

**Introductory remarks by Carolyn Hannan, Director  
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**At the CSW52 parallel event  
Women in cities: Policies and mainstreaming strategies**

**Organized by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Seoul Foundation of  
Women and the Family in collaboration with UNHABITAT.**

It is my pleasure to make brief introductory remarks at this event on “Women in cities: Policies and mainstreaming strategies” organized by the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family, the Seoul Metropolitan Government and UNHABITAT. I am also very happy to see ESCAP represented on this panel because of the considerable work it has done on women in cities, including in collaboration with women mayors.

In August last year I had the pleasure to attend a conference on Global City Strategies for Implementing Policies on Gender Equality organized in Seoul by the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family, under the auspices of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. During my visit to Seoul, I was impressed by the many initiatives undertaken by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family for women.

I welcome the initiative to bring the issue of women in cities to the Commission on the Status of Women and congratulate the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family for women.

The positive links between gender equality and empowerment of women and the effective and sustainable development of human settlements and urban areas and the improvement of the quality of life for all citizens are increasingly clear. Women represent half the resources and half the potentials of families, communities and nations and are important agents of change in all contexts, including in cities.

One Millennium Development Goal gives attention to urban development - MDG7: Ensure environmental sustainability. It has a specific target on cities: Achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. Implementation of this MDG must also include attention to gender perspectives.

There are no specific references to women in cities in the Beijing Platform for Action and its follow-up but a number of references to important elements of the urban environment, such as water, sanitation, transport and health care. On the other hand, all the critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action have relevance for women in cities, including poverty, education, health, economy, decision-making, human rights, violence, conflict, environment, and media.

At the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), in Istanbul in 1996, the City Summit placed great importance on women's concerns and led to a series of commitments by national governments within the framework of the Habitat Programme. The Declaration of the first World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities committed members to: *“promoting and ensuring the full participation of women in the decision-making process at a municipal level by taking necessary measures for them to share power and authority”*.

The urban environment can be a site of both empowerment and exploitation for women. Cities offer many advantages for women; but there are also many challenges. Compared with rural areas, many cities offer better facilities and services, such as water, transport, education, child care and health care. They provide more opportunities for social, economic, cultural and political participation. Women can also usually access more diverse employment opportunities in cities. There are possibilities to engage in community politics at different levels. Enhanced access to information, including through the media and new information and communication technologies (ICT), is another advantage for women. In cities women can more easily access sports, recreation and cultural facilities.

Urban poverty can, however, negate the potential advantages of cities for women. Women in poor communities do not have the same access to infrastructure – including transport, services and employment opportunities - as affluent women in the same cities. Poor urban women are more likely to become victims of sexual violence or human trafficking. Urban poverty is linked to HIV transmission and reduces the likelihood of treatment.

It is important to recognize that women are not a homogeneous group and there are significant differences and inequalities between groups of women living in cities, including on the basis of race and age, which must be recognized and given particular attention.

Planning of housing and urban communities – facilities, services and infrastructure - should be based on the needs, priorities and contributions of women as well as men. Women have a very good understanding of the kinds of structures and spaces that are needed to meet basic needs of families.

Women are still far from being represented equitably in political and administrative decision-making in cities. Their voices are not systematically brought into the consultation and dialogue around city planning. As a result, city institutions, facilities, and services are not always conceived with their needs, priorities and contributions in mind, which can result in, among other things, inefficient public services with inappropriate opening hours.

The participation of women in local government has been increasing steadily but there are serious challenges to be overcome, and the pace of change is far too slow. The 2006 figures from the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) indicate that only

20 percent of councilors at the local level are women, while women make up only 9 percent of the world's mayors.

Prejudices against women's involvement can be more strongly held at local than at higher levels. Local government in many areas has been shown to be particularly responsive to informal institutions and relations of power, rather than more formal rules and procedures, which often advantages men rather than women. The male environment within political institutions can also deter women.

Violence against women and girls is unfortunately a feature of urban life. Violence in its various forms, from intimidation to sexual assault, restricts the ability of women to move in and around cities, reducing their freedom to seek work, social services and leisure activities. It is therefore very timely to consider this aspect in the context of the launch by the Secretary-General of his campaign on violence against women at the opening of the Commission on the Status of Women earlier this week.

Initiatives must be taken to change the physical environment in cities in order to make them safer. Clearly fundamental is the need to make public spaces (such as parks, car parks and university campuses) and public transport networks safer and more accessible. Adequate lighting in housing areas and inner cities is also essential.

Women are frequently actively engaged as leaders and participants at community level. They have demonstrated considerable enterprise in addressing the challenges of urban poverty, providing some of the most creative grassroots initiatives, such as savings clubs, soup kitchens, communal care facilities and organizing efforts to engage and co-operate with local authorities around access to services.

Many women have pressed for participation in civic organizations to ensure that these have a distributive agenda which meets the needs of poor families and communities. The contribution of women to slum upgrading and services delivery, whether in cash or in kind, has been considerable. They are often the first to find the user fees required or provide community labour, and they are invariably involved in maintenance responsibilities associated with community management, particularly when these functions are unpaid.

Policies, plans, resource allocations and programmes in cities need to more effectively target the particular needs and priorities, and build on the contributions of, women as well as men, to guarantee more effective and sustainable management of cities.

The conviction expressed by the Heads of State in the United Nations in 2005 that "progress for women is progress for all", is also true in the cities of the world. Gender-sensitive development is needed to ensure that cities provide safe and empowering living conditions and can contribute to equitable, effective and sustainable urban development for the benefit of all.

I wish you a very successful discussion.