



• P R E S S R E L E A S E •

United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)
P.O. Box 30030 Nairobi, Kenya

Contact: Marshall Hoffman
Office: 703 820 2244

For Immediate Release

For an interview, please call Steve Schlessinger at 212 963-8723(o); 212 866-1650 (h)

100 Million Homeless in World Most Are Women and Dependent Children

Up to 100 million people are homeless throughout the world, the majority of them women and dependent children, says Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary General of **Habitat II**, the global conference aimed at developing solutions to urban problems, to be held June 3-14 in Istanbul, Turkey.

The problem is not just homelessness. Overall, at least 600 million people -- again, most of them women and dependent children -- live in shelters that are life threatening or health threatening in developing world cities.

Every day, some 50,000 people, mostly women and children, die as a result of poor shelter, polluted water and inadequate sanitation. Some 70 million women and children live in homes where smoke from cooking fires damages their health.

"The main reason for homelessness among women and their dependent children is poverty," says Dr. N'Dow, who is also Assistant Secretary General and head of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), based in Nairobi, Kenya. Habitat, dedicated to improving access to housing and basic services for the world's poor, is organizing **Habitat II**. "Women are doubly disadvantaged by their need to earn a living while providing care for family members and running households."

On May 8, Dr. N'Dow announced the formation of the Huairou Commission on Women, Homes and Community to advise him on gender issues during the Habitat Conference,

The Commission was formed to represent the perspective of grass-roots women and is composed of notable women (*please define*), representatives of non-governmental organizations, women from the private sector and experts in the field of community development.

Of the estimated 1.3 billion people living in poverty around the world, 70 percent are women and girls. Women and girls are also the fastest increasing group of impoverished, a process called "the global feminization of poverty."

India is one of the few developing countries that has tried to count its homeless, finding more than 2.3 million. Western Europe, on the other hand, counts just 6,300 homeless.

The percentage of squatter housing, almost always substandard and likely to be headed by women, also shows housing problems in developing countries, especially in cities. Some 5.5 percent of Turkey's households are squatters but 23.3 percent of all households in the capital of Ankara are squatters. In Peru, 5.6 percent of all households are squatters, but 8.1 percent of households in the capital of Lima are squatters.

Other reasons for female homelessness include:

- Women have few or no property rights in many parts of the world. Many women of the world are barred, mostly by custom but sometimes by law, from inheriting or owning the homes in which they live, condemning them and their children to poverty and destitution. Women comprise more than 50 percent of the world's population, but they own only one percent of the world's wealth, United Nation statistics say.
- The sharp increase of households headed by women. Some 33 percent of families globally are headed by women, but 45 to 50 percent of households in some African and Latin American countries are headed by women.
- Women are much less likely to have steady employment than men, and working women are lower paid, including those in industrial countries. In France and Belgium, women earn about three-quarters of the average male wage, and in Japan, only about half. In Singapore, women earn the equivalent of 72 percent of men's wages; in Hong Kong, 63 percent; in the Republic of Korea, 57 percent.

- Some 75 percent of the world's women cannot get formal bank loans because they lack permanent employment and title deeds to land or housing that they can offer as security, or because the laws of their countries classify them as minors, not eligible to make legal transactions.
- Of the 23 million refugees, and 27 million internal displaced (within their own countries) worldwide, some 70-80 percent are women and children.

In order to investigate and develop workable solutions for the world's cities, the United Nations General Assembly has called for the global conference named **Habitat II**. It is the last major UN global conference of the century. Some 20,000 participants from governments, the private sector, non-government organizations and international agencies will participate in **Habitat II**

"One of Habitat II's main goals will be to search for ways to improve the living conditions of the hundreds of million of poor women and their dependent children in the world," says Dr. N'Dow.

Demographic projections illustrate the growing housing problem. Between 1995 and 2025, some 93 percent of the urban population growth worldwide will occur in developing world cities. Construction of adequate housing, especially for the poor, is failing to keep up with this increase.

Women's Health Directly Tied to Housing

The United Nation estimates that if all housing could be brought to a minimum acceptable standard, there would be five million fewer deaths and two million fewer permanent disabilities annually on a global basis.

It is estimated that one in four of the world's population does not have access to clean drinking water and that in many developing countries, about 50 percent of the urban population does not have water within 200 meters of their dwelling.

In the least developed countries, 53 percent lack access to water, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure goes as high as 59 percent. Some countries such as Congo have as much as 80 percent without access to safe water.

In such situations, it is generally the women and older girls who have to provide water. In some parts of rural Africa, women have to use as much as 85 percent of their daily energy intake in fetching water. In these regions, 40 percent of non-pregnant women and 63 percent of pregnant women are anemic (due to a combination of poor diet and heavy work loads).

