

Valencia Declaration on Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, and Urban Sustainable Development in the Post-Pandemic Future

The members of the Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI) to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat and the participants in the Expert Group Meeting “Gender and Sustainable Urban Development in the Post-Pandemic Future” convened in Valencia on 21 October 2021. The Expert Group Meeting (EGM) was planned in conjunction to the annual working meeting of the AGGI, marking one decade of working as an advisory body to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in human settlements.

The AGGI represents women as an independent advisory body that guides and supports the Executive Director on all aspects of UN-Habitat's work. AGGI was created in response to the request made by the UN-Habitat Governing Council at its twenty-third session in April 2011 ([Governing Council Resolution 23/1](#)) to the UN-Habitat Executive Director to strengthen UN-Habitat's gender equality and women's empowerment focus. AGGI is the result of the joint work of women within UN-Habitat, in civil society, and in local, subnational and national governments around the world, who developed AGGI as an instrument to improving our communities, with the contributions of grassroots and professional women to local and urban development. It is a history told in the book *UN-Habitat Gender Journey* (UN-Habitat, 2016).

The Meeting gathered experts, decision makers and grassroots representatives from around the world. The initiative to organize this event for the first time arose from the need to develop a coordinated response to the global challenge of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in human settlements, as well as in light of the negative effects on women's rights and gender quality efforts due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other dramatic events, such as those in Afghanistan.

The pandemic and its subsequent economic and social impacts have greatly affected women: women disproportionately work in economic sectors particularly hit by the pandemic; they are a majority in many frontline occupations; they take much greater responsibility for care tasks whose workload has multiplied; violence against women and girls has increased. This situation is particularly precarious in the developing countries, in which informality in employment is coupled by scarce social protection networks. It is multiplied among those in situations of war and occupation, and in refugee camps.

To reach the goals stated in the New Urban Agenda, approved by the United Nations in 2016, as well as those of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and leaving none behind, women's needs must be taken into consideration, regarding care tasks, economic opportunity, and physical safety. Women's talent needs to be fully employed on a global scale, promoting policies to foster full and equal participation of women in our society and economy.

Women are key agents of social and urban transformation. Gender mainstreaming is today the policy approach most likely to improve the urban environment for all, regardless of gender; make cities resilient; increase economic productivity and reduce inequalities. When women participate fully, the benefits can be seen immediately. When women prosper, all the society benefits, including successive generations.

Participants at the Expert Group Meeting gathered to discuss strategies to successfully achieve women's empowerment in cities and rural settlements at global level following the [Gender Resolution](#) adopted by UN-Habitat in the first session of the United Nations Habitat Assembly on 31

May 2019, with a particular focus on four outstanding thematic strains and some practical approaches, with a special call for the protection of women in Afghanistan.

A roadmap: the 2019 Gender Resolution

The Gender Resolution *Achieving gender equality through the work of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme to support inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements*, adopted during the first General Assembly of UN-Habitat in 2019, provides a roadmap for action to greater gender equality in the post pandemic. This Resolution is a key element to help implement the gender dimensions of both the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Resolution urged to achieve gender equality through UN-Habitat's work, by making commitments to:

1. Strengthening and supporting a twofold gender strategy, that involves:
 - a) mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment into the normative work and operational programmes of UN-Habitat; and
 - b) setting up policies and programmes to support efforts to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment within the scope of existing resources.
2. Using available resources for gender mainstreaming within the programmes and activities of UN-Habitat, as included in its strategic plan for the period 2020–2023;
3. Engaging and working meaningfully with other UN entities and with civil-society organizations, including women leaders in local authorities, the private sector, the media and grassroots women's and community-based organizations and NGOs, as well as experts;
4. Making optimal use of the Advisory Group on Gender Issues, as well as other relevant networks, to facilitate the mainstreaming of gender within UN-Habitat;
5. Allocating adequate resources for the development and implementation of an updated version for the period 2020–2023 of the revised policy and plan for gender equality and the empowerment of women in urban development and human settlements;
6. Reporting to the United Nations Habitat Assembly at its second session in 2023, on the implementation of the Gender Resolution 2019.

Gender issues in the post pandemic future

One of the impacts on the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a wide-spread economic crisis, which in turn amplified the existing levels of poverty around the world requiring more attention to this issue. Many of these will also include formerly middle-class groups impoverished by the loss of employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown to what extent care tasks in the home are performed by women and how difficult it is to telework in the home with children when schools, canteens, restaurants, and all kinds of services are closed. It has somehow manifested in much cruder ways gender inequalities in housework and employment. In the context of these inequalities, sustainable urban development for social inclusion and poverty eradication makes sense only if it considers substantial gender equality as a structural element for change as a priority.

