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AT THE INAUGURAL CEREMONY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL FORUM "WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE:  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TO AGRICULTURE  
AND TO FOOD SECURITY IN THE AMERICAS"*

Dear friends:

I thank you for the honor of being able to participate in the inauguration of this inter-American forum and to share some thoughts on an issue that is of such great importance for our societies but seldom discussed in international forums: the role and living conditions of women in agriculture.

We are right to acknowledge that one of the biggest political and social weaknesses of our public policies is the failure to address the issue of equity as it pertains to women in our rural milieu. I would even dare to suggest that we have been doubly remiss: we have not done enough to address either the inequalities that women still suffer in our countries or the problems that exist in the rural milieu, where underdevelopment and poverty are greater than in the urban sectors of our societies.

The women who live in our rural areas are more neglected and less understood, and receive less attention, than any other sector of society. Although it is no secret that women play a decisive role in the production process and in the living conditions of rural families, their contribution does not appear in national censuses, is not reflected in national land registries and is not included in calculations of the agricultural labor force.

The prejudices of a vision that fails to consider the gender dimension are compounded by the distortions of research instruments designed with an urban mindset. Due to their social conditioning, rural women regard themselves as homemakers rather than farm workers. How is a rural woman to respond when she is asked what her main economic activity is? She milks the cow, tends to the vegetable garden and the backyard animals, collects firewood, carries water, sells the farm's produce and, on top of all that, prepares the food, cleans the house and takes care of the other members of the family.

What, then, is her main job? What is it recorded as in the statistics? How is she regarded and what sort of assistance is she offered?

We realize that much more analysis of the conditions of women in agriculture is needed; and that more institutional effort is required to progress from good intentions to better interventions that make it possible to bring about a substantial improvement in the living conditions of rural women. We have an obligation to investigate the living conditions of rural women not only from the gender perspective but also from the standpoint of development, as part of an agricultural sector that is undergoing a transformation, where the ancestral conditions of production are linked to the challenge of the internationalization of our economies.

All of Latin America is moving toward a new rurality, one that is more productive and more sustainable. The agricultural sector and its women need to integrate more dynamically and beneficially into the economies of their own countries and into the international

economy, or they run the risk of being excluded from the subsequent stages of development. Ours is a century that will be characterized by innovation, environmental sustainability and globalization. Therefore, we need to have a precise and deep understanding of the participation of women in the agricultural economy, so that state institutions can adapt their public policies and aid programs.

The activities of women in agriculture need to be linked to national and international production and marketing chains. They must be able to guarantee high environmental standards and demonstrate their profitability. We have to encourage their enterprising spirit through access to credit, improve the quality of their products, and promote their techniques for marketing and the diversification of production. Furthermore, the state has a duty to include rural women in the whole framework of social support, including access to housing, to training and to education for children, among others.

That is why this international forum fills us with hope, because it is a great opportunity to raise awareness. Governments and public institutions, private entities and non-governmental organizations, we must all pledge to undertake the in-depth study of the living conditions of women in the agricultural sector of the Americas and to infuse public rural development policies with a gender perspective.

At this forum, we are honored by the presence of renowned specialists and representatives of national and international, governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in both the gender issue in the Americas and the problems of our agricultural and rural development.

This is a particularly propitious moment to address the problem of equity, as more and more women are occupying important posts in the decision-making process of the countries of our region. In my country, we are very clear about our obligation: for the first time, there is a woman President and for the first time the Minister of Agriculture is a woman.

Furthermore, we hope that the large networks made up of the Inter-American Commission of Women and the ministers of agriculture of the hemisphere will not hesitate to assume the commitment of implementing the recommendations made by this important forum, incorporating a cross-cutting vision of gender equity into the programs promoted in our agricultural and rural sector.

My dear friends:

Women and land are inseparable as far as life and fertility are concerned. Accordingly, we celebrate the communication of concerns related to such a natural pairing—one that is not always studied, nor always understood.

I wish you every success in your deliberations and I promise, insofar as possible, to analyze and implement your recommendations in order to bring our public policies into line with the just aspirations of those tough, brave women who day after day plow our fields, fill our homes with life and harvest with pride the fruit of their labors, their wombs and their hearts.

Thank you very much.