

# 15 October International Day of Rural Women



–At the 2007 UN GA, the NGO World Rural Women's Day was declared a UN Resolution Day–

## WWSF Open Letter to Rural Women of the World – 2009

Annual WWSF global awareness campaign to increase knowledge and empowerment since 1996

### Theme: Claim your Right to health and well-being!

Dear Sisters living in rural communities around the world,

**The right to health and well-being**, is an internationally recognized human right, yet millions of individuals worldwide still suffer from insufficient health systems, unhealthy environments, and poor living conditions. Diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and malaria claim the lives of millions each year, alongside unhealthy conditions such as pollution. The problem is only further exacerbated for the poor (rural areas in the developing countries are home to three quarters of the world's poor) and for women, two groups that are often marginalized, discriminated against, and mistreated, thus limiting their access to medical services.

**Especially you, the rural women of the world**, face hardships in fully realizing your rights. Many health issues plague you and you are usually the last to receive health care, and are oftentimes relegated to outdated services. Treatment is difficult to come by especially if there are obstacles of travel, access, and cultural constraints such as the need to obtain permission from husbands. Women in Africa have some of the world's highest death rates in pregnancy and during childbirth. For each woman who dies, 20 others suffer from serious complications, according to WHO.

**You have, as all people, the right to health and well-being.** This right is included in various international treaties, conventions, and instruments. Indeed, every nation has signed at least one binding treaty concerning the right to health and well-being. The following are the most important treaties, declarations and conventions and what they say concerning the right to health and well-being:

- ✓ **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)** → Art.25 "(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his/her control. (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection."
- ✓ **Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1976)** → Art. 12: "States Parties... recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health."
- ✓ **World Health Organization Declaration of Alma-Ata (1978)** → General comment 14: the right to the highest attainable standard of health.
- ✓ **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)** → Art. 12: "(1) States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning. (2)...States Parties shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation."
- ✓ **Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992)** → "Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature."
- ✓ **UN International Conference on Population and Development (1994)** → Chapter IV: Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women, Chapter VII: Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health, Chapter VIII: Health, Morbidity and Mortality (including Section C: Women's health and safe motherhood).
- ✓ **Beijing Platform for Action (1995)** → Strategic objective C1: Increase women's access throughout the life cycle to appropriate, affordable and quality health care, information and related services.
- ✓ **Millennium Development Goals (2000)** → Goal 6: by 2015 all UN Member States have pledged to half and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, half and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases, and reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio.

## The following are selected health issues plaguing women, especially rural women, today:

- **HIV/AIDS:** There are problems of health seeking and treatment as those among you who are HIV-positive are oftentimes expelled from your communities, leading many of you to not get tested or receive treatment. [www.who.int/gender/hiv\\_aids/en/Integrating%5B258KB%5D.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/hiv_aids/en/Integrating%5B258KB%5D.pdf)
- **Mental health:** Women tend to suffer more from depression, stress, and anxiety, yet prevailing social taboos concerning these issues deter many from seeking help. Especially with the increasing incidence of war, more and more are suffering from mental health issues. [www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/en/genderMH.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/en/genderMH.pdf)
- **Tuberculosis:** 8.4 million people are estimated to develop tuberculosis, with 2 million of those resulting in death; rural women are in particular danger from the disease. [www.who.int/gender/documents/en/TB.factsheet.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/documents/en/TB.factsheet.pdf)
- **Health and Work:** Women make up about 42% of the estimated global paid population, with many more working in non-paid or informal sectors. Although you make up a vital component of the workforce, your working conditions are often abysmal and conducive to the spread of multiple diseases. [www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/Gender,HealthandWorklast.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/Gender,HealthandWorklast.pdf)
- **Malaria** remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide. Nine out of ten cases worldwide occur in Africa south of the Sahara and 90% of Africa's population is at risk of Malaria - mostly women and children under five. [www.who.int/gender/documents/gender\\_health\\_malaria.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/documents/gender_health_malaria.pdf)
- **Blindness** affects 40-45 million people worldwide with about two thirds of those cases being women of which many are untreated due to discrimination in treatment. [www.who.int/gender/other\\_health/en/genderblind.pdf](http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/en/genderblind.pdf)
- **Maternal mortality:** More than half a million die each year during childbirth as a result of preventable complications occurring before, during and after pregnancy and childbirth. Global maternal mortality is the leading cause of death among women and girls of reproductive age. Thousands of others suffer from disability or permanent medical consequences; 90% occur in Africa. Maternal mortality is a human rights violation and a perfect example of gender inequality and discrimination as there is no comparable violation occurring to men. Dangerous to mothers, children, and communities as a whole, reducing it will improve maternal health and promote gender equality and empowering women, including through the allocation of necessary domestic resources to health systems. [www.who.int/features/qa/12/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/features/qa/12/en/index.html)
- **Female genital mutilation:** is yet another gross violation of human rights. There are multiple treaties, conventions, and laws outlawing the tradition, but still 130 million women have undergone the mutilation with an estimated 2-3 million more undergoing it each year. [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/)
- **Environmental health hazards: e.g. pesticides.** Women and especially the rural women of the world are regularly exposed to various environmental hazards, contaminants and substances and suffer different consequences.

There are still many other health issues plaguing you, yet the problem arises from the unequal and unfair distribution of health services. The right to health is your right. You can and should claim it for the good of yourselves, your families, and your communities. As rural women, you are vital and essential to the health of your families and communities. Oftentimes you are the sole caretakers of children, your efforts in rural life affect both the nutrition and the environment of your community. Your vital contribution deserves recognition, acknowledgement, and support.