During the COVID-19 pandemic that is threatening lives and economies around the world, the lockdown of cities has made clear and dramatic all the unsolved nodes of the sustainability of development, of large urbanization processes, of growing and unbalanced distribution of wealth, of the devastation of the planet's resources, placing at the centre of attention structural problems among which the crisis of care is paramount. Economic vulnerabilities increase at the interlinkages between

the urban and the rural. Food insecurity is higher among women than men on all continents. The need of improving the territorial connectivity between communities and between the ecological, landscape and cultural values of the regions becomes even more evident. In a world that innovates and changes, the danger of new discrimination for women is high. The digital divide of a large part of the population, affect women, older people, people with disabilities, making difficult electronically supported forms of working, whose basic requirement is Internet access. Poverty, humanitarian crises and conflicts are urban phenomena that generate continuous migration to the cities.

Globally, poverty disproportionately affects women and girls: 330 million women and girls live on less than US \$1.90 a day, 4.4 million more than in the case of the men. In many countries laws, policies, customs, traditions, and practices prevent them from owning and inheriting land, property and housing, equal access to credit and loans, and fully participating in the development process. If cities are places where problems arise, they are also places where solutions for prosperity, inclusion and social justice can be found more easily.

Thematic strains for gender mainstreaming in cities in the post-pandemic period

1. Reduced spatial inequality and poverty in communities across the urban-rural continuum

Sustainable urban development requires considering the gender dimensions of access to basic services, mobility and public space; access to land and housing; as well as rights in the context of planning and urban regeneration of cities and human settlements. This includes access to health services, including services for sexual and reproductive health, education, childcare, livelihood opportunities and safe, affordable transport and public spaces. It also entails guaranteeing adequate housing, including for poor women and those fleeing gender violence. Special attention needs to be paid to women's role as caregivers, how care giving can be made compatible with employment and with education, and their right to be safe from gender-based violence, and how this affects their housing, transport, education, and other service needs.

2. Enhanced and shared prosperity of cities and regions

Gender equality in the context of shared prosperity and productivity of cities requires consideration of women's decent work and livelihoods and recognition and redistribution of women's unpaid care work in society. City level policies that provide public services, social protection and basic infrastructure, and that promote sharing of domestic and care work between men and women, and create more paid jobs in the care economy, can accelerate progress on women's economic empowerment. The digital gender divide poses a challenge for gender equality and women's empowerment since it can undermine women's ability to obtain an education, work, access government services and participate in political and public life. Women's access to ICTs is significantly lower than men's in terms of connectivity, equipment, solutions (software and applications), data and digital skills, knowledge, and opportunities.

3. Strengthened climate action, resilience and improved urban environment

Women commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change owing to their social status and gender discrimination, specific economic and domestic responsibilities, limited access to relevant resources and mobility, as well as general exclusion from climate change decision-making. A gender-responsive approach relies on a range of women's rights and gender equality to support women's empowerment, viewing women as powerful change agents in addressing climate change at scale, playing a crucial role in resilience, adaptation and mitigation

efforts, including community-based efforts. Some may live in high-risk areas facing drought, landslides, floods and hurricanes or living or working in poor informal settlements, especially those who are further disadvantaged being older, disabled, indigenous, pastoralist, nomads, hunters and gatherers or displaced due to conflict or health.

4. Effective urban crisis prevention and response

Be it crisis resulting from climate change, disasters, conflict or endemic urban violence, women and girls face increased risk of violence - including sexual violence - and of being trafficked. Furthermore, women are often on the front lines of providing community support, distributing food and supplies, and caring for the young, sick, elderly and people living with disabilities. They also have skills, knowledge and capacities which can support these responses and initiatives. A gender responsive approach must be taken across the cycle of prevention to response, including planning and budgeting, in order to inform the sequencing of implementation of policies, programmes, and services, to produce equitable results. Intersections of gender with other variables including age, socio-economic status, race and ethnicity and other factors need to be considered.

5. Ensure the active role of women in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and the New Urban Agenda at the local level

Within the Decade of Action declared by the United Nations, there is an urgency to support transformational initiatives to accelerate gender equality and ensure delivery of the global agendas at the local level. The evidence of long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the achievement of the SDGs, including gender equality is clear. There is a need for a widescale engagement from local to global to reverse this situation and include actors able to multiply and scale up the recovery process. Women should play a key role in the local communities and there should be an explicit support of policy implementation and standards on gender equality to ensure the delivery of the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

A Call for the Protection of Women in Afghanistan

The events in Afghanistan since August 2021 present serious threats to the civil population, in particular to the safety and lives of women. Women and girls are at serious risk of being subjected to renewed violence and violation of their human rights and freedoms. The steps forward obtained for women rights over the years must be upheld and recognized. Forced mobility of women and girls, lack of access to essential services, including health care and education, and violence and abuses, testify to the importance of acting decisively and in a coordinated and effective manner to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. Women and girls urgently need the support and the action of the women around the world to ensure that their rights are guaranteed and to prevent further actions against them.

