



**Ministerial Breakfast Roundtable on
*Bridging the Urban Gender Divide: An Imperative for
Achieving the Millennium Development Goals***

**On the occasion of the
High-Level Segment of the
United Nations Economic and Social Council**

**Statement by
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Your Excellencies,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished delegates,
My colleagues,

Ladies and Gentleman:

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to welcome you to the Ministerial Breakfast Roundtable on *Bridging the Urban Gender Divide: an Imperative for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*. It is fitting for us to examine our progress in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women in our cities and towns, especially after a decade of implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Government and people of Brazil who agreed to co-host this Ministerial Breakfast Roundtable with UN-HABITAT. This builds on our successful collaboration in hosting the Gender Equality Action Assembly just before the 5th Session of the World Urban Forum held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, March 2010. The Government of Brazil is one of the few countries in the global south which has gender equality and empowerment of women in urban areas duly covered in their national gender plan. Ms Nilcéa Freire, Minister, Special Secretariat for Policies on Women, is a strong advocate for women and girls' safety and security in cities both in the private and public arenas. We thank the Minister very much for her leadership.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The world is becoming more and more urban. The current projection shows that by 2050, over 70 per cent of the world population will be urbanites. It is therefore important to bear in mind this demographic shift in our efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment of women at the global and national levels. Gender equality in the rapidly growing cities of the developing world has very little to do with gender equality in rural areas. In fact, it is much more intertwined with the undesirable consequences of rapid urbanization, urban poverty and deprivation. These issues, in turn, are fundamentally different from rural poverty and rural deprivation, and require new conceptual frameworks, new policies and strategies, and new tools and methods.

Cities are, without a doubt, engines of economic growth and of social and political advances. They are also the locus of technical and scientific progress. But if urbanisation is poorly planned and managed, it can generate social exclusion, poverty and deprivation on an unprecedented scale.

One of the reasons why statistics typically portray a better picture for urban areas compared to rural areas is due to a very simple oversight. We have assumed that proximity to basic services means access to those services. Statistical data is rarely disaggregated in such a way as to reveal the disparities between, for example, slum and non slum populations. Our seminal studies on the urban divide have shown that people can be living within walking distance of schools, hospitals, water mains and sewers, and have no access to education, health care, drinking water and sanitation.

The urban divide is real and it is particularly real for women and girls.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The *State of the World's Cities Report 2010* confirms that education, especially for girls is a key driver in accessing the opportunities presented by urban life. Although education of girls and young women generates powerful poverty reduction synergies, yields lasting intergenerational benefits, and is positively correlated with enhanced economic productivity, higher earnings and

improved health and well being, education of boys and girls is considered a luxury for the urban poor. For many poor people in urban areas, the dilemma they face is choosing between school for their children and food for survival and meeting other basic needs including hours spent fetching water. If choices are to be made, it is the girl child who is the first to drop out of school. This, combined with unsafe school environments, reduces the enrolment, attendance and completion rates for girls in schools in poor urban neighbourhoods. Failure to provide segregated sanitary facilities and water services is a major deterrent for keeping girls in schools as inadequate facilities increase sexual harassment and prevent them from attending school especially during puberty.

Cities provide better access to health services, compared to rural areas, but only for a certain class of people. The State of the World's Cities Report reveals that slum dwellers face more severe health challenges than their rural counterparts as the lack of access to health services is compounded by poor living environments. Inadequate sanitation, hygiene and water lead not only to more sickness and deaths, but also to higher health costs, lower school enrolment and retention rates and lower productivity among slum dwellers than their non slum and rural counterparts. Poverty, poor sanitation and indoor air pollution make women and children living in slums more vulnerable to respiratory illnesses and other infectious diseases than their rural counterparts. This is in addition to other diseases and health disorders related to over crowding and more polluted urban environments. Violence against women and its related health implications affects women across the urban divide, but poor urban women are more vulnerable to crime, as they tend to live in slums and informal settlements which are notoriously devoid of security and policing services.

