Women in dry lands rank among "poorest of poor", UN Secretary-General Annan says

Desertification is one of the world’s most alarming processes of environmental degradation. It threatens the health and livelihoods of more than one billion people. And each year, desertification and drought cause an estimated $42 billion in lost agricultural production. The great scope and urgency of this challenge led the United Nations General Assembly to proclaim 2006 to be the International Year of Deserts and Desertification.

The theme of this year’s observance of World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought is "Women and Desertification". In many of the world’s dry, agricultural areas, including much of Africa, it is traditionally women who devote time and effort to the land. In developing countries, women account for approximately 70 per cent of the agricultural labour force and produce 60 to 80 per cent of the food. It is primarily they who process, manage and market food for their families and societies, and who work directly with natural resources. And it is they who, having seen environmental degradation and other problems close at hand, have acquired valuable knowledge.

Despite such efforts and knowledge, women living in dry lands tend to rank among the poorest of the poor, with little power to bring about real change. The United Nations Convention on Desertification and Drought underlines the important role played by women in ensuring implementation of the Convention. Yet, with ownership and decision-making over land and livestock remaining predominantly in the male domain, women are often excluded from participation in land conservation and development projects, from agricultural extension work, and from the overall policy-making process.

There are some signs of progress. In many countries, women are beginning to gain access to land ownership and to take part in decision-making. Increasingly, Member States are recognizing that a lack of financial resources is impeding efforts by women and men to combat desertification. This is giving women new opportunities to change their lives, societies and environments. On this World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, let us all pledge to do our part in empowering women and engaging them as full partners in global efforts to address this vital challenge.