



World Urban Forum

Cities: Crossroads of Cultures

Inclusiveness and Integration?

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Dialogue On Gender And Culture In The Urban Environment

Promoting a culture of women's empowerment and involvement for better urban services

The physical and social conditions of the urban poor only add to gender discrimination to marginalize women and girls further in developing countries. With its focus on the physical and spatial aspects of development, urban planning all but disregards the unique, gender-differentiated situation of women. The major challenge is to determine the extent to which evolving cultural trends advance women's role in the development of human settlements.

New family structures

The family as an institution used to hold together through blood and marriage ties. Now modernization and urbanization are changing all this in the developing world. The dramatic shift from extended to nuclear family has paved the way for fresh alternative forms, including single parent, step-parent and blended households, remarriages and cohabitation with children. Institutional families also may act as safe havens for orphaned, abused and neglected children.

These cultural transformations affect mostly poor urban women. Females head more single-parent households than males particularly in slums and squatter settlements. Divorce, separation, cohabitation and re-marriage place peculiar strains on women's social and economic lives.

New roles and risks

In urban areas as in informal settlements, up to 50 per cent (or even more) of households are headed by women, who typically rank among the poorer segments of the population. In the developing world, unable to inherit land and property, large numbers of women migrate from the countryside to the dire poverty of urban slums. Once there, they raise children while under the constant threat of eviction, crime, violence, HIV/AIDS and the daily dangers of unhygienic public toilets.

Cities against women

If they are to improve their own and their families' living conditions, female slum dwellers must find better ways of generating incomes. Through their involvement in urban agriculture, women play a vital role in the urban economy as small entrepreneurs, traders, workers and providers of food security.

Experience suggests that women are more skilled than men at small-scale businesses, such as street vending. However, city planners are often oblivious of the obstacles women face. Gender-responsive transportation, security, childcare services and access to sanitation would ease female street-vendors' burden in their struggle for economic survival. So would an end to harassment, confiscation and arrest by security forces, which female vendors endure for lack of legal status and recognition.

Opportunity and exploitation

Local, national, and international bodies, as well as some poverty-reduction strategies, have sought to promote better recognition of women's economic capacity and potential. A number of donors are providing support to women's self-employment through micro-enterprise. In Gujarat, India, poor urban women set up their own, successful micro-credit bank 30 years ago.



Most developing countries attract foreign investment through 'export processing', 'special economic' or 'free trade' zones, with the low cost of the (largely female) workforce as an incentive. Appalling work conditions and long hours are typically rewarded with wages that can meet only 60 to 70 per cent of minimum individual needs. All too often, gender-specific benefits (maternity and menstruation leave) are either denied or an occasion for humiliation.

More generally, cultural factors restrict women's access to the means of production (from credit to training opportunities) and confine them to a limited number of occupations and markets. As their economic activities concentrate in the informal economy and close to home, they need those resources that are essential to doing business and working in residential areas.

Land and property pitfalls

A patriarchal culture and the gender factor compound insecurity of tenure for women in developing countries. Formal law and informal norms (including customary and religious law) often deny women the right to acquire and inherit property. Lack of access and control over housing in informal urban areas is a major problem for women. Many female low-income urban dwellers lack the resources for adequate shelter.

'Gender blindness' in housing and basic service programmes is becoming increasingly apparent. These programmes rarely consider the needs and priorities of women, who often face systematic exclusion or discrimination. Urban poor women and children are particularly affected by forced eviction, including by public authorities and city councils

Women enhance governance

Despite their equal presence as citizens, women, especially when poor, remain under-represented in city governing structures, especially local decision-making, owing to social and political gender-related factors. Basic services, human rights, economic capacity, transportation, violence and security of tenure are crucial issues for women, who must therefore be involved in relevant decisions. Women are major users of water and sanitation; experience shows that their inclusion in relevant management bodies improves both service and payment levels, and makes those systems socially and culturally responsive. This in turn brings a sense of ownership and common interest among communities, as do women's informal social support networks.

Human rights for prostitutes

Prostitution has a direct link with the break-up of small-scale communities and the advent of large, anonymous urban areas together with commercialized social relations. Prostitution (and sexual tourism) must be seen as another strategy that some female slum dwellers have adopted for economic survival. Like those involved in sexual tourism, those women have basic human rights and require health, sanitation, housing and security services.

Culture highlights women issues

Popular culture gives the young opportunities both to consume existing forms and invent some new ones. They contribute in the fight against HIV/AIDS, crime, immorality and general social deviance through music, drama and poetry. Regardless of gender, these young people from deprived areas are a source of inspiration to others as they epitomize success. Accessible media like radio and television have been instrumental in lobbying and advocating for the social, economic and reproductive rights of poor women and young people. Locally composed drama brings their daily plight to the attention of policy-makers, highlighting lack of access to basic services, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS.

Need for further reform

Urban planning often overlooks gender issues in access to land, property and housing. Women need broader-ranging reform, including inheritance and marital property regimes, with proper attendant laws and policies. Gender must be a crosscutting perspective.

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