

## **International Women's Day 2013**

### **Message by Dr. Joan Clos, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director UN-Habitat**

Today, just over half the world's people live in urban areas and it is predicted that the number of urban dwellers will rise to 70 per cent by 2050. Cities and towns are sources of development if they are well planned and governed but when they are not they can become spaces of insecurity and conflict. The urban poor are more exposed to crime and violence than the rich, and since women make up the majority of the urban poor they are more exposed to risk.

I am appalled that today women and girls continue to experience various forms of gender-based violence in both private and public life.

On city streets, public spaces and public transportation, women and girls are still subjected to violence and abuse. Such daily occurrences limit the freedoms of women as equal citizens to enjoy their cities, and to exercise their rights to education, work, recreation, mobility, collective organization and participation in social, economic and political life. Today we say enough is enough. We must act decisively, together with all our partners to end reprehensible acts of violence and discrimination against women and girls.

When I look at the city, I see that violence against women remains a largely neglected issue, with few laws or policies in place to address it. Beyond policing, there is a great need to address violence in public spaces, taking a gendered approach and to understand the role urban design, planning and management play in minimizing risks as well as changing perceptions of insecurity. We need to support the development of national urban policies which should provide the institutional and legal framework for addressing women and girls' safety in the existing borders of cities and towns, but also in the pro-active planning of city extensions.

Eliminating violence against women is inseparable from achieving equality for women. We have the knowledge and solutions at hand. Partners such as UN Women and the broader UN system, the Huairou Commission, Women in Cities International, Plan International, Federación de Mujeres Municipalistas, GROOTS International, Information Center of the Independent Women's Forum, International Council of Women, Women and Habitat LAC Network, Women and Peace Network and many others are engaging in grassroots neighborhood action as well as local, national, and global initiatives to eliminate violence against women.

We cannot forget the exposure and vulnerability of women and girls in conflict and post conflict situations. Women and girls are victims of unbelievably horrific atrocities and injustices in these situations; it is intolerable. As refugees, internally displaced persons, combatants, heads of household and community leaders, as activists and peace-builders, women and men experience conflict and crisis differently. In urban contexts loss of housing, land, property, livelihoods and access to basic services are often the outcome of conflict and crisis. Furthermore, institutions of governance and law are weakened and social fragmentation is pronounced. Consequently, threat to women's security increases until the post conflict state's security and legal infrastructure are rebuilt.

Governments themselves are taking bold action. And women are not standing by passively but engaging in innovative efforts from their homes to the streets and beyond to rebuild their families and communities. But this is not enough. I call on Governments and our partners to pursue the following six point agenda to make cities prosperous, equitable and safe for women and girls:

- Ensure women's full participation in the urban planning, management and governance of cities and towns;
- Improve policies and programmes targeting victims of disasters and conflicts taking into account how women and men experience conflict and crisis differently:
- Ensure that gender issues are included in the design and implementation of urban planning programmes so as to bring wide social and economic benefits to women and their communities;
- Undertake governance reform around land and property issues to provide pro-poor, gender-responsive policies and programmes that ensure that women's rights are not undermined by social norms and traditional practices that discriminate against women;
- Continued support to local authorities that are working with community groups, including women's networks, to improve safety and security through greater gender-sensitivity in urban planning and design.

Today, let us move with deliberate and decisive voice to ensure that our cities are centers of action for eliminating violence against women and girls.

