



Habitat International Coalition

Note Verbale

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Consolidating, Developing and Mainstreaming the Feminist Approach in HIC Africa

The Vancouver Action Plan of 1976 notes that human settlement policies are powerful instruments for change. A gender perspective reveals that villages, cities and neighborhoods have been shaped by the values of patriarchal society that continues to influence social relations. The feminist approach to human settlements entails bringing about gender equality in the built environment.

HIC led the way with this expression of feminism in its Women and Shelter (HIC-WAS) Network, 1988–99, introducing gender into the UN Human Settlements Commission. The Commission’s resolution 13/13 of May 1991, adopted in General Assembly proceedings of the same year, “.....Invites governments and UN Habitat to develop closer cooperation with HIC Women and Shelter Network and similar non-governmental organizations at national, regional and international levels.”¹ HIC-WAS further influenced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, whose silver anniversary we commemorated last year. That global policy instrument featured a commitment government actions to “Give women full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property.”²

Similar wording was adopted in the Habitat II Agenda of 1996, in which states committed to “The empowerment of women and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, whether rural or urban, are fundamental to sustainable human settlements development....”³ And “to give women full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property, credit, natural resources and appropriate technologies...”⁴

Over its decade of life, HIC-WAS produced newsletters in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese and coordinated membership in all regions, while hosted by Mazingira Institute, Nairobi, and later by Fedevivienda, Bogotá, and Women’s Advancement Trust (WAT), Dar es Salaam. It eventually gave rise to the “super coalition” of women’s civil society partner organizations through the Huairou Commission, “which includes members of grassroots and non-governmental organizations such as Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) International, the HIC Women and Shelter Network and the International Council of Women and the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) to monitor and evaluate gender-aware implementation of national plans of action, as well as the inclusion of women in decision making in human settlements.”⁵ But this process has departed from HIC’s foundational approach of human rights and corresponding criteria in habitat and human settlements development. For HIC to revive its strong and human-rights specialized feminist perspective and gender leadership, it needs to *mainstream* this corresponding critical thinking. HIC Members need to restore their women’s rights focus to reinvigorate global action and leadership.

This note acknowledges the representation and contributions of HIC’s Africa Members and officers in the UN Commission on Social Development (CSocD) and Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and other global policy forums. It considers also contemporary research and training activities of HLRN’s Women’s Land and Home project with HIC Members in several African countries. This has produced new

findings and capabilities for advocating remedies for women deprived of their wealth, wellbeing and habitat through violations of their human rights to adequate housing and land, among other human rights. These outcomes promise to change minds and bring about needed policy outcomes within local and central spheres of government, as well as at the global level in both African and UN human rights bodies, as well as in regional and global development forums.

The current HIC Women and Habitat convergence in Africa accompanies recognition of initiatives by HIC Members, officers and structures at a time in HICstory, whereby Africa is host to the HIC Secretariat and Secretary General, resolved to implement the recommendations of the recent HIC and HLRN project evaluation and decisions of the HIC Board to focus attention and resources on the Coalition's work in Africa. This involves building and better managing membership across the continent, but first and foremost globally acknowledging and newly learning from African HIC Members' outstanding work and lessons, not least in their historic and continuing leadership and production on gender issues and women's human rights related to habitat.

Consistent with the Human Rights Habitat Observatory approach, HIC's emphasis on women's human rights related to habitat embraces the concept and approach initiated at Nairobi, Kenya in 2002, when the Civic Forum declared the city a "human rights habitat," whereby human rights with the corresponding permanent and binding human rights obligations of states inform sustainable development, which is otherwise expressed in temporary and voluntary 2030 Agenda commitments. The work of African Members of HIC combines these obligations and commitments as commonly shared, cross-border criteria for their respective and complementary efforts at capacity building, policy analysis, physical solutions, strategic planning and programming, advocacy and other constructive problem solving. Reinvigorating these actions with a specific focus on women's land and housing rights engages HIC's two greatest strengths: learning and advocacy. The effort also seeks to align HIC Member activities with principles and approaches associated with feminist urbanism.⁶

This perspective further informs the human rights norms and creates new opportunities for interpreting state obligations related to the human rights to adequate housing and land in territorial development. It draws a line of consciousness through that initial resolution 13/13 of 1991 through CEDaW's General recommendation No. 34 on the rights of rural women (2016). This heritage poses an opportunity to clarify what is required for states parties to comply with their binding treaty obligations under CEDaW Articles 13 and 14 and the over-arching treaty-implementation principle of gender equality.⁷ These precede and support voluntary guidelines such as Sustainable Development Goal 5.⁸

This HIC Women and Habitat Africa collaboration also applies women's human rights with a territorial perspective, appropriate to the African context, that applies the habitat approach defined in the Habitat Agenda, whereby "concerns and demands require a regional and cross-sectoral approach to human settlements planning, which places emphasis on rural/urban linkages and treats villages and cities as two [points on] a human settlements continuum in a common ecosystem."⁹

Consistent with HIC practice and the HIC Constitution, one practical measure toward reinvigorating HIC leadership in the women and habitat field involves forming a Women and Habitat Working Group of cooperating HIC Members to coordinate efforts and create synergies between and among HIC Members in Africa. African Members of HIC hereby announce formation of the Women and Habitat Working Group in Africa for cooperation with HIC Members across Africa and welcome exchanges with other regions as well.

Notes:

- ¹ Promoting the Advancement of Women in Human Settlements Development and Management, resolution 13/13, in Report of the Commission on Human Settlements on the work of its thirteenth session, 29 April–8 May 1991, A/46/8, 8 May 1991, p. 34, para. 5, at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/135795/files/A_46_8-EN.pdf. See also Wandia Seaforth, with Aliye Pekin Çelik, Catalina Hinchey-Trujillo, Lily Hutjes, Diana Lee-Smith, Anne Margarethe Lunde and Jan Peterson, *UN Habitat Gender Journey* (Nairobi: UN Habitat, 2017), at: <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/UN-Habitat%20gender%20journey.pdf>.
- ² Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 4–15 September 1995), A/CONF.177/20. 17 October 1995, under Strategic objective A.2. Revise laws and administrative practices to ensure women’s equal rights and access to economic resources, para. 61(b), at: <https://undocs.org/A/CONF.177/20>, endorsed by the General Assembly in A/RES/50/42, 17 January 1996, at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/50/42>.
- ³ Report of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) (Istanbul, 3–14 June 1996), A/CONF.165/14, 1996, para. 27, at: <https://undocs.org/A/CONF.165/14>.
- ⁴ *Op. cit.*, paras. 40(b) and 72(e).
- ⁵ Activities of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, (Habitat): Progress Report of the Executive Director, HS/C/17/2, 9 March 1999 para. 36, at: https://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/1935_17183_2.HTM.
- ⁶ Adapted from *Urbanismo feminista: Por una transformación radical de los espacios de vida* (Barcelona: Col·lectiu Punt 6 (Collective Point 6), 19 December 2019), at: <https://www.txalaparta.eus/es/libros/urbanismo-feminista>.
- ⁷ Article 3 of both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966).
- ⁸ “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” and its Target 5.a “Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws,” in Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1. 21 October, 2015, p. 18, at: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf.
- ⁹ Habitat Agenda (Habitat II), *op. cit.*, para. 104.