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Ministerial round table: Women as agents for economic change: Smallholder farming, food security, agriculture upgrading and rural economic diversification in least developed countries

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

1. The round table began with broad acknowledgement that agriculture remained the leading source of employment for women across the poorest countries, as about three quarters of employed women in the least developed countries worked in that sector.
2. Women played a central role in agricultural production by ensuring household food security and nutrition. If employed in waged labour, rural women devoted a substantial portion of their income to purchasing food for their families, and more than men. They also contributed to food security through the preservation of biodiversity and plant genetic resources. One panellist stressed the importance of merging new technology with traditional practices and recognized the value of rural women's traditional knowledge.
3. However, rural women faced gender-specific difficulties in accessing productive assets and services. Data displayed a consistent pattern of gender disparity in terms of access to land, credit, farm inputs, extension services and labour markets with a negative impact on women's productive potential. One panellist noted that women farmers were just as capable as men farmers, but the women produced on average less than their male counterparts because they lacked access to the necessary inputs. Additional millions of tons of agriculture and food products could be produced if women farmers had the same access to productive resources as men.
4. In the view of some panellists, trade liberalization did not have clear-cut positive or negative effects on women in agriculture. The effects varied across subgroups of women

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depending on sectoral segregation, crop and farming patterns, type of land tenure arrangements in place and dynamics within households.

5. One panellist said that trade expansion was typically associated with a trend towards commercialization, which involved increasing the share of agricultural produce that was sold by farmers, and agricultural diversification, which implied a shift in farming from low-value staple crops to higher-value commodities. In traditional export cash crops such as coffee or tea, commercialization and diversification were often associated with a shift towards higher-quality products. These patterns had discernible gender effects. They might favour commercially oriented farmers – typically men – who had easier access to inputs and marketing networks and information, and crowded out poor small-scale producers – typically women. Trade policies were thus not gender neutral. If developed without gender awareness, trade policies could exacerbate existing gender disparity.

6. Further, agricultural value chains were providing more opportunities to women than traditional agriculture, and transfer of technology facilitated women's move from farm to off-farm activities. Outgrower schemes, for example, had produced good results where farmers were given access to the necessary knowledge, inputs and markets. This allowed them to add value to what they produced and created opportunities for integration into value chains. It was important that women be aware of the kind of products the market demanded and that product quality was an essential element of any successful export strategy.

7. There was wide consensus among the participants that proactive measures were necessary to ensure that rural women harnessed the benefits and opportunities of trade integration, including at the regional and subregional levels. These included targeted, gender-sensitive subsidies for productive inputs, investment in time- and labour- saving technologies that met women's needs, market information systems and extension services attuned to women farmers and rural-based agribusiness, stronger women cooperatives and associations, and microcredit schemes closely linked to training and mentoring.

8. Some panellists noted that women were playing an increasingly important role in political life at the national and local levels. Indeed, it was not possible to design policies in favour of women without their participation in the development of such policies. Gender equality was enshrined in the constitutions and legal frameworks of many countries. Effective implementation and moving from de jure to de facto equality would remain ongoing challenges.

9. There was a need for policy coherence across different areas. Trade, agriculture, labour, infrastructure and social policies were intertwined and needed to be coordinated. Flanking policies that should accompany trade policy included that of freeing women's time by providing better public services, upgrading women's skills through better education and on-the-job training, and setting up gender-sensitive business incentives.

10. Some participants said that the ministries of gender equality played an active role in policy formulation in their countries. Their participation in policymaking had made it possible to mainstream gender issues into all national strategies and programmes.

11. Coherence was also needed at the stakeholder level. One panellist said that good results were usually achieved when government, the private sector and civil society joined forces to reach common goals.

12. Two participants highlighted the importance of transparency and accountability and the need for women to be able to keep all stakeholders accountable for gender-related commitments.

13. The discussion pointed to the needs to do away with gender segmentation in agricultural production and rural labour markets, to provide women with adequate access to

productive resources, to offer capacity-building that was attuned to women's specificities and to effect a change in mindset. Indeed, women could not benefit from more open economies if the issues of poverty, inequality and violence were not addressed.

14. A significant change in mindset was reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the shift from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, unlike Millennium Development Goal 3, which focused primarily on women's education and agency, Sustainable Development Goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) placed emphasis on creating capacities for women by addressing the main obstacles they faced in the economic sphere. Of the 169 targets, at least 20 related to women's empowerment and women's rights. In particular, the Sustainable Development Goals called for all marginal groups to be taken on board to ensure that no one was left behind.