Practical Approaches

Topics to take into consideration

- Women's economic empowerment, in the formal and informal economies; taking opportunities offered by the transition to a low-carbon economy, including those in agricultural and informal economy, as well as climate action finance initiatives. Support collaborative economy while looking also at challenges and risks of rise of new forms of sharing economies based on direct communication with the customer on internet platforms.

- Women's access and gender-responsive physical and social urban infrastructure, including water, energy, transport, and facilities of all sorts, including shopping, education, health, sports, elderly, and childcare, etc., considering conciliation of work and family, with particular attention to those at-risks - migrants and environmentally displaced persons, especially female headed households.
- Women's active participation, specially of grassroots women's organizations, in the post-COVID-19 recovery programmes and the stimulus packages associated to them at the local and national level.
- Women's health programs and systems to provide appropriate health care.
- Gender-responsive housing policies and security of land tenure and inheritance rights for women.
- Programs for cities, public spaces, and housing free of violence against women; gender responsive and women's safety approach to risk and disasters through the provision of temporary and permanent infrastructure development, including for the immediate provision of essential services, with consideration of the local cultural context.
- Revision of laws, policies, and practices, for the removal of provisions in legal frameworks that discriminate against women directly and indirectly.
- Integrate the paradigm of everyday life, that supports both employment in the formal and the informal economies, and care tasks, as a grammar to structure microarchitectures of times and spaces, so that all are guaranteed accommodation, facilities and adequate services, parks, vegetation, safe public spaces, built spaces that alternate with natural spaces and an accessibility and mobility that allows a balance of all dimensions of life.
- Promote the mixed use of the territory and compact urbanization and with short distances, which create a rich network of nearby public spaces, help the tasks of providing care for women, reduce travel and promote the autonomy of women, young people and the elderly.
- Prioritize urban and social "patchwork" micro actions, which belong to the women's culture and ethics of caring, to generate friendly and sustainable cities that produce well-being and equal opportunities for all. The patchwork is based on small "sparks", not on large works, but in squares, parks, small spaces that can trigger urban and social regeneration, through small participatory projects.
- Creating coworking spaces as neighborhood facilities for teleworking and reduced commuting trips, while rethinking office space.

Operational Issues and Tools

- Evidenced based approach by improving sex disaggregated data, as well as intersection characteristics such as age, disability, and ethnicity, including gender-responsive key performance indicators (KPIs).
- Gender budgeting and gender financial audits; financing mechanisms to support the development of gender responsive approaches, ensuring funds arrive to most needed communities. Special attention to the COVID-19 economic recovery plans and stimulus packages.
- Mandatory ex ante and ex post gender impact assessment - of all programs, plans and projects. This evaluation must be mandatory to have any effect. Legislation must describe minimum content.

- Gender balance, women's rights, gender expertise, and gender equality built into governance structures at local, national, and global levels, promoting women's leadership and decision-making in every sector of economic, political and social life; more women in decision-making positions, more women in technical professions, in urban planning teams.
- Multi-stakeholder approach placing communities and grassroots women at the centre of designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating projects.
- Information sharing, allocation of resources, capacity development, technology and skills for female actors and communities, in order to support and empower grassroots women and make decentralized decision-making work for grassroots women.
- Coordination for comprehensive approaches that are multisectoral and multilevel, with local participation, and long-term planning, particularly around prevention, ensuring municipal role in the long-term after the international community has left.
- Participatory and co-creation methodologies, including safety audits, for understanding women's perspectives on urban spaces, safety and exclusion.
- Gender aware networks of connections, new technologies, digital platforms and artificial intelligence and support education and training of women including technological training workshops for women in ICT.
- Strengthen planning systems and local fiscal capabilities, that include, as they develop and consolidate, gender perspectives. A multiscale, urban and territorial and holistic multisectoral approach, which integrates policies for people with territorial policies.
- Systems to encourage gender equality actions and support for women in the private sector; different types of requirements or incentive systems can be designed for this purpose.
- Financial support packages in the post-COVID-19 recovery framework addressed to women and suitable for their realities, including flexibility approaches for those women working in the informal sector. Lower barriers for small and medium-size enterprises led by women, as well as facilitating women's access to finance and entrepreneurship tools and capacity-building efforts.
- Inclusion of gender equality reporting in the voluntary local reviews and voluntary national reports as the main tools to follow-up on the achievement of the Agenda 2030 and its SDGs. Creation of specific women-led local task forces by local authorities to monitor gender approaches to recovery responses and global agendas implementation frameworks, including the New Urban Agenda.

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The Advisory Group on Gender Issues (AGGI)<

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