

UN HABITAT

Address by
Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
and Executive Director of UN-HABITAT
on the occasion of the opening of the
World Urban Forum Gender Equality Action Assembly
in Rio de Janeiro,
Friday 19 March 2010

Your Worship Mayor Eduardo Paes of Rio de Janeiro,

Ms Lucia Maiera, Special Advisor of the Special Secretariat of Policies for Women, who is here on behalf of Honourable Nilcéa Freire, Minister of the Special Secretariat of Policies for Women, Presidency of the Federative Republic of Brazil,

Ms. Rebecca Reichmann Tavares, Regional Director of UNIFEM for Brazil and South Cone,

Ms. Jan Peterson, Chair of the Huairou Commission, UN-HABITAT Scroll of Honour Laureate,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is truly an honour to welcome you to the very first session of the Gender Equality Action Assembly of the World Urban Forum.

The Assembly provides a valuable space for women leaders to work together on solutions to urban challenges.

It is also a platform for suggestions about more effective implementation of UN-HABITAT's five-year Gender Equality Action Plan.

We are gathered here in what no doubt will become a permanent feature on the eve of every session of the world's premier meeting on cities. After all, cities are only worth living in if they are women-friendly!

And so before I begin, let me express my heartfelt thanks to our hosts, Mayor Paes and Ms Maiera, here on behalf of the Honourable Minister Freire who will be joining us later. Please give them a big hand, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you.

I also thank the city and people of Rio de Janeiro, and all of you in this audience who have worked so hard with us for a fair, inclusive urban agenda.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Within these walls, we have high-ranking decision makers at the national level committed to gender mainstreaming.

You greatly honour us with your presence! We draw great strength in your commitment at the Assembly. Ministries of Women's Affairs can give local authorities the national support and political backing needed to promote gender equality more effectively in towns and cities.

Never before have we met together with such a wide range of partners to track progress on a global strategy for gender equality in towns and cities. This meeting is about holding UN-HABITAT and its partners to account.

It was almost a year ago at our headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, that the member countries of the UN-HABITAT Governing Council stipulated in a resolution that we must come up with a better, more focused approach to promote gender equality and to empower women.

Our *Gender Equality Action Plan* is the result of a collaborative effort with you—our partners. It is forged in our shared vision of gender equality as a pillar of sustainable urbanization.

When we talk of sustainable urbanization, we are talking about cities which respect the rights of all. We are talking about cities which enable different social groups to interact freely and have equal opportunities; about cities that offer productive work and livelihoods and which pollute less.

After serving two full terms as Executive Director of UN-HABITAT at the level of Undersecretary-General of the United Nations, I am more convinced than ever as I now prepare to leave office that sustainable urbanization is the challenge of the 21st century. And that the cornerstone of that challenge is gender.

Half the world's people live in urban areas, and that is expected to reach 70% in the next two generations. Urbanization is accelerating in the developing world. Most of this growth is occurring in secondary towns that have the least capacity to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population.

As a result, we are witnessing high concentrations of people living in unhygienic, insecure and often demeaning conditions in slums and other sub-standard housing. In the developing world, on average one in three urban dwellers lives in these conditions. This proportion goes up to 70% in some instances. Our most recent report, the *State of the World's Cities* puts the figure at 828 million people.

For women, poor housing conditions and urban poverty pose added challenges. These added challenges are due in part to discrimination at home and within their respective communities. But they are also caused by policy makers that fail to recognize that women have needs and priorities that are not always the same as those for men.

This year's World Urban Forum is dedicated to the theme, *Bridging the Urban Divide*. Despite the economic progress and technological advances of our cities, urban growth is not sustainable unless we address urban inequalities. Gender inequalities are a dimension of urban inequality that restricts economic progress and prevents citizens from enjoying equitable opportunities to health, safety and well-being. But our efforts here, during this two-day assembly on the *Gender Equality Action Plan*, are helping to narrow the urban divide.

Dear Colleagues,

Earlier this month, people around the world celebrated the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. The theme was *Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities—Progress for All*. Cities have historically been important places for the advancement of women's rights and women's access to employment, education and social and political freedom.

It is no coincidence that as the world becomes more urban more girls go to school and more women become gainfully employed or run their own businesses.

At the same time, in many towns and cities of the developing world, women face gender discrimination when they try to secure a decent place to live, when they try to get housing or business loans, when they strive for equal pay, and when they want to have their voices heard in decisions that affect their well-being and livelihoods.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Women and girls in slums and poor urban areas are often the worst off in cities. Here are just three examples of a shocking crisis that make my blood boil:

Using data from 2000 to 2007, UN-HABITAT's analysis of primary school enrolment rates in urban areas of 33 African countries shows that girls in slums are the least likely of all groups to go to school. Without sufficient government intervention, urban poverty forces many parents to choose which child to send to school. In most families in Africa, they opt for the boys.

