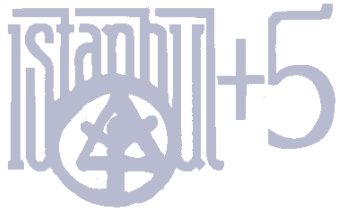


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A Woman's place

Much progress has been achieved in the advancement of women – from better legislation to greater participation, from the Cairo Conference on population and development to the Beijing Platform for Action, from economic empowerment to intellectual emancipation. But for the majority of the world's women, daily life remains a difficult and sometimes dangerous struggle. The objectives of gender equality, development and peace that remain at the heart of the international agenda for women's advancement are still far from being achieved.

– UN SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN
International Women's Day, 8 March 2001

WOMEN HAVE MADE SOME REMARKABLE GAINS since 1995: they are living longer and healthier lives; they receive better schooling; they are more economically active; and more women have the franchise than ever before. Despite these gains, women around the world continue to figure prominently among the ranks of those living in poverty and who suffer from illiteracy, dislocation, violence, poor nutrition and ill health. According to United Nations estimates, they still lag behind in virtually all aspects of life.

In many countries, the feminization of poverty has made it increasingly difficult for women to eke out an existence for their families. The lack of basic services and poor infrastructure impact women the most because they, much more than men, deal with water, sanitation, fuel and waste management. While women are most often the direct managers at the household level, they are subject to exclusion in decision-making forums at the local and national levels. Thus, even though they suffer the consequences of inadequate housing, they often lack the means to fix it.

Aware of the exclusion of women in urban planning and governance, the Habitat Agenda calls for gender equality in human settlements development. To reinforce this commitment, Habitat has placed women at the centre of their two strategic campaigns: the Global Campaign on Urban Governance and the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure. These campaigns

are meant to provide strategic points of entry into the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. Both campaigns feature the increased role of women in the social, economic and political spheres, and meeting the needs of women will be the key measure of their success.

The Global Campaign on Urban Governance advocates the active participation of both men and women in urban planning as a way of achieving sustainable development. The policy on women and good governance aims at increasing the representation of women in the decision-making process and focusing greater attention on the human settlements issues of concern to women.

In cities across the globe, women's participation in public and private institutions is minimal. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), women hold only 12 per cent of the seats in national parliaments worldwide. At the local leadership level, the figures range from less than five per cent in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa to 40 per cent in parts of Europe. It is not only the representation of women in the political arena that must increase, but the professional arena as well. This means having more women bankers, architects, urban planners, environmentalists, and so on. The goal is to have more women in leadership positions so that women's needs and problems are not overlooked.



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Similarly, the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure strives to ensure that women have equal rights to own and inherit land and property. One of the most problematic areas for women in many traditional societies is their inability to inherit land. Even in some modern societies where women do have the legal right to acquire, manage and dispose of property, customary practice still inhibits them from exercising their legal rights. The situation of women in conflict zones is further exacerbated by their inability to inherit. Many women whose husbands and parents have been killed find themselves and their children dispossessed.

Aware of the importance of providing women with security of tenure, Habitat has been working with Governments, local authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners to ensure women's access to land and property. For example, laws have been passed in Rwanda giving women the right to inherit property. This was particularly important because in the aftermath of the civil conflict, an estimated 60 per cent of the survivors were women who had no recognized right to inherit land or property.

Ultimately, the question is not whether women should be involved but rather how. In an effort to promote positive initiatives taken in countries throughout the world, Habitat has designed a user-friendly best practice database. It includes many examples and best practices that show how women can be successfully integrated into the process of human settlements development.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Bank in India is an excellent example of how mainstreaming women decision-makers has worked to benefit ordinary women. SEWA Bank was set up to provide credit at reasonable rates to low-income women who were often charged exorbitant rates at normal banks. These women repay their loans and spend the money to improve their families' status. Such improvements include expanding their informal businesses, educating their children and improving housing.

The involvement of women architects in an urban planning project in Austria is another best practice that exemplifies the positive effects of incorporating women into urban governance. A group of women designed a model project in which a section of Vienna's suburbs would be exclusively planned and designed by women architects. The objective of the project was to make the manifold facets of women's everyday life an essential criterion of the design. The result is that 359 housing units will be constructed with women-friendly facilities, such as rooms to store prams on the ground floor, the placement of kitchens as the central place of housework, and the inclusion of social spaces to enhance neighbourly relations.

In Nicaragua, a local non-governmental organization (NGO), Habitar, supported communities in their negotiations with the Government to obtain land titles of 8,862 plots in seven neighbourhoods benefiting 21,000 people, especially poor families and women-headed households. A similar best practice in Sri Lanka helped facilitate the construction of low-cost housing for poor families, especially women-headed households. The Sri Lanka Reclamation and Development Corporation, with financial support from the EMACE Foundation, relocated squatters who had lived along the Dehiwela canal bank for over thirty years. The main objective was to provide settlers with grants in order to assist them in obtaining land tenure for a plot of land and then to help them build their own houses on a self-help basis.

Habitat has concluded that full implementation of its Agenda will require an enhanced role for women. For this to happen, the participation of women must be encouraged and supported at all levels. At Istanbul + 5, the draft 'Declaration on cities and other human settlements in the new millennium', which has yet to be finally negotiated and adopted by Member States, will recognize the need to "promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty and to stimulate development of human settlements that are truly sustainable."