Position Paper: Women in the Urban Environment

Where Things Stand…

The situation of women in urban areas is increasingly challenging. As is the case in so many environments, women and girls suffer disproportionately from gender- based discrimination, they face greater pressure than men from a range of issues such as the climate crisis, homelessness, violence, poverty, sexual division of labour, health including reproductive and mental health, food security, pollution, access to acceptable safe water supplies, suitable and adequate sanitation, lack of basic infrastructure and many more. They have been disproportionally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which in many urban areas of overcrowded homes and shelters has spread rapidly.

Under international law, Member States are obliged to ensure that women and girls have the right to adequate housing to live in a place in safety and dignity**.** The reality is still different. Billions continue to live in inadequate housing and despite the ongoing attention to the gender dimensions of the right to adequate housing and non-discrimination; discrimination in the right to adequate housing for women has remained pervasive and multi-faceted as the gender-based discrimination all women face is often still manifested in inadequate housing conditions. Worldwide it is estimated that at least one billion of the urban population live in informal settlements in which women and girls along with other urban poor, immigrants, religious, ethnic, and other minorities are concentrated. More broadly, data across regions finds women disproportionately face inadequate housing conditions. In an analysis based on data from 59 low- and middle-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, data shows that in 80% of countries analysed, women are overrepresented in urban slums in areas cut off from essential services and at the root of this phenomenon are gender-based inequalities that limit women's rights to housing and asset ownership. In another example, women headed households in Brazil make up 60% of total households facing housing deficits and of these, households headed by Afro-Brazilian women are a majority.

The pressure on all urban areas is increasing as a result of migration from rural areas to cities, with shelters springing up randomly as populations increase faster than the government agencies can deal with them. Migration mainly by women and children from areas of conflict, as well as those caused by the climate crises (drought, fires, tornadoes) and natural disasters such as earthquakes exacerbates all the problems previously described.

It is estimated that currently 55% of the world's population live in urban areas and this is expected to rise by 2050 to 70%. Such an increase in urban populations means that there is pressure on all parts of the local infrastructure and an urgency to deal with those pressures.

<u>Climate Change, Housing and Urbanisation</u>

Cities are responsible for more than 70% of emissions and consume 78% of the world's energy; they are also disproportionately exposed to climate risk. Cities are at the forefront of climate action; over 1000 cities and local governments have committed to reaching net zero emissions by 2050, although more can be done to integrate gender perspectives, in particular in the planning and use of sustainable transport and urban infrastructure systems.

The effects of climate change on human rights, including housing, have been described in detail many times. In short, climate change threatens the full employment of the rights to housing especially for women. Climate change is now the greatest threat to human rights in the twenty first century. In 2021 the most important challenge at a global level for the right to housing is climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has identified "rapid and far-reaching transitions "in urban areas adding these changes will be unprecedented in terms of scale. The most critical challenges now facing the right to adequate housing is how it can be realised in a manner that does not worsen, but mitigates, the climate crisis.

The right to adequate housing for all women and girls has been a challenge for decades. Many have been forced to live in public or social urban housing located in those areas which pose environmental health risks, including overcrowding, which is one of the most pervasive forms of inhabitability or which are located in environmental risky areas. For example, housing built in proximity to sources of pollution or toxic substances or subject to air pollution which plagues low-quality housing, informal or temporary settlements.

Poor air quality is a challenge in the context of sustainable development for all countries, in particular in cities and urban areas in developing countries, with levels of air pollution that are higher than the limits set out in the World Health Organisation air quality guidelines.

Air pollution disproportionately affects women, children and older persons, and also has a negative impact on ecosystems.

Pollution from waste especially plastic pollution makes cities less habitable and less safe.

All women and girls may be forced to live in locations where there is water scarcity or which are at risk of flooding. Without safe, sufficient water as well as adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities, it is harder for women and girls to lead healthy, dignified and productive lives.

Women and girls suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate related disasters, for example flooding, as they may drown during a flood unable to leave family caring commitments or have to travel greater distances to secure safe water, heightening their risk of being subjected to violence. They are likely to have to spend more time caring for people afflicted by water borne diseases following floods.

The Human Rights Council has recognised that the worst effects of climate change on housing are felt by those who are already vulnerable because of factors such as poverty, gender, age, indigenous or minority status, national or social origin, birth or other status and

disability. Women who are impoverished are especially vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change as they often lack the resources to protect themselves or to adapt to changes. Moreover, those living in urban areas face future impacts of climate change which will trigger new poverty traps especially in urban areas.

The climate crisis has increased the ferocity of the impact of natural disasters. In 2021 the Special Rapporteur regarding adequate housing observed that the majority of persons who are currently being displaced are now in that situation not due to conflict (narrowly defined), but due to disasters which drives displacement to peri-urban and urban and rural areas equally. Such regions increasingly constitute the majority of most rapidly urbanising countries. Natural conservation initiatives and climate change mitigation measures are also increasingly resulting in forced evictions and displacements.

