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Multi-Stakeholder Forum
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Panel 1: “Ensuring rural women’s land rights and tenure security and strengthening food security and nutrition for rural women and girls”

Madame Moderator,

I am happy to be able to contribute to the Multi Stakeholder Forum by participating in this panel.

Growing up in Iceland I had a second home with my aunt and her family, on a small farm in the countryside, and both of my parents were born and raised by poor Icelandic farmers in one of most remote and rural areas of Iceland.

Therefore, today’s subject is personal to me and I remember vividly my grandmother who was in reality a farmer par excellence but was recognized by society as the wife of a farmer, that is, my grandfather, who was a wonderful man, but clearly with interest in most other fields than farming.

This was long after we, in Iceland, achieved equality in legal terms, with respect women’s land rights and tenure, and is for me a strong reminder, that despite legal equality being of fundamental importance, it will only get us so far.

The fact is, that almost half of humanity still lives in rural areas. In turn, that means that approximately quarter of humanity are rural women and girls. Women farmers and farm workers are claimed to be responsible for more than 50 % of the world’s food production and yet, women farmers have significantly less access to, control over and ownership of land and other productive assets compared with their male counterparts.

This is of course in itself gross injustice but also economically insensible as this reduces productivity and wellbeing in the societies concerned.

Thus, it is obvious that we must encourage legislative improvements at the national level aiming for legal equality in terms of access, ownership and inheritance rights to land for women.

However, and speaking from my own experience, I believe that from the outset we must anticipate that narrow legal equality might not be enough to bring about real equality. We should therefore be ready to take all available measures to further encourage and support women in availing themselves of their rights and possibilities.

In my country, we have used soft policy measures to support and encourage women to claim their rightful position. An example of that is that the Farmers Association of Iceland has formed a grass-root movement called Active Agriculture with the aim to empower women-farmers to be more active and more visible in society.

We should also consider if further legislative measures might support the enjoyment of initial legal equality. An example of that might be the legally mandated representation of

women on the boards of all Icelandic companies with more than 50 employees. Despite of women, of course, having for decades enjoyed equality in terms of serving in such leadership positions, in reality, at the beginning of this century, they were still virtually absent in Icelandic boardrooms. This legislative change of 2010 has now resulted in a sharp increase in women serving on boards of companies and certainly strongly improved gender equality in otherwise gender segregated industries as farming and fishing, traditionally the mainstay of economic activities in Iceland's rural areas.

But we also have to recognize that certain challenges that we are dealing with in rural communities are prone to affect women in a disproportional manner. I know that some of these challenges will be dealt with by later panels today, but I would still like to mention one that Iceland has been focusing on, which is combatting land degradation.

Land restoration has been shown to have even more positive effect on women as the negative effects of degradation tend to hit them stronger than males, for example, in terms of heavier workload, in terms of collecting water and securing food for their family.

All relative improvements in living conditions of rural women increase their possibility to become more active participants in their local communities and to claim and enjoy their legal rights and standing.

I am therefore happy to share with you that Iceland, in cooperation with Namibia and UNCCD, will during the CSW be sponsoring a side event on land restoration and its positive impacts on women's enjoyment of their rights, and that we will focus on a proper reflection of that in CSW's Agreed Conclusions.

I started by telling you about how no one ever referred to my grandmother as a farmer. I witnessed as I was growing up how my aunt slowly started to refer to herself as a farmer and how society hesitantly accepted that. Nowadays, nobody in Iceland would dare to refer to a woman living on a farm in any other way than as a farmer.

We can achieve legal equality for rural women for land rights and we can even get society to respect those rights.

I thank you.