Access to security of tenure, land and housing is critical to achieving gender equality, women's rights and the advancement of women both in the rural and urban areas. However, not much progress has been achieved in this area despite international commitments and national and local level efforts to reform laws and policies on equal access to land. The laws and customary practices of succession and inheritance still prevent women from enjoying their rights to land and adequate housing. This situation is exacerbated in urban areas where land markets and pricing are key determinants to accumulation of capital and wealth. One of the principle reasons why the urban poor remain in the poverty trap is because they are typically excluded from land markets. They have little or no access to credit. Their homes are not considered houses because they do not meet middle class building codes and standards. Thus the single biggest investment that most people make in a lifetime, namely one's home and house, is discounted to zero for those living in slums and informal settlements. In this regard, any serious and sustainable attempt at reducing poverty in urban areas and for women in particular will necessarily need to address the issue of access to land, housing and finance.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

UN-HABITAT is guided by the gender policy, a gender equality action plan, and the UN system-wide strategy on gender mainstreaming. Emphasis is placed on strengthening gender mainstreaming in both normative and operational activities. This includes the collection, analysis, and dissemination of evidence based and sex disaggregated information on cities, women's access to land and housing, water and sanitation, and safety and security. This work is undertaken in partnership with other UN agencies, governments, and the Habitat Agenda partners.

Women's access to housing and to security of tenure is at the centre of our advocacy actions. The Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), which is facilitated by UNHABITAT, is a significant global endeavour aimed at supporting systematic, innovative, pro-poor, affordable, and gender sensitive land tools. The network has developed 'Gender Evaluation Criteria' to assess gender sensitivity in land policies and practices. These 'Criteria' have been recently piloted in Brazil, Ghana and Nepal where grassroots women have assessed Land Administration Programmes, Land Reform and Urban Planning Statutes regarding their gender-responsiveness. The pilots empowered

women and grassroots organizations and increased their knowledge and confidence to negotiate their land rights with their respective governments. In Brazil this led to secure land rights for 8,500 families or 55,000 people.

“The Roundtable on 'Piloting of a GLTN Land Tool: A Practical Way to Ensure Gender Equality' at the recently concluded Fifth Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 5) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 22-26 March 2010 ended with an inspiring and rewarding announcement by the representatives of the State Government of Pernambuco, Brazil. The government announced that after 40 years of struggle, about 8,500 families of Santo Amaro, Recife will not be evicted but regularized. The announcement solicited tears and congratulations from the audience including some grassroots groups from the affected communities.” (Source www.gltn.net)

UN-HABITAT has supported women land access trusts in a number of African countries as intermediary organisations between low income women, government, local authorities, and financial institutions and the private sector to assist women access land and housing finance. Women are mobilized into housing cooperatives and saving groups. The programme promotes the domestic mobilization of capital through community saving, the use of credit guarantees, and in-kind support from local authorities and the private sector for acquiring housing.

Making cities safe and secure for all is another area of UN-HABITAT work, which focuses on promoting the safety and security for women and girls through the use of women safety audits and support for local authorities to address violence against women in public spaces. A memorandum of understanding was signed between UN-HABITAT and UNIFEM on safety and security for women and girls in cities.

Through research, capacity building, technical assistance and policy dialogue and development, UN-HABITAT has raised awareness of gender and women's issues in urban water and sanitation among policy-makers, built skills for programme implementers and various stakeholders including women and youth organisations in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. The sanitation micro-credit initiative supports the constructions of gender friendly toilets for communities and institutions including schools in Africa and Asia

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Governments, policy-makers, gender experts and activists should embrace and pay more attention to urbanisation to ensure that cities and towns are properly planned with adequate provision of services, infrastructure, and security for all. This entails working closely with municipalities and regions, engaging with politicians and administrators, urban planners and architects, land officials, city engineers, mayors, utility companies and other service providers at the local level. City and local authorities should be made to account for gender equality and empowerment of women as part of national efforts to monitor gender equality. My organisation is prepared to collaborate with women's organisations and national women's machineries in this challenging endeavour. As leaders we should adopt a balanced approach to promoting women's empowerment, peace and security in the rural and urban areas.

I would like to end by encouraging you all to become ambassadors for gender equality and women's empowerment in cities at the Commission on the Status of Women, at regional and national level within your respective areas of work. You may wish to consider addressing the impacts of the urban gender divide in your national gender strategies and plans of action. The plight of urban poor women should become a concern for us all, and practical actions should be taken at all levels.

The future is urban. Thank you all for your attention.