

Women and Habitat: a history

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When a senior official of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) received a document in 1976 suggesting that the environmental concerns and conditions of women receive attention from his agency, he scribbled “over my dead body” on the forwarding note. I know, because I had to process the note to its next destination, being a junior functionary of UNEP at the time. If the statute of limitations on this piece of internal UN bureaucratic information has not expired, I hope the relevant authorities feel free to sue me. As to whether the subsequent involvement of UNEP in women and environment matters, such as the massive Global Assembly on Women and Environment in 1991, actually took place over his dead body, I am not aware.

In this article I aim to present, based on my professional and personal experience, the evolution of women and habitat issues, including an assessment of how well these are being addressed currently, in the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (Habitat). It is a history that necessarily covers the interaction between UN-Habitat and civil society, as well as with some other UN events and agencies, especially UNEP.

Despite the negative atmosphere this opening anecdote portrays, there were other stirrings in 1976. The first United Nations Habitat Conference in Vancouver took place that year, and was famous for the vibrant civil society Forum which accompanied it. At one of the Forum workshops, the concerns of women were highlighted and Women and Environments journal (later magazine) was born as a direct result. Habitat issues concerning women found a place in this magazine over the following years. In 1985 it described its scope as a “feminist perspective on women and planning, design alternatives, urban projects, technology, space, non-traditional jobs, community development, nature and ecology” (SINA 9; 1985). Thus it was thinkers and planners who were then beginning to describe the content and agenda of “women and habitat”.

Indeed the debate about whether environment and habitat issues should be treated as one complex of ideas and policies has raged since that time. Not least, the debate among member states at the UN at the time of Vancouver 76 led to the creation of a separate agency from UNEP, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), which later became the UN Habitat Programme, but which was nevertheless located in the same place as UNEP, in Nairobi, Kenya. For many, the need for a specialized agency looking at conservation of the biosphere should not be separated from looking at the “habitat” of human beings, namely human settlements. But geopolitics of the time divided the former as the agenda of the North, looking at conservation, and the latter as the agenda of the South, focussing on poverty and urban growth. Women’s issue were not a priority to either agency at that time, as I have indicated. They remained a special interest that was pursued by civil society, academics and lobby groups, notwithstanding the UN Decade for Women, which started in 1975, and produced the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) among other major achievements.

When the Third UN Conference on Women was held in Nairobi 1985, some officials of the UNCHS (all women) actively participated with civil society organizations in helping to articulate the issues of “women and habitat” through a series of workshops at the large NGO Forum. They were concerned that this had been a gap in the agency’s programme throughout the First UN Women’s Decade. A large “Women and Habitat” workshop was organized by Mazingira Institute of Nairobi, Habitat International Council (later Coalition, HIC) and the Netherlands Council of Women (part of the International Council of Women, ICW). Other workshops, out of the thousand or so held, that addressed similar themes were organized by National Council of Neighbourhood Women of USA and Match International of Canada. Keynote papers articulating the women’s perspective on the themes of the 1976 Vancouver Habitat Conference led to the structuring of issues and the resolve to create an international network, starting with the workshop participants. Emerging themes were women’s particular housing and infrastructure needs (urban and rural), their relation to women’s income generation, legal constraints on women, and women’s participation in policy and planning. Women and Environments was one of the actors involved. Netherlands Government funded UNCHS to hold a series of regional workshops on communication for women and habitat issues over the next few years, and these again drew in Forum participants as well as many other organizations.

International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH-87) marked further steps forward, with UNCHS itself finally putting women’s issues on the agenda of the Conference documents, and further international workshops being held. “Women and Shelter” became the theme of an African Declaration formulated for IYSH. Meanwhile HIC – now transformed into a Southern-led Coalition of many small NGOs – resolved to carry forward the 1985 resolution and set up a Women and Shelter Network, and this was implemented at a HIC-organized international meeting in India in 1988, presided over by the Executive Director of UNCHS. The network’s founding members resolved to keep an open structure of grassroots women’s organizations which would enable the issues to emerge from them and influence UNCHS and the policy agenda in general.