Climate change will continue to have a cataclysmic impact in the future on urbanisation and housing unless ambitious actions are undertaken immediately.

What has been done…

At Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador, in 2016, the 'New Urban Agenda' and The Quito Declaration were adopted with a view to achieving SDG11 of the 2030 UN Agenda. This set out an action plan to achieve sustainable development based on amongst others the principle of equality of development, including gender equality as well as to make Cities and Human Settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable with 10 targets to help to achieve this goal.

UN Women had also launched a campaign Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women with a view to countering urban based violence against women and girls. Initially there was not a lot of activity but many cities around the world have now joined this initiative with 50 cities taking local rather than Member State action. The UN Women Report for 2017 to 2020 gives examples of actions which have been taken by City Governments to protect women and girls and to ensure there are spaces where women and girls feel able to engage freely and safely.

In 2020, the UN General Assembly in UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/224 also reaffirmed "its commitment to urban and rural development that is people-centred, protects the planet and is age- and gender-responsive." It went on to observe that, by "readdressing the way cities and human settlements are planned, designed, financed, developed, governed and managed, the New Urban Agenda will help to end poverty and hunger in all its forms and dimensions, reduce inequalities, promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in order to fully harness their vital contribution to sustainable development, improve human health and well-being, foster resilience and protect the environment."

Whole areas of infrastructure services and facilities will need improvement or new provision as the population balance changes to the cities and the climate crisis continues its

cataclysmic impact on urbanisation in the future. The following are priority issues which need to be faced by local, regional and national authorities, many of which impact disproportionally on women and girls but there are many more, all of which are indivisibly linked.

Housing

One of the major platforms for UN Habitat III is housing. The New Urban Agenda provides a commitment to improve all housing provision but there will be a long way to go even in developed countries where there is an increasing challenge of homelessness. In addition, Governments will need to address prevention, mitigation, adaptation and rehabilitation in building back better when addressing the challenges of the climate crisis and the increasing disasters it has created related to housing and urbanisation.

Health

In addition to the impact of climate crises on all women and girls 'health and their lives the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a negative impact on women and girls 'health in urban areas.

Whilst there may be a greater number of health and welfare services and facilities available in urban areas these may not be accessible to many women for a variety of reasons such as lack of safe transport or social and cultural norms. During the pandemic reports indicate that often the first facilities to close were those that provide sexual and reproductive health for all women and girls, eliminating treatment for breast and gynaecological cancers, HIV/AIDS and maternal and post maternal care as well as access to contraception and safe abortions.

Women have been at the forefront of provision of health care services not only during the COVID pandemic but prior to that most health and welfare systems rely on women as care givers. Women were most directly affected as a result of restrictions during the Covid pandemic in relation to child and elder care.

The majority of health service provision such as hospitals and health centres is found in urban areas so the impact has been on possible loss of jobs as well as exposure to the dangers of the COVID pandemic.

Mental health for all has been severely affected during the COVID pandemic but again women have faced more stress and anxiety often being left to bear the weight of child care as well as provide food. Living within urban areas for many women and girls causes a great deal of stress in itself especially when faced with danger on unsafe streets and transport.

Education

In many urban areas schools and colleges have been closed as part of the pandemic restrictions imposed by Governments. In addition, the increases in disasters due to the climate crisis have made the opportunity to pursue any type of education impossible.

These interruptions in education will lead to limited access to employment and income for a whole cohort of young people, as well as exclusion from future employment opportunities leaving women and girls behind. Girls forced into early marriage as a result of for example poverty may not have access to continuing education; if secondary education is available to girls, they may regularly be missing it due to lack of adequate toilet facilities or taboos around menstruation.

Employment

Lack of encouragement and opportunity continues to be a major obstacle for women entrepreneurs or those looking for employment. Urban manufacturing is often exploitative especially of women, sometimes girls. Access to training and opportunities to improve skills are seen as a lesser priority than care for the family. The combination of the sexual division of labour and the global division of labour continues to grow with these environmental emergencies.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Sexual harassment, stalking and other forms of violence have created a culture of fear for their safety amongst women in cities. Recent news reports have highlighted the dangers especially following high level reports of the rape and murder of young women in several countries.

All forms of gender-based violence have increased in the circumstances of the COVID 19 pandemic so with increased awareness more action needs to be taken to protect women and girls. The Safe Cities and Public Spaces initiative should be commended for the action being taken but more cities need to join the campaign. The aim is to have 50 more cities sign up to this initiative. The UN Secretary General has identified the increase in gender-based violence as a Shadow Pandemic.

And Where Things Need to Go….

