

Canadian Federation of University Women

Written Statement - UNCSW62

Rural women and girls are among the world's most marginalized populations as they face numerous challenges accessing and benefiting from public services. This situation creates barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment and impacts their quality of life in a variety of ways, including increased vulnerability to domestic violence due to isolation, limited local employment opportunities, minimal local access to higher education and the obvious intersectionality of barriers to empowerment connected to reduced access to technology. To support higher population densities, public services tend to be proximal to urban centres, resulting in limited access to essential public services for rural women.

In Canada, 18% of the female population live in rural or remote areas. Often, rural women most notably struggle to access domestic violence support services and safe housing, childcare, health and mental health services and training and educational services. The lack of public transportation, economic resources, government funded programs and professional services significantly impact their ability to access these essential services.

Poverty/Employment/Transportation

Women's poverty, in rural and remote regions, is a global concern. According to the last Canadian census, rural women, on average, are far more likely to have lower income than rural men, experience higher rates of unemployment, and higher levels of poverty than urban women. This is especially true in rural and northern Indigenous communities, where, due to the effects of colonization and isolation, there is an important gap in the living standards compared to the rest of the country.

The lack of access to public transportation in rural communities is a significant barrier to rural women's access to essential services, social support, and educational facilities as well as to participation in socio-economic activities. Strategies to reduce or remove transportation barriers in rural areas must be prioritized when developing public policy and programs targeting rural and

remote areas. Many of Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous Women were victimized because they were forced to hitch-hike between their rural communities and the city due to lack of public transportation connecting them to services in urban centres.

Violence

Sustainable Development Goal 5 identifies the elimination of all forms of violence against women as a key element in achieving gender equality. Statistics show that Canadian women in rural regions are at higher risk of experiencing domestic violence as they are twice as likely to experience assault from their intimate partner as urban women. Moreover, the probability of women being killed as a result of domestic acts of violence is higher in rural regions.

Long distances to access services, lack of transportation, insufficient outreach with support and information on available services to support victims and potential victims of domestic violence, combined with community denial and victim-blaming, as well as a rural culture of self-reliance, are among the factors that prevent rural women from seeking support. Moreover, the scarcity of women's shelters, the lack of safe, adequate, and affordable housing as well as economic reliance make women more likely to return to an abusive partner.

Indigenous women in rural and remote areas are especially vulnerable to violence due to a higher level of poverty, poor infrastructure, and insufficient access to basic necessities, racial discrimination and the intergenerational impacts of residential schools. There is an even greater deficiency of services to prevent and address violence against Indigenous women, especially in the rural North. For decades, Indigenous organizations have been pushing for community-based services that are culturally sensitive and gender specific.

Childcare

Childcare is also critical to achieving gender equality in rural regions. Internationally, traditional roles and limited access to childcare are key factors leading to the disproportionately higher amount of unpaid work performed by rural women, including child and eldercare. Across Canada there are large disparities in the availability, quality and affordability of childcare services and these are even more pronounced in rural and remote regions where there is little or no option for regulated childcare.

Transitioning from a market-based approach to childcare to adopting a universal publicly funded childcare program is the most sustainable option. This is especially true for rural areas where the cost-benefits analysis for private service providers can deter them from operating in a region with low population density, and with non-standard work schedules and seasonal work. Guaranteeing early learning and childcare services in rural and remote areas will stimulate rural economic

development and empower rural women by increasing their presence in the workforce not to mention providing children with early learning experiences that positively influences their development and learning abilities.

Physical Health and Mental Health

Canada struggles to provide comprehensive, and accessible health care and mental health services across rural and northern communities. While Canada's rural population represents 18% of its whole population, it is attended to by just 8% of its physicians. Moreover, access to comprehensive mental health services in rural areas is essential; according to recent statistics, rural and remote areas experience higher rates of self-reported fair or poor mental health, systematically related to social inequality. In a global strategy to address the human rights needs of rural women and ensure equitable access, governments must incorporate incentives to attract highly skilled professionals to practice in remote and rural regions.

Education

Education is a powerful tool to enable rural women and girls to engage, economically and politically, in their community and in society. The proportion of women with higher education in rural and remote areas is significantly lower compared to urban areas which means rural women have fewer opportunities for high-paying jobs. In Canada, low graduation rates in northern regions are especially concerning; only 53% of Inuit women between 25 and 64 possess a certificate, diploma, or degree.

Recommendations:

To achieve gender equality and ensure the empowerment of women and girls in rural and remote regions, United Nations Member states must:

- Develop specific strategies to address the mobility barriers that prevent access to services by improving public transportation infrastructure, technology infrastructure, improving access to technology, creating incentives for professional workers to work in rural regions and increasing the presence of community outreach workers.
- Research and investigate the specific barriers to gender equality faced by women living in rural and remote regions.
- Adopt gender specific and culturally sensitive policies and programs that address inequalities stemming from gender, geography, demographic, ethnic, cultural, and economic differences.
- Ensure that women and girls in rural and remote areas are protected from violence by providing direct, long-term and core-funding for shelters, affordable housing, emergency crisis lines and emergency transportation.
- Implement public-education campaigns in rural regions to address gender stereotypes, victim-

blaming attitudes, and specific root causes of violence against women and girls.

- Implement mandatory training on violence against women specifically for police and judges, with a focus on the additional challenges faced by indigenous women.
- Provide rural women and girls with education and information that will empower potential victims of violence to identify risk factors and reach out to services.
- Ensure comprehensive, available and accessible health care and mental health services in rural and remote areas.
- Ensure access to quality public education at all levels, including early learning, primary, secondary, and tertiary education, as well as universal, affordable, flexible and quality childcare services to enable rural women to access education opportunities, re-training and employment.

In Canada and around the world, rural women deserve to have the same rights and liberties as their urban counterparts. The Canadian Federation of University Women urges Canada to take a leadership role in the implementation of gender-based policies that address the barriers faced by rural women and girls. We also urge the Member states to take immediate action on the previous recommendations and stay true to the overarching principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to "ensure that no one is left behind."

Canadian Federation of University Women is a non-partisan, voluntary, self-funded organization with over 100 clubs, located in every province across Canada. Since its founding in 1919, Canadian Federation of University Women has been working to improve the status of women, and to promote human rights, public education, social justice, and peace. It holds special consultative status with the United Nations and belongs to the Education Committee of the Canadian Sub-Commission to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Statement endorsed by:

1. Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women
2. Graduate Women International
3. International Alliance of Women
4. MATCH International Centre
5. National Council of Women of Canada