



## HABITAT INTERNATIONAL COALITION

### Women and Habitat Working Group Africa (WHWG)

## Statement on Urban October

### 1.Preamble.

Urban October as already known, is an opportunity for everyone to be part of the conversation about the challenges and opportunities created by the fast rate of changes in our cities and towns. Everyone is therefore encouraged to be part of activities to discuss issues on sustainable urbanization.

### 2. Review of Urban October 2020.

The theme of World Habitat Day 2020 was *Housing For All: A better Urban Future*. In marking or celebrating Urban October 2021, it is pertinent to briefly