

Mr José Graziano da Silva, Director General of FAO,
Mr Neven Mimica, the EU Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development,
Your Excellences,
Distinguished Ministers,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Special Warm Welcome to Rural Women and their representatives here,

It is an honor and a pleasure for me to be here together with you today to pay a special tribute to lives, work and bravery of rural women as main protagonists of this high level event.

In my own country, Slovakia, we value the contribution of rural women to the society. With their work they prove that on the Earth still exist the old human values such as dedication, willingness to help and effort to spiritually and materially support the growth of their families, communities, regions, countries and all of us globally. Therefore, the Slovak Rural Parliament together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak republic awards on an annual basis the best Rural Women Leader of the Year. This is a part of our national celebrations of International Rural Women's Day and World Food Day.

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to our co-organizers, FAO and European Commission, for positively reflecting on the initiative of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union to do something special together for rural women. I would like to appreciate the preparatory work in close collaboration with World Food Programme, International Fund for Agricultural Development and UN Women and their respective gender teams. Together we are stronger to Step It Up with Rural Women to End Hunger and Poverty.

We were given today an opportunity to show together that only by collaborative action of all stakeholders we can achieve very ambitious, complex and transformative 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These political commitments need to be translated into concrete results for people, planet and prosperity. We can achieve those not only by 2030, but even before that time. Let us be ambitious! As Salvator Dali said "Intelligence without ambition is a bird without wings". So let us all put on our wings today together with rural women.

Allow me to share with you few thoughts that have laid the foundations of today's high level event.

The Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union for this semester has set the gender equality and empowerment of women as the key priority in the humanitarian and development fields. Our goal is to recognize the role of rural women which lies in the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It is estimated that 60 percent of the chronically hungry people today are women and girls. The majority of them lives in developing countries and has agriculture as their main source income. While rural women play a crucial role in food production, they at the same time take care for their families and households. Yet, in many contexts, women, and especially rural women, still struggle with less access to important resources such as land, credit, or well-paid jobs as well as with non-equal participation in decision-making process. For example, women make up about 43 percent of the global agriculture labor force but have ownership of less than 20 percent of agricultural land.

This is one of the reasons why we are here today.

The gender gap imposes significant costs on society, in terms of lost agricultural output, food security and economic growth. Promoting gender equality is beneficial not only for women but moreover for sustainable agricultural development. It is fundamental to reducing child malnutrition and increasing the wellbeing of the whole family. Therefore, it is not only a good thing to do, but also a very smart thing to do.

It was FAO's respected annual flagship publication *The State of Food and Agriculture* that first announced this startling finding: that if women had the same access to productive resources and rural employment as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 percent. It means reducing the number of hungry people in the world by 12 to 17 percent.

Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, of whole countries.

There is a need to bring transformative approach to help overturn the deep-rooted structural barriers that rural women face. This High Level Event provides an opportunity to re-affirm the commitment of support to rural women to build a better world, one free of poverty, hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition.

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all know that the current world faces many challenges. During the Slovak EU Presidency, gender responsive humanitarian action was one of the key priorities for the Humanitarian and Food Aid – both as an objective and as a tool to assure effective humanitarian response. Women and girls represent a particularly vulnerable group in crisis situations, and assistance must be tailored to their specific needs.

Besides ensuring sufficient protection of women and girls, it is also important to recognize the central role women can play in peace- and resilience-building as they are the first responders in crises. Women and girls cannot be seen only as victims – they are key actors of change.

In line with Agenda 2030 a transformative approach is needed to unleash the potential of rural women to end hunger and poverty, including taking on board men. Gender equality is also a men's issue and men's active participation is vital for the success of this important matter. It is not just about women; it is about changing relations between women and men. We have one strong male feminist present here today. Thank you, Mr. Commissioner Mimica, for being such a powerful feminist, recognizing the role of rural women as agents of change.

Allow me to highlight one interesting element that also triggered the idea of having a high level event on rural women. For the past few years Slovakia has actively participated in the activities of Network for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Rome. This network works hard to support the implementation of the Gender Strategies adopted by FAO, WFP and IFAD respectively as well as in uniting all regions. Joint cross-regional statements prepared by the network and supported by so many countries across all regions at the Governing Bodies meetings are excellent examples of all working together for a common cause.

We fully subscribe ourselves under the main vision of the Gender Network, in which it envisages a world where all girls, boys, men and women have equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities, access to resources and decision-power.

Furthermore, this event is aimed as a follow-up of the topic for the International Women's Day 2016, "Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality". The outcomes of this high level event will serve as a contribution to International Women's Day on 8 March 2017 at the FAO headquarters and will also be presented at the annual meeting of the Committee on the Status of Women at the United Nations in New York.

Let me conclude by saying that any violence against women and girls is not tolerable and is a shame for humanity. Ending violence against women and girls should be set as our priority to which each one of us not only could but also should contribute by taking action. Let us remind ourselves that the other side of violence is peace and prosperity and that is the world in which all human beings deserve to live.

I wish you successful deliberations today which I do hope will transfer into practice with follow-up activities with direct and positive impacts on lives of rural women. Let us leave no rural woman behind!

A dream without ambition is like a car without a gas, you are not going anywhere.

I believe that everything can transform and change to better by taking joint action, thanks to you!