthy and educated. Especially during the first 1,000 days of a child's life.

So if we consider this alternative, there is **no other possible conclusion** – we **must step up our investment in women!** As an investment in families, in our communities, in our wider societies. And in our planet's future.

That is why we also **need to 'step it up'** a gear to empower **rural women**. Especially if we are to achieve our goals of eradicating poverty and hunger.

And yes, we need to do this **'in step' with rural women** themselves.

Let me **thank** the Slovak Presidency, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Women, the World Food Programme, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, for gathering so many leading thinkers and speakers around this important issue here today.

Together we need to **urgently address** the deep-rooted **economic, social and cultural barriers**, which too many rural women and girls still face.

In doing so, we can **unlock their catalytic potential** to better manage their own lives and those of the people around them.

Allow me to briefly mention some **examples** of how **we are stepping our engagement** in the European Union - from setting the **right policy frameworks** at the highest levels, to making **real changes** in the lives of women and girls through our actions on the ground.

It's no secret that **I want gender to be at the front and centre** of all our actions to achieve truly sustainable development.

As President Obama has said, no team will ever succeed with only half of its players on the pitch.

Just last month, I presented a new proposal for our **future development policy**. For the first time, this new European Consensus on Development will focus on women and girls **not just as beneficiaries**, but as **key drivers of development**.

Our new **Gender Action Plan** for 2016-2020 – which includes commitments on access to decent work, healthy nutrition, finance and other productive resources – provides the **framework** to achieve this.

As well as **targeted** actions, we will ensure that women are empowered throughout **all of our development policies and programmes**, from agriculture to energy, and from climate change to infrastructure.

We are making a **substantial investment** of around **EUR 9 billion in over 60 partner countries** which have prioritised food and nutrition

security, and sustainable agriculture, in their national plans. **Integrating gender equality is a key part of our collaboration** for an agricultural, food and nutrition secure future for these countries.

In more concrete terms, this funds projects like **the FIRST programme**. Together with **FAO** we provide policy officers and technical expertise in **35 countries** at all levels of government - to improve agricultural, food and nutrition policy, including through greater gender equality.

Along with policy-making, we also work to **improve women's leadership and participation** from the household, to the community, and the national level.

Women must help shape the laws and decisions, the policies and programmes, which affect their own lives and their communities.

We are working with **International Fund for Agricultural Development in Africa and Asia** to provide long-lasting support to farmer organisations, which target the **young and female smallholder farmers** who need it most.

Over the years, more and more women have taken up **representative positions** in farmer organisations at local, national, regional and continental levels, and gained a greater voice as a result.

When it comes to **resources**, we also want to ensure more access for female farmers to land, financial services, technology, training, and social protection.

The **Agriculture Financing Initiative**, which I launched at the Milan Expo last year, aims to unlock the potential of small producers and agribusinesses by generating much-needed investment.

I am pleased to announce that there will be a **dedicated window for women**, to increase their capacities, participation and access to finance.

When it comes to **impact**, I have seen **what this means practically for people's lives** on the ground.

Earlier this year I visited the Somali region of Ethiopia, which has been hit by a devastating drought and food shortages as a result of El Niño. When I looked into the eyes of the victims, they were **overwhelmingly women and children**.

This is why we are **stepping up our humanitarian aid and relief efforts**. And at the same time working towards greater long-term resilience and development, including through projects such as the **Productive Safety Net Programme**.

With an **EU contribution of EUR 100 million**, it is the largest multi-donor programme of its kind in Sub-Saharan Africa. Working with the **World Food Programme**, we have provided over **7 million vulnerable people** with either cash or food, in return for carrying out public works.

As a result, over **65,000 kilometres of rural roads** have been constructed, **900 million seeds** have been planted, and **2,000 classrooms have been built** or renovated. This means more children in school, more meals on the table, and **more rural women empowered**.

As well as providing immediate relief and resilience, we are supporting other longer-term projects to **increase innovation** and women's involvement.

Just over a year ago, I visited the **International Potato Centre in Lima, Peru**.

The **humble potato** is the world's third most important food source, has many vital nutrients, and forms a staple diet for over a billion people.

The **cutting-edge research** conducted at this Centre aims to improve the diets, agricultural production and livelihoods of many of the world's poorest people.

In Peru, it is **the local women** who traditionally manage, produce and conserve many of the native varieties of potato. By working together with them, this project has successfully **increased women's ability** to organise, to grow their businesses, and to provide a nutritious diet for their families and communities.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

If there is **one core message** that we should all take away with us today, it is this - if we are serious about putting an end to poverty and hunger once and for all, then **we all need to step up our support for rural women**.

We must make "Accelerating Progress towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women" a **hard reality**, not just a few nice words on paper.

We will therefore **work closely with all of our partners worldwide** - the Rome-based agencies, governments, civil society, academia, the private sector – and **with rural women themselves**.

We in the European Union will **provide our full support to accelerating our joint engagement**, and to painting a picture of future that puts rural women firmly in the driving seat.

Thank you.

(1309 words)