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STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF RURAL WOMEN

Compiled by Hluvukani Development Agency and other women's organisations in response to a call for comment from the Technical Committee on Fundamental Rights During the Transition (Multi-Party Negotiating Process, World Trade Centre, Kempton Park)

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PREAMBLE

Since policies are presently being formulated for all sectors of society, it is essential that the plight of rural women also should be pertinently placed before policy-makers.

This document is an overview of perceptions and experiences gained by women development agencies, individuals, and research institutions working with rural women.

The contents are meant to evoke discussion and set in motion well-considered processes by which the problems, visions and hopes of rural women may be addressed. They are likewise meant to send a signal to the engineers of our society: *that women across the political spectrum are organised, well positioned and ready to get involved in meaningful dialogue at all levels.*

Rural women are perhaps the single biggest majority in the voter community. They are also more sensitive to their own needs than has been readily perceived under past dispensations. They can and will use their vote creatively to build a culturally sensitive, gender-sensitive, functional and peaceful society.

We call on all participants at the Multi-Party Negotiating Process to heed the voice of the majority. Deprived and disadvantaged as many of us are - subject to a triple oppression related to race, class and gender - we are nonetheless well aware at this unrepeatable moment in time that we owe it to ourselves and to generations to come to take a hand, NOW, in the processes that are shaping our country's future. The efforts of generations of women (and indeed some men) to build a non-sexist society cannot be ignored, and so the event will prove. We say to those whom history has selected to take momentous decisions on behalf of all: heed the voice of the women. We have numbers, skills and insight. Support us to support you.

RURAL WOMEN AND THEIR DEMANDS

SHORT-TERM DEMANDS

- (1) Meaningful representation at MULTI-PARTY NEGOTIATING PROCESS
- (2) Access to INFORMATION about the state of the nation
- (3) Comprehensive VOTER EDUCATION, with the effective use of the MASS MEDIA inter alia
- (4) Meaningful policy formulation regarding our future PARTICIPATION in the following areas:
 - local government
 - a future central government
 - marital power relations
 - reproductive rights
 - property rights
- (5) GENDER-SENSITIVE REPRESENTATION as regards election candidates and a future government
- (6) The right to withhold our vote unless FULL VOTER INFORMATION is guaranteed and ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS put in place
- (7) A working group on TRADITIONAL SOCIETY, focusing on the status of women
- (8) The necessary FUNDING for consultation

LONG-TERM DEMANDS

- (1) A meaningful consultative process with regard to policies, bills or laws concerning our rights as rural women
- (2) Meaningful outreach strategies by organisations sympathetic to our cause

(3) Meaningful empowerment programmes such as quality literacy and other life-skills programmes

(4) A scrutiny of marital laws, both traditional and Western, and the relationship between them

(5) Research on cultural and Western oppressive machinery within the family and in broader society

(6) Constitutional protection of rural women regardless of class and background

THE CONDITION OF RURAL WOMEN, WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO WOMEN ON TRADITIONAL AND COMMERCIAL FARMS

Through the evolution of our society, certain sectors are making more gains than others. Women have to be considered in terms of many indicators. Currently rural women are regarded as the lowest category in terms of their basic needs and quality of life. They lack access to decision-making in virtually every sector of their lives.

Most approaches towards helping rural women are aimed at the welfare level, without any thought of preparing them for access to any form of power. The following are examples of areas of power and the current status of rural women with regard to them, as perceived by themselves and those who communicate with them.

WOMEN AND MARITAL RELATIONS

African marriage is riddled with social trappings. The following are among the factors that have never been adequately studied, and therefore no meaningful policies have emerged:

- (1) The process of marriage entrenches patriarchy and places a woman in an ongoing process of disempowerment.
- (2) The laws governing what is called 'customary union' are archaic and were drafted without consultation with the affected group. It is not even designated 'marriage', being seen as an inferior status of cohabitation. Within that relationship there is no formal or proper documentation; or if there is, it is meant only to protect the privileges of the male partner. Such union does not give women access to property or to meaningful decision-making such as tribal discussions of community affairs. Male children are even accorded a higher social status than female children.

The woman becomes totally hooked into the clan to her own great disadvantage. If her husband dies, for example, she cannot inherit any property and is at the same time eligible to any male person in the clan.

- (3) Patriarchal relations have never been properly examined.

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- (4) Property relations are biased towards the male partner. Women are not allowed to own land or any meaningful property.

While one would accept the normative relations that ensue from tribal marriages, power relations within this institution need to be properly examined.

WOMEN AND PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

Tribal land is usually vested in the chief/induna or the *lekgotla/indaba*. Women have been totally excluded from any say in its allocation for private ownership, property development or societal amenities. For instance, women cannot decide to put up a child care facility on any piece of land even if this is their top priority.