Fundamental Action

All Member States are urged to:

- Take action to empower all women and girls, along with the private sector and civil society. Together we must ensure that all human rights are realised, including the equal involvement of women and girls in the economic, social, cultural, and political development of all urban communities especially where new or expanded urban areas are being created.
- Ensure that a transformative gender perspective is incorporated within policies or programs that address prevention, mitigation, adaptation and rehabilitation in

building back better when addressing the challenges of climate crisis and the increasing disasters it has created.

- Recognise the disproportionate and distinct effects of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters on women and girls, in particular those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and ensure that policies and programmes reflect these impacts to strengthen the resilience and adaptive capacities of women and girls in cities and coastal and rural areas.

- Ensure action is taken to fulfil commitments made for the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs to provide enhanced, resilient and appropriate city infrastructure, services and facilities which promote gender equality. These include:

  Commitment to develop integrated and age and gender transformative housing policies and approaches across all sectors and at all levels of Government, which incorporate the provision of adequate, affordable, accessible, safe, well-connected and well-located housing with special attention to addressing the challenges of climate change as well as the proximity factor and the strengthening of the spatial relationship with the rest of the urban fabric and the surrounding functional areas.

- Commit to stimulate the supply of a variety of adequate housing options that are safe, affordable, and accessible for members of different income groups of society, taking into consideration socio-economic and cultural integration of marginalised communities, homeless persons, and persons in vulnerable situations including those posed by the climate crisis. Member States should also take positive measures to improve the living conditions of homeless people with a view to combat and prevent its criminalisation.

- Fully implement previous international human rights agreements and comply with the requirements of CEDAW.

- To achieve the SDGs that support all women and girls as well as safe and sustainable cities, Member States must improve national statistical offices and other relevant parties to properly collect, analyse, and disseminate sex and age disaggregated data. In doing so, Member States can then produce gender statistics throughout all censuses that will better enable them to implement and monitor policies designed to aid and girls. Furthermore, Member States must recognise the value of data available from civil society.

- Member States should enable the fair and just distribution of vaccines to counter COVID-19 to ensure all women and girls have access to protection.

Additional Action

- Policies and programmes should take a life-course approach to education and employment for women and girls, recognising and understanding that access to learning is a human right at all ages and that women and girls living in urban areas have different learning needs at different times in their lives.
- Develop policies and programmes that involve women in the management and provision of accessible, safe, reliable, affordable and effective water and sanitation and energy resources. Work with local partners to ensure gender appropriate and sensitive water and sanitation facilities.
- Support policies and programmes which provide urban women and girls with finance and social protection, as well as securing a place in decision-making forums at all levels, encouraging more female leadership through mentoring opportunities and training.

Where Soroptimist International Stands

These are the principles that Soroptimist International strongly supports and will advocate for on behalf of women and girls across the life course in urban areas:

Soroptimist International believes that the following require priority measures for action to enable women and girls living in cities to achieve gender equality and empowerment:

- Engage all women and girls in their local communities to develop grassroots solutions to challenges.
- Provide all women and girls with opportunities and skills to take leadership and management roles from consultations through to implementation of all projects and programmes.
- Educate men and boys at local, regional and national levels to understand the issues for women and girls especially in relation to education and violence against women and girls.

Resources

UN SDG 5 & 11 2015 https://sdgs.un.org/goals

UN Quito Declaration (Implementation Plan) 2016 https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/

UN New Urban Agenda 2016 https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/

Safer Cities and Public Spaces for Women UN Women 2011 Safe-Cities-and-Safe-Public-Spaces-global-results-report-2017-2020-en(2).pdf

UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/75/224 para 8 2020
https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/implementation_of_the_outcomes_of_the_united_nations_conferences_on_human_settlements_and_on_housing_and_sustainable_urban_development_and_strengthening_of_the_uni.pdf

UN A/HRC/47/43 Twenty years of promoting and protecting the right to adequate housing: taking stock and moving forward
Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, Balakrishnan Rajagopal 2021 Human Rights Council A/47/43

UN A/HRC/46/28 Human rights and the global water crisis: water pollution, water scarcity and water-related disasters
Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment 2021 A/HRC/46/28

UN A/74/161 Human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment 2019 A/74/161
UN A/HRC/31/52 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment 2016 A/HRC/31/52

United Nations News, "Cities: a 'cause of and solution to' climate change", 18 September 2019; and United Nations, "Cities and pollution" (n.d.).

C40 Cities, "From LA to Bogotá to London, global mayors unite to deliver critical city momentum to world leaders tasked with keeping 1.5 degree hopes alive at Glasgow's COP26", 2 November2021.

E/CN.6/202/3 Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes Report of the Secretary General 2022 Para 25

E/CN.6/2022/3 Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes Report of the Secretary General 2022 Para 6 citing M. Finer and N. Mamani, "The Amazon and climate change: carbon sink vs. carbon source", *Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project*, No. 144 (2021).

E/CN.6/202/3 Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes Report of the Secretary General 2022 Para 57(c)