Honourable Ministers, Madam Executive Secretary, distinguished delegates, colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here and gives me great pleasure to be addressing this gathering ahead of the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Our priority theme this year is “Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls”.

It is indeed a challenging theme for this region, as highlighted by my colleagues. It is also a particularly relevant theme as the 2030 Agenda places a strong focus on food security and nutrition with gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls as a foundation for sustainable and inclusive development. Of course, as you know, the eradication of hunger, in all its forms, and poverty are at the core of FAO’s mandate.

Among the world’s developing regions, Asia and the Pacific has witnessed the deepest and fastest structural transformation. This is due to a number of factors, including rapid economic growth, demographic shifts, urbanization and increasingly globalized markets. This has also had an impact on agriculture, food systems, and rural economies in particular.

Yet, agriculture continues to be a key source of rural employment in this region. In low income countries agriculture provides work for as much as two-thirds of rural dwellers. Even in lower-middle income countries 40 percent of people in rural areas rely on agriculture for their livelihoods.

But here’s an even more striking figure. In rural areas, agriculture engages well over half of all economically active women (58 percent).

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

Women play key roles across our food systems. Rural women, in particular, farm, fish, sell food in the markets, and process our produce. They often work unpaid on their own family farms and as wage labourers in the farms and agribusinesses of others. They are typically custodians of seeds and agrobiodiversity.

In short, women in rural agriculture are, in many ways, the backbone of our food systems. And yet they carry a disproportionately heavy burden.

Because they have other work too. They prepare food for their families. They spend long hours collecting water and firewood. They are active in their communities and they are the key and often sole providers of care for children and other household members.

This region’s rapid economic transformations are not keeping pace with inclusive transformative change for rural communities, and for women in particular. Indeed, socio-economic inequalities have increased and, in the rural context especially, women continue to face significant gender-based constraints and inequalities including access to land and credit, decent employment, financial services, meaningful training and representation, while bearing the brunt of increased tasks on the farm and in the household (for instance when men migrate and as livelihood diversify).
An illuminating example is land. Land is a critical asset for livelihoods, shelter and identity – yet, in many countries in the region the share of women landholders is less than ten percent and, in only a handful of countries, the figure doesn’t get any higher than 30 percent.

Excellencies, colleagues.

While this is not just absolutely unfair – it makes absolutely no sense!

We have evidence that shows us that if women had access to, and control of, the same resources as men, their contributions would increase food production by as much as four per cent and this would have benefits for the entire family with greater food and nutrition security as well as improved health and well-being of children.

It is clear that the goals of food and nutrition security and sustainable development cannot be achieved without the empowerment of women and girls in our region. It is therefore imperative that we redress access barriers to enable women and girls to achieve their full human and productive potential.

By now it’s also clear that piecemeal and sectoral approaches are simply not enough. In fact, for the most part, these existing inequalities are the foundation upon which this continuing manifestation of agricultural patriarchy, social injustices and discrimination reside. With the 2030 deadline just over the horizon, we can no longer afford to let gender equality and women’s empowerment be a nice slogan couched in the developmental community’s banter of “cross-cutting themes.”

What we need is radical, transformative change and commitment to such change – in national policies, strategies, programmes, and not least, in backing these up with adequate data and budgetary allocations in line with other “mainstream” development sectors.

The opportunity and importance of this event that brings together Ministries of Women’s Affairs with Ministries of Agriculture, Rural Development, and Disaster Management and civil society, including farmers organizations and indigenous peoples’ organizations, cannot be understated and is definitely a step in the right direction.

So, I hope this will mark just the beginning of new and strengthened partnership that will allows us to build on each other’s strengths and together seek the radical transformative change that is required.

I wish all the participants fruitful discussions and deliberations.

THANK YOU.