On commercial farms, the bulk of the workers are women. They are brought in mainly as cheap labour and to do de-skilling work such as weeding or harvesting. Women are exposed to dangerous agricultural chemicals that affect their health, quality of life and fertility. They are allowed no voice in planning processes.

There are currently no meaningful developmental programmes. Literacy programmes are in progress in some areas, but these have the effect of demeaning women even further. The content and methods of transmission are designed to make women more docile, unable to rise to anything but an ability to take instructions. Consciousness-raising programmes are not encouraged.

Child-care facilities are almost non-existent. Where they do exist, they are not affordable. Women are caught up in a vicious cycle either of child neglect or of further impoverishment of the family at the expense of one child only.

WOMEN AND HEALTH

Rural women are never exposed to meaningful health programmes.

Poorly organised family planning services do reach these women. They are administered to suit the needs of other people, not those of the woman herself. In many instances they can be regarded as an invasion of her body. Her rights in determining the size of the family are never regarded, either in the short or the long term.

In the long term, policies have to be developed to give rural women active access to quality education. They in turn will then be able to make informed decisions about the size of the family and the choice of birth-control methods.

WOMEN AND WATER PROVISION

To the rural woman, running water is an unthinkable luxury. She spends endless hours carrying heavy tins of water on her head, which affects both her health and her social life.

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Africa is being seen as a dying continent - in terms of its natural resources, their use and their accessibility to Africans themselves. Women have always been the custodians of our heritage. However, because of the commercialisation of the land and over-control by tribal authorities, and in the absence of such basic facilities as electricity or any modern energy source, rural women have no choice but to use wood as fuel. The choice now appears to them as a choice between "my child's survival or the survival of a tree". An aggravating factor is that the rural woman has never been exposed to meaningful adult education about environmental management.

RURAL WOMEN AND POLITICS

Most rural women have no access to political education or any information about current affairs. They have no voice in local civic matters. They are not part of the *lekgotla/indaba*. Mass media do not reach them easily.

Although these women constitute about two thirds of the female voter community, the danger exists that they will vote against themselves, mainly because of a lack of information about both the process and the content.

Rural women are an attractive constituency for all parties, simply because currently they would not constitute a qualified voter constituency. No candidate will ever be held accountable, because there is no structure or process to inform women about their rights and demands. It will not be easy to alert these women to the power that will suddenly be theirs within the next twelvemonth: the power to say 'no' by means of their vote, to demand that their vote should be a turning point in their history.

WOMEN, RELIGION AND CULTURE

Most rural women belong to some religious movement, be it a mainline church or an independent indigenous religion.

In these organisations, too, they have little decision-making power. They are seen as fund-raisers, cleaners and singers.

In cultural matters, rural women are custodians of a rich cultural heritage that is not being recognised, or else is ignored in favour of Western cultures. These women are therefore subject to a dual oppression: both class and gender oppression.

WOMEN AND HOUSING

Women have no property rights; even the construction of their houses is based on traditional methods. Rural women live in prehistoric conditions. To many women a one-roomed shell serves as kitchen, bedroom, family room and bathroom. On most commercial farms women live in complete squalor, without privacy or the most basic facilities or comforts.

WOMEN AND FOOD PRODUCTION

Women have been de-skilled by decades of underdevelopment policies. The traditional food production methods have been lost or neglected. Traditionally women were able to plough the land, look after the crop, harvest and preserve the surplus. The commercialisation of food production has left rural women with nothing. They can produce for the farmer, but they have no access to the food because they have no money. In other words, they have been introduced into the market economy

without deriving any benefit from it. Their barter systems have been destroyed and they are denied access to national resources.

WOMEN, INFORMATION AND FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

Women on commercial farms cannot even be sure that they will be allowed information on the current state of the nation. Farmers have the right to refuse access to voter education; or they may not be prepared to facilitate freedom of movement to learning centres or to invite process facilitators.

WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

Women in rural areas are not being developed to participate creatively in the economy. They are custodians of cultural modes of production, but little research had been done to determine their visions, creativity and talent. The activities they are usually introduced to by so-called development agencies are sewing or other forms of Western production, and most of the products fail to break into mainstream clothing production. Research is needed to establish the potential kinds of production activity. Women can be and have been builders, pastoral farmers, environmental managers and makers of aesthetic objects for the home.

Rich creative talents such as traditional African painting, interior decoration, African music and story-telling all lie fallow in rural women for lack of empowerment programmes.

WOMEN AND PEACE

Women have always been among the most defenseless victims of violence. Now that political and criminal violence has spilled over into the rural areas, women have most to lose when homes are burnt down and children killed or maimed; yet women have no voice at all in law enforcement agencies or in the organised peace initiatives. It may credibly be maintained that women, if empowered, would be a potent force for peace. Especially because of their influence on the young children, and the caring nature associated with women, they have it in their power to set in motion a healing process.