

Declarations upon Declarations: When Shall Women Experience Real Change?

The Nairobi conference on Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (held in 1985) set out several targets for the period 1985 and 2000, which included abolishing illiteracy, making it possible for women to be self-sufficient, passing laws of equality to ensure a truly equitable socio-economic framework, and launching public campaigns to abolish discrimination. To complement these ideals, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) established measures for national, regional and international action in twelve critical areas of development including women and poverty, education and training, health (including reproductive health), violence, and economy, power and decision-making. This paper utilises the experiences of women living in slum communities in Africa to address two main questions: (i) what are the conditions in slum communities that make it impossible for women to achieve the targets set in these declarations? (ii) What is required to bring real change to the women's lives?

It is estimated that 924 million people (31.6 per cent) of the world's urban population live in slums, of which 43 per cent are in developing regions (UN-Habitat 2003). Another estimate indicates that 44 per cent of slum dwellers are women (APHRC 2002). A review of the existing strategies to mainstream gender in development reveals a gap in addressing the situation of the urban poor generally, and more specifically, of women. This paper assesses four main development indicators to highlight the situation of poor women in slum communities - education, employment, health, and secure tenure.

Education

Generally, education levels are low for women in slum communities. For example, a study conducted by APHRC (2002) in four slums of Nairobi established a ratio of in-school youth aged 15–17 years in the slums at 2:1 (40.2 per cent and 22.2 per cent, respectively) for boys and girls compared to rural Kenya, which was almost even (74 per cent and 72.9 per cent,

respectively). About 70 per cent of the out-of-school youth attributed their status to their inability to pay school fees. Pregnancy-related and socio-cultural factors (early marriage, payment of bride wealth, little value attached to girls' education, etc.) also contributed to the out-of-school status for the girls. Limited education opportunities have implications for women's careers and overall well-being.

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Employment

Women are estimated to head one-fourth of all households worldwide and many other households are dependent on their income even where men are present. Female-maintained households are very often among the poorest because of wage discrimination, occupational segregation patterns in the labour market and other gender-based barriers (World Bank 2002). In urban areas, evidence suggests that only a few women have access to formal employment and that most of them are dependent mainly on the informal economy for their own and their family's survival (Stoevska 2004a). It is clear from statistics that in most African countries, women dominate the informal labour market.

Generally, there are high unemployment levels among women compared to men (Stoevska 2004a). But even when women are employed, they are much more likely to work in low-productivity jobs with low status (often insecure, unsafe, and poorly paid) or in agricultural production for family subsistence, and in informal employment activities which do not provide financial security or social benefits. Women resident in the slums tend to be engaged as casual labourers in the informal sector, as support staff in wealthy homes or in petty trade, activities that do not generate an adequate income for their survival. Many also tend to work as contributing family workers (without pay) while men are more represented among

employers. On average, women earn less income than men (Stoevska 2004b).

Health

HIV/AIDS is currently the most important health problem in Africa mainly due to its impact on all sectors of development. In Africa, the HIV epidemic has historically been concentrated in urban areas, where significantly higher prevalence rates have been recorded compared to rural areas. Anecdotal evidence in South Africa suggests that HIV is concentrated in townships and informal settlements (van Donk 2002). The Kenya demographic and health survey (DHS) revealed significant differences between urban and rural areas. Females in urban areas accounted for 12.3 per cent of the HIV burden compared to 7.5 per cent in rural areas while 7.5 per cent of males in urban and 3.6 per cent in rural areas were infected with HIV. In total, the HIV prevalence rate was 10 per cent urban and 5.6 per cent rural. It is important to note that nationally, women had higher prevalence rates in all age categories below 45 years (CBS et al., 2004).

Although there is evidence that urban areas and women are highly affected by HIV, it is not possible to delineate its burden among the urban poor, which is presumably high. The high poverty levels among slum residents limit their access to care and support, including access to anti-retroviral therapy.

A recently concluded study on women living with HIV and AIDS in the slums of Nairobi established that to cope with the condition, they had devised strategies that were largely centred on survival, including commercial sex work and the sale of illicit liquor, thus increasing their susceptibility to re-infections and other risks. Insecurity in slum communities limited their participation in income generating activities and increased their vulnerability to rape and HIV re-infection. Based on the study findings, it was recommended that comprehensive and sustainable HIV and AIDS services should be provided for poor communities in informal settlements and continuous advocacy and

community sensitisation against stigma and discrimination. Fundamentally, the upgrading of informal settlements would address the environmental conditions that exacerbate the poor health of the infected and affected women (UNDP & GOK 2001; Amuyunzu-Nyamongo et al., unpublished manuscript).

Secure tenure

The Beijing Platform for Action identifies the need for equitable social development that recognises empowering the poor, particularly women living in poverty, to utilise environmental resources sustainably as a necessary foundation for sustainable development. Secure tenure is the first component of the progressive realisation of the right to housing and the adequate exploitation of the available resources. However, security of tenure of a household does not necessarily imply the security of tenure for the woman in a context where ownership documentation is usually only in the name of the household head, who is usually the man. In most developing countries men head more than 75 per cent of households as illustrated by DHS and other surveys conducted in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Women's lack of security of tenure may expose them to homelessness. An Addis Ababa urban inequities survey report (UN-Habitat 2005) shows that the majority of homeless women are either widowed or divorced, which could imply that at some point women become victims of insecure tenure. In Kenya, women own less than 5 per cent of the land (KLA undated). The situation is worse in the slums where ownership of land and housing is often through unclear channels, which marginalises the women further.

What is required to bring real change to women's lives?

The few examples cited in this paper illustrate some of the challenges facing women living in slum communities that impede the attainment of declarations aimed at changing their lives. This is critical more so because slums are essentially physical and spatial manifestations of urban poverty and intra-city inequalities, conditions that must be addressed to attain improved well-being for women and entire communities. Some of the actions that should be taken to ensure that women

attain real change in their lives are outlined below:

(a) It is critical for countries to be facilitated to move beyond commitment, i.e. beyond rhetoric, to implementing interventions aimed at meeting women-centred goals. Although developing countries are signatories to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Millennium Declaration and MDGs (UN 2001), among other international conventions, they often lag behind in implementation. Women should take every opportunity to remind governments and the international community of their commitments and the need for action. Advocacy campaigns are critical while the need to maintain an international momentum is urgent if women are to experience real change in their lives.

(b) It is critical for women to implement initiatives agreed upon in meetings and other international forums. Support should be provided to women living in disadvantaged circumstances, including slum communities, to provide avenues for income generation and access to public services such as education, health and housing. Addressing the pervasive abject poverty will be respecting women's right to development.

(c) The need for gender-disaggregated data cannot be overstated. The evidence provided in this paper suggests that women in slum communities are more disadvantaged than their male counterparts. Collecting gender-disaggregated data will facilitate informed monitoring of progress towards the attainment of international and national development goals. In addition, it will enable the formulation and implementation of gender-responsive policies and actions.

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