In probably its most adroit move in the whole story, UNCHS convened a meeting in 1989 ostensibly to review the outcome of the communication workshops on women and habitat, but which also brought together key civil society groups. This historic meeting produced a resolution calling for a women’s programme in UNCHS, and for grassroots women’s concerns to be brought to policy attention by “inviting governments and UNCHS (Habitat) to develop a closer cooperation with the Habitat International Coalition Women and Shelter Network and other similar NGOs at national, regional and international levels”. In 1991, this same resolution made it to the UN General Assembly, where it was adopted as Resolution 13/13 of the GA’s 8th Plenary session.

The nineteen-nineties was the decade of UN global conferences, and women and habitat issues were by now right up-front, thanks to all the preparatory organizing. Whether over anyone’s dead body or not, UNEP led the Global Assembly on Women and Environment, using the energies of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) which held preliminary grass-roots-dominated workshops of one and a half thousand women and produced Women’s Action Agenda 21. This

document influenced the less radical UN Agenda 21 that emerged from the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, and women and habitat issues were included.

The International Research Seminar on Gender, Urbanization and Environment, organized by the International Sociological Association Research Committee 43 and Mazingira Institute, produced a Research and Policy Agenda in 1994. Along with the regional and global meetings organized by HIC Women and Shelter Network (HIC-WAS) and other women's organizations, the women and habitat set of issues was beginning to develop more "bite" in terms of critical analysis, grounding in poor women's concerns, and influencing international meetings of governments through the UN. And a key event took place in that the leaders of HIC-WAS and GROOTS (Grassroots Women Organizing Together in Sisterhood – the international manifestation of "Neighbourhood Women" of the USA) decided to collaborate, and invited the International Council of Women (ICW), formed a hundred years earlier, to join in a new grouping dubbed the "Super-Coalition". The idea was that, being grassroots based and with overlapping agendas but weak on resources, there would be greater strength in collaborating. Resolution 13/13 was empowering to the group as well, and it was able to start influencing the international meetings in a big way.

Already, the "Women's Caucus", superbly organized by WEDO, was ever-present at UN meetings and systematically got its concerns on the main meeting agenda. The caucus always insisted on having its meetings in the main conference hall, half an hour before the official meeting, and it lobbied hard (and still does) to retain that slot in every meeting. It was short step to invite WEDO into the Super-Coalition, along with others, including the Asia Women and Shelter Network, a breakaway faction of HIC-WAS.

This incredibly powerful grouping was now further facilitated by the establishment of the UNCHS Women and Shelter Programme in 1991. Although only a small unit, it managed to mobilise donor resources, and through collaboration with the women's movement as mandated by the General Assembly, a large amount of noise was generated at the preparatory meetings and UN Conferences themselves throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium. Grassroots women appearing in UN Conferences became the norm for UNCHS (Habitat) and there was even a UN Expert Group Meeting of women slum dwellers from three continents of the South which produced a set of Community Based Indicators of women's participation that became an official UN document (Miraftab 2006).

Global organizing of grassroots women led to the numerous clauses on women and habitat that influenced the "Platform for Action" at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, including the notorious "inheritance clause" that held up negotiations for 24 hours, necessitating an extra day of the Conference and almost derailing it. Almost surprisingly, a deal was done on the meaning of equality as enshrined in the Qu'ran, and the historic clause was passed. It reappeared in the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996, and became part of the Habitat Agenda, the guiding document of the UNCHS programme.

It is worth reflecting at this point what hugely contentious issues the subject of women and habitat raises, targeting centuries of male power and supremacy that have meant women do not inherit property (land and housing) or take part in government or

even governance (meaning all the institutional structures that influence society), and also do not have much access to jobs, loans and other entitlements due to citizens. Getting all this written down in UN agreements was not easy due to the predominance of male interests in most international gatherings and the general inertia of public opinion. Achieving it also meant there was bound to be a backlash.

