

# A new strategy to close the gender divide

The combined impact of rapid urbanization, climate change and global economic downturn is creating further inequalities between men and women in cities, especially among the poor, writes **Emily Wong** of UN-HABITAT's gender mainstreaming department. Here she explains how the agency is seeking to remedy this through a new Gender Equality Action Plan.



Women and children in slums are being pushed further into poverty due to the economic crisis

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In April this year, the 58 member States in the Governing Council that oversees UN-HABITAT backed a new strategy on promoting gender equality and empowering women. The *Gender Equality Action Plan* provides a road map for all UN-HABITAT programmes to address gender concerns in the course of pursuing a better urban future in a world where more than half of humanity lives in towns and cities.

Under the Millennium Development Goals, the global community made a commitment to achieving “a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers” by 2020. However, the United Nations has calculated that the financial crisis, with high and volatile food and energy prices, has pushed at least 100 million people around the world back into poverty.

Both men and women in slums face problems associated with poverty, poor living conditions and lack of social safety nets. But research shows that women and girls are by far the worst affected. Widows are robbed of land and property by their own in-laws, because in many countries traditional practices still override universal rights. Girls in slums have to choose between defecating in a plastic bag or risking rape should they dare venture outside to a dirty public toilet at night. Often women are left out of decisions on new homes after a disaster. Women eking out a living in the informal sector are the first to lose their livelihoods as the recession bites. Girls are often forced to sacrifice school to do household chores instead. Indeed, the list goes on and on.

This is why the Gender Equality Action Plan is an important tool to galvanize and focus efforts in closing gender gaps and raising living standards for the women and girls who are over-represented among the poorest of the poor, plus the most disadvantaged.

UN-HABITAT’s 2008-2009 flagship report, the *State of the World’s Cities* shows that households headed by women suffer disproportionately from “multiple shelter deprivations”. These deprivations are defined as any combination of lack of durable housing, lack of sufficient living area, lack of access to water, sanitation, and a lack of security of tenure.

In Haiti for example, (see table) nearly 60 percent of households headed by women from three shelter deprivations, while in Kenya and Nicaragua, one-third of woman-headed households suffer all four deprivations.

In its recent report, *Averting a Human Crisis During the Global Downturn*, the World Bank



Women are at greater risk of losing their livelihoods as the recession bites

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stated that evidence from the East Asia crisis and others show that families suddenly faced with unemployment and lost wages often pull their children out of school, especially girls, and that they seldom return to class afterwards.

“Even when times are good, exercising their rights is one of the biggest problems faced by women, especially those living in poverty,” says Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka, Executive Director of UN-HABITAT. “Whether it comes to securing a loan to build or renovate the home, or obtaining the title to inherited property, women always have more trouble. Gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment are pivotal components of sustainable urbanization in the face of the current economic, financial, and food crises, not to forget the increasingly frightening ravages of climate change.”

Accounts of the South Asian earthquake in 2005, also known as the Kashmir or Great Pakistan Earthquake, as described in UN-HABITAT’s latest *Global Report on Human Settlements*, revealed that women were largely dependent upon men for access to relief and that few women received tents or food. Neither did they come forward to participate in food or cash work programmes.

And yet women have vast knowledge as carers of children, the injured and the elderly, and as organizers in the home.

The potential of women to mobilize communities in preparing against disasters, whether by building stronger homes or organizing warning systems, is a valuable, but still largely untapped resource.

But there are exceptions. In UN-HABITAT’s post-disaster reconstruction work in Indonesia, project workers used an approach called the “People’s Process”, which places trust in community members, including women, to take the lead in planning and design of their homes and villages.

One of the *Gender Equality Action Plan’s* focus areas is around advocacy, which includes awareness raising around best practices to incorporate gender issues into urban development and housing work.

In developing and implementing the new action plan, UN-HABITAT has emphasized the importance of partners. These have included the woman’s organizations and civil society networks that have provided inputs into the plan and also training institutions and other UN partners, such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), with which UN-HABITAT is working.

For example, UN-HABITAT has joined UNIFEM in the *Global Programme on Safe Cities Free of Violence Against Women*. This is the first global effort to develop a safer cities model

### Percentage of Urban Households Headed by women with different degrees of Shelter Deprivation in Selected Countries

Country %	% one shelter deprivation	% two shelter deprivations	% three shelter deprivations	% four shelter deprivations
Ghana (2003)	38	34	51	-
Kenya (2003)	23	24	28	31
Madagascar(1997)	28	24	29	14
Senegal (1997)	27	23	25	14
Tanzania (1999)	28	28	15	-
Nicaragua (2001)	40	37	39	33
Haiti (2000)	52	50	57	-
Indonesia (2002)	13	14	17	-
Nepal (2001) 2	0	14	19	-
Armenia	30	38	17	-

Source: UN-HABITAT (2006) Urban Indicators Database, 2006. Additional analysis by Prabha Khosla.  
Note: Shelter deprivations are defined as the absence of the following conditions: durable housing, sufficient living area, access to improved water, access to sanitation, or secure tenure.

of preventing violence against women — both at home and in public spaces — by combining practical measures by local authorities with efforts to empower women and mobilise communities.

The new gender strategy also includes further work with training institutions to build the capacity of architects, urban planners and local government workers to incorporate gender issues into their work. The intention

is that the design, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of city services must bring more equitable benefits to close the unacceptable gender gaps.

Improving gender equality in access to land and housing is another focus area of the *Gender Equality Action Plan*.

Past experience has proven that the private sector can also be strong partners in promoting gender equality together with UN agen-

cies, either by offering funding or technical expertise.

The UN Trust Fund in Support of Actions to Eliminate Violence Against Women was funded in part by private sector donors, including Johnson and Johnson and Avon.

UN-HABITAT has also worked with Akright Projects, a private real estate developer, to build affordable homes for low-income women and their families in Uganda's Jinja district, about 80 kilometres east of the capital Kampala.

The homes were built on 50 plots of land donated by Jinja Municipal Council, another valuable partner that also provided technical assistance during execution of the project's first phase.

UN-HABITAT is now working with the Uganda Women Land Access Trust on the second phase of the Jinja Women's Pilot Housing Project, which involves a revolving fund and a credit guarantee scheme.

This enables poor women, who are normally excluded from the regular banking systems, to borrow money affordably to pay for better accommodation.

But despite these examples, the struggle is an uphill one.

"Women are still grossly denied the right to adequate housing and related rights such as land and water," said Miloon Kothari, former Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing at the UN Commission on Human Rights. "We live in a world today where millions of women are homeless and landless." ♦



Kibera slum where hundreds of thousands of women live in poverty

Photo © UN-HABITAT





The gender gap is widening as women in poor urban areas are bearing the brunt of the economic downturn

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