### Yet, know and understand to claim your right from your governments. Ensure that your leaders:

- ✓ **Reaffirm** your right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health; protect and promote the attainment of this right for you and your families, and incorporate it in national legislation
- ✓ **Increase** their political will and commitment, cooperation and technical assistance to reduce the unacceptable high rate of preventable maternal mortality and morbidity, as well as their investments in activities ensuring the right to health
- ✓ **Ratify and implement**, without delay, if not already done so, the Intl. Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- ✓ **Promote** gender equality and involve you in gender-sensitive health programs, including decentralized health services that address women's needs throughout their lives; take into account your multiple roles and responsibilities and the special needs of rural women and women with disabilities
- ✓ **Strengthen** education and awareness programs and combat stigma, stereo types, and gender discrimination
- ✓ **Expand** efforts to end discrimination, violence, and abuse against women
- ✓ **Provide** women's equal access to health care and treatment services, education, and government-involvement
- ✓ **Protect** your health from environmental contaminants; invest in leadership and educational opportunities for women
- ✓ **Revise** antiquated and biased programs; make them responsive to your health needs and your reproductive needs
- ✓ **Promote** proven traditional health approaches and medication
- ✓ **Establish** National Accounts of Well-being, measuring people's well-being, which should become a government policy.

As always, WWSF empowers you to celebrate **International Day of Rural Women-15 October**. Use the **World Day** and the **Open Letter** to claim your basic human right to health and well-being. Make your voices heard and join in celebrations of the 2009 winners of the WWSF Prize for women's creativity in rural life. <http://www.woman.ch>



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**Thank you** for sending your reports of local/national activities to mark the Day: e-mail: [wwsf@wwsf.ch](mailto:wwsf@wwsf.ch)

## → WHY A DAY FOR RURAL WOMEN - 15 OCTOBER?

**World Rural Women's Day - 15 October** was first launched at the UN Beijing Conference on Women (1995) by several international NGOs to honor and recognize rural women's contributions to development in their communities, valorize their centrality in food production and household food security. Since then the Women's World Summit Foundation WWWSF as a worldwide empowerment and mobilization project annually organizes a global campaign. WWWSF publishes every year an **Open Letter to rural women of the world** on the occasion of the World Day to empower rural women to demand that promises made in their name at numerous UN summits and conferences are implemented. Celebrations and events take place annually in more than 100 countries. After many years of WWWSF lobbying and campaigning, the 2007 **UN General Assembly declared to observe 15 October as 'International Day of Rural Women'**, which means that the World Day is now a *United Nations Resolution Day* with a message from the UN Secretary General to all UN member states.

The Day provides rural women and their organizations with a focal point to raise the profile of rural women; sensitize both government and civil society to their crucial yet largely unrecognized roles and to promote action in their support. Initiatives on how to celebrate the World Day are left to individual organizations and communities, according to their own traditions and requirements. Activities or events should be concrete and visible. Action undertaken by rural and farming women in all parts of the world on the same day, in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation, strengthens its impact.

## → FACTS ON RURAL WOMEN

- Rural women, mainly farmers, are at least 1.6 billion and represent more than a quarter of the total population
- Rural women produce on average more than half of all the food that is grown: up to 80% in Africa, 60% in Asia, between 30 and 40% in Latin America and Western countries
- Women own only 2% of the land, and receive only 1% of all agricultural credit
- Only 5% of all agricultural extension resources are directed to women
- Women represent two thirds of all illiterate people
- The number of rural women living in poverty has doubled since 1970

(Sources: FAO and IFAD)

## → Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform>

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted at the fourth World Conference on Women. This common agenda for women's empowerment stands as a milestone for the advancement of women. It specified 12 critical areas of concern that require concrete action in favour of **Women and Poverty • Education and Training of Women • Women and Health • Violence against Women • Women and Armed Conflict • Women and the Economy • Women in Power and Decision-making • Institutional Mechanism for the Advancement of Women • Human Rights of Women • Women and the Media • Women and the Environment • The Girl Child.**

## → Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

The MDGs reinforce the Beijing Platform for Action, which commits the international community to achieve a set of development goals by 2015. The 8 goals include: **Eradicate extreme poverty & hunger • Achieve universal primary education • Promote gender equality and empower women • Reduce child mortality • Improve maternal health • Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria & other diseases • Ensure environmental sustainability • Develop a global partnership for development.** <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals> The Millennium Summit (2000) restated familiar statistics: half of the world population lives on under \$ 2 a day; 1 billion live on less than \$1 a day; 600 million will not see their 40th birthday; 800 million cannot get primary health care; 200 million children suffer from lack of food; 140 million people of working age have no jobs; 750-1000 million are under-employed; 500 million young people will arrive on the job market in the next then years seeking jobs.

## → Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

From the women's point of view, CEDAW is the single most important international legal instrument adopted by the UN, also known as the Convention on the Rights of Women. Women around the world are using CEDAW effectively to bring about change in their conditions. It has encouraged the development of inheritance rights, property rights and political participation and fostered development of domestic violence laws.

### Art. 14 - Government commitments

1. States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
  - a. To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning
  - b. To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counseling and services in family planning
  - c. To benefit directly from social security programs
  - d. To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency
  - e. To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self-employment
  - f. To participate in all community activities
  - g. To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes
  - h. To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.