While the Women and Shelter (first called Human Settlements) Programme of UNCHS (Habitat) was going from strength to strength, resistance was also building up, and this was evident both in international gatherings and within the UNCHS secretariat. Despite the enormous impact of the international documents which led governments to take significant steps in passing laws and implementing measures on women's property rights and participation in government and public life, the high profile of the women's movement created some nervousness.

At the Global Forum in Huairou, a suburb of Beijing at the time of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Executive Director of UNCHS, being impressed by the achievements of the Super-Coalition, dubbed it the "Huairou Commission" and suggested it also include individual women who are important figures in public life across the globe. Subsequently, although several UNCHS programmes now worked actively with the Huairou Commission in order to achieve effective outreach in human settlements, UN officials at all levels and government delegations (not least that of China) began objecting to its role, suggesting it was a biased interest group. The leadership and legal status of the Commission was, rightly, questioned. After all, it had simply come into being on a wave of enthusiasm of grassroots coalition-building and the ideology of "partnership" espoused by UNCHS following the successful Habitat II meeting of 1996, which broke new ground in UN – civil society relations.

Meanwhile, based on a commissioned gender policy analysis, UNCHS created a Gender Unit to execute mainstreaming in its work, in addition to the Women and Shelter Programme. This innovative, two-pronged approach to gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment, was unfortunately short-lived. With budget cutbacks and restructuring, as well as most senior UN officials not getting the hang of there being any difference between the two institutional functions, the two were merged again barely eighteen months after the Gender Unit was established.

But there were steps forward as well as backward. A Gender Task force set up in 1997, before the Gender Unit, enabled interested UNCHS staff to share gender work and methods informally, and grew to include about a quarter of all the Secretariat professionals, about fifty-fifty men and women. It established direction to gender mainstreaming in the institution, and was formalised as an in-house Committee in 2000. Gender was quickly and systematically incorporated into the two new "Campaigns" of UNCHS in 2000 – on Security of Tenure and Governance – as well as into the new five year plan and budget, through the work of Task Force members in coordination with the campaigns.

Several programmes and units of UNCHS, including the Governance Campaign, structured their gender and women's outreach work around the involvement and capacities of Huairou Commission and its member organizations. With the merger of the women and gender programmes, this became a low-resource-use strategy for

mainstreaming. Also, the Gender Coordinator represented UNCHS in inter-agency matters, from which vantage point several joint workshops were organized during the UN Beijing +5 Forum in New York in 2000 and Istanbul +5 in 2001, to develop solidarity with FAO, UNDP, UNIFEM and other UN bodies on women and habitat issues, particularly women and secure tenure and women and governance.

UNCHS became a full-fledged programme of the United Nations in 2002, re-named UN-Habitat. Its Gender Unit continues, but the Gender Task Force no longer functions and the relationship with the main civil society bodies is somewhat weaker than in the hey-day of the nineteen nineties.

The right of women to own and control property, and in particular their right to inherit it from their parents, is now a widely publicized matter, and numerous campaigns at national and international levels have taken up the cry and developed methods of bringing about change. Unlike women's role in governance, especially urban governance, this is really a UN-Habitat issue, while governance is addressed by UNDP and UNIFEM as much as by UN-Habitat. Both have certainly had a wide impact. UN-Habitat has developed a joint programme with the UN High Commission on Human Rights around the issue of housing rights, including women's inheritance rights, and carried out research on the latter which is published.

Yet ultimately, the driving force has been, and will probably remain, civil society organizations. The influence of civil society, including grassroots and slum women, on the UN and international policies in UN-Habitat, presents a useful case study as the debates on global governance and broadening the base of the UN continue.

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Further Reading and Resources:

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