Medical research has documented cases of permanent damage to women's health directly attributed to carrying water -- among them spinal and pelvic deformities, and degenerative rheumatism. More immediate problems include exposure to water-borne diseases, chronic fatigue and the threat of miscarriage for pregnant women.

Urban Planning

Since women often have to work in or near the home, they are the most affected by failures in planning housing and settlement projects.

Examples of bad urban planning that fail to consider women's needs are: the absence of day-care facilities; the inappropriate location of public water points in poor communities; the lack of children's play parks; inadequate lighting of streets and public areas; costly and inconvenient public transportation facilities; and "modern" housing designs that do not take into consideration women's traditional use of space.

Zoning laws that prohibit economic activities and food-growing in residential areas particularly hurt women's income-producing strategies.

"Women's needs, along with those of men and children, can only be adequately met if women and men participate equally in human settlements planning and management at community, local and national levels," says Dr. N'Dow.

Success Stories

Habitat is calling for changes in the decision-making process to enhance women's urban environment, which include:

- Participation of residents -- women and men, girls and boys -- as a basic part of the planning process;
- Integrated and comprehensive planning so that the links between housing-services-employment are recognized in a gender-sensitive way;

- Gender disaggregated data (Data that specifies women or men) on human settlements;
- Studies on social impact addressing gender needs;
- On-going monitoring and evaluation of policies, plans and implementation.

Habitat's Women in Human Settlements Development Programme seeks to support non-government organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and grass roots organizations around the world, either specifically of women, or where women are very active in human settlement issues.

At the **Habitat II Conference**, several major topics will be explored in relation to how they affect women's issue: equality; empowerment issues; structural adjustment policies and the world economic reality of today, towards freer markets and how they affect men and women differently; gender analysis and data disaggregation by gender.

Developing countries or countries in transition that have made major advances in insuring housing for women include India, Cuba, Ukraine, Colombia and Namibia:

- In Namibia, while awaiting expected repeals of laws that require married women to get their husbands' signature, the practice in human settlement policies has changed already. The government is active in designing and implementing housing programs that are gender sensitive. They encourage women to form saving and credit groups, and they give priority to households by women -- 41 percent of the total number of households -- in credit schemes.
- In Ukraine, the real amounts of women's wages amount approximately to 70 percent of those received by men. In the transition taking place in the country now, efforts are being made to improve women's status. The current legislative system makes no difference between men and women with respect to ownership of land and property.
- In Colombia, in addition to progressive legislation, the government has created a special credit scheme for housing improvement loans, especially targeted at households headed by women.
- In Cuba, legislation does not make a gender difference. Legally, women have the same rights as men over property, grantees of tenure (not necessarily ownership), contract signing and management access.

- In India, women have gained legal rights to inherit land and property, but gender inequalities still persist as women's shares are often smaller than those of men. In a major breakthrough, the government of Maharashtra state recognized the right of slum and pavement dwellers to shelter. Through collective ownership, communities will be able to obtain security of tenure. Women's participation is an integral element of the program.

Habitat International Coalition (HIC) Women and Shelter Network has started the process by sensitizing and creating awareness among men and women, at the community and national levels, on the right of women to own and inherit land.

At the regional and international levels, the Network has been pushing hard to insure women's fundamental human right to equitable access to, and control over, land and property, on an equal basis with men, regardless of customs, laws and traditions relating to inheritance and marriage that deny such equality.

* * *

Women's Land and Property Rights in Africa

In many parts of Africa, when a man dies, his widow suffers a double tragedy: she not only loses her partner but also loses all material wealth they ever owned. Her in-laws claim all the property and land, leaving her with none of the wealth she helped to create through her efforts.

If the widow is childless or has no sons, she may be evicted from the land and forced to return to her parents. If the widow has children, particularly sons, she could continue to stay on the land because her sons will inherit it.

A study on widows of the Zambian national football team members who died in a 1993 air crash found that 24 of the 27 widows lost property to which they were entitled.

In Africa, deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions and values dictate that wealth, property and land belong to men. In such social systems, women do not inherit or own land or property because customarily these belong to husbands or fathers, and it is the sons who inherit. A woman is perceived as a "temporary resident" in her parents' home until she

gets married, and a resident in her husband's home so long as he is alive and satisfied with her.

Ironically, in most countries the law does not discriminate against women in land property ownership. Indeed, national laws in many African countries give women equal rights with men to own land or property. But the reality is very different because of traditions, customs and attitudes that have existed for centuries.

Women have a slightly better situation in urban areas than in rural ones, because women can buy and own land. But because of their economically disadvantaged position, most women cannot afford to buy land, which is often very expensive. Women's access to urban land and property is also affected by the fact that they do not have access to rural land, which their male family members often use as security for loans to acquire property in urban areas. Even when women have an income, it is usually inadequate as they often hold poorly-paid jobs. Also, the procedures for urban land acquisition are cumbersome, time consuming and difficult to comprehend.