As a second example: Household surveys in Bangladesh show that in 2006, approximately 20 per cent of families in urban areas had water piped to their homes. In the vast majority of cases, women were the ones tasked with water collection. In the slums of Dhaka, for instance, women have to collect water in 89 per cent of households, compared to men in only 5 per cent. And when children collect water, it was still more often girls than boys. And when girls are fetching and carrying water—they're not in school.

As a third example: In the Bolivian administrative capital, La Paz, a UN-HABITAT study suggested that women living in slums had much less knowledge about sexual health, compared to women outside the slums. In slums, women were only about half as likely to be aware of basic ways to avoid AIDS, compared to women living in non-slum areas.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recent weeks this region has experienced two devastating earthquakes, one in Haiti and one in Chile, with more than 230,000 deaths in Haiti alone. As the countries rebuild their cities, we must ensure that women's needs and contributions are taken into account.

Crime and violence - especially violence against women - often escalates in post-disaster situations, and the safety and security of women must be protected.

However, women are also agents of change. We can help communities build back better by taking into account the specific needs of women and children.

We also have a critical role to play in re-establishing livelihoods, fostering peace and developing greater resilience against future disasters.

Reconstruction and disaster relief efforts must involve women and men equally, with strong efforts to empower more women in decision-making.

The call and the need for tracking progress on gender equality in towns and cities could not be more urgent or more relevant. And that applies whether or not a city is recovering from a calamity of some kind.

With less than five years to the 2015 target of the Millennium Development Goals, it is befitting to recall that the third Goal is designed to promote gender equality and to empower women. There is no doubt that success in attaining all the other Goals will depend on how well women's needs are addressed and women are empowered participate effectively in leadership in development.

Distinguished delegates,

Our new *Gender Equality Action Plan* provides a platform for more effective global advocacy on gender issues in the reality of an increasingly urban world.

Allow me now to give a few brief examples of progress so far of its implementation.
In the area of Advocacy, Monitoring and Partnerships:

UN-HABITAT launched a compilation of web-based resources and fact sheets on *Gender Equality and Sustainable Urbanization*. It was done in collaboration with the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality. It was launched last December on the UN website, Womenwatch.

UN-HABITAT is funding and providing technical support to the Huairou Commission on an interactive website for grassroots women to foster exchanges about human settlements development. We are enthusiastic about its potential to empower low-income women in urban areas to bridge the digital divide.

UN-HABITAT continues to expand evidence-based advocacy in our flagship reports, the *Global Report on Human Settlements* and the *State of the World's Cities*. Later this year, UN-HABITAT will be releasing a new report. Entitled *Women in Cities 2010-2011*, I assure you that it will be one of the most authoritative publications in this field.

In the area of Participatory Urban Planning and Governance:

UN-HABITAT works with the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International on the training of grassroots women leaders on advocacy and joint-working with local authorities—more popularly known as Local-to-Local dialogues. Over the past year, UN-HABITAT has also worked with Huairou and Women in Cities International in preparing two publications on women's urban safety.

Last September, in Israel, participants from 18 countries took part in UN-HABITAT's course on incorporating gender perspectives in local governance training. The training was done in partnership with Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Centre, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Centre for International Cooperation.

UN-HABITAT is also about to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Seoul Metropolitan Government on promoting women-friendly cities. The work covers gender mainstreaming, gender and local governance, and the promotion of safer cities for women.

In the area of Land and Housing:

UN-HABITAT's work through the Global Land Tool Network continues to promote participation of grassroots women in land governance. The Network has collaborated with women's NGOs in Ghana, Nepal and Brazil in piloting a gender evaluation tool of laws and government policies and practices on land administration.

In the area of environmentally sound urban services:

UN-HABITAT's water and sanitation programmes are reaching out to low-income households headed by women through microcredit schemes and revolving funds for better sanitation.

The project is running in 11 towns in Africa alone. Similar schemes operate in Asian cities.

In the area of affordable financing for housing and infrastructure:

UN-HABITAT has helped to establish Women Land Access Trusts in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Burundi and Ghana. These are intermediary organizations that help low-income women who operate small businesses, mostly in the informal economy, get loans for better housing and infrastructure, such as water and sanitation. UN-HABITAT is in the process of expanding these Trusts in Africa and beyond.

In the area of strengthening gender mainstreaming within UN-HABITAT:

As an agency, we know we must lead by example. UN-HABITAT is committed to strengthening the capacity of our Gender Mainstreaming Unit. We are also training managers and staff on approaches to mainstream gender into their work. Our next gender training for HABITAT programme managers takes place next week, here in Brazil.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am proud to introduce to you a brand new publication, *Gender Equality for Smarter Cities: Challenges and Progress*. It carries much useful information. Copies are available here in English and Spanish.

Indeed, as part of our new World Urban Campaign for smarter, better more equitable cities, I appeal most strongly to those ministers, parliamentarians and mayors present to be the first to sign up to our new Women's Urban Policy Makers Network.

I wish you success in your deliberations, and I urge you always to keep in mind the poorest people, those women in poverty, and our daughters all of whom have the right to live in women-friendly cities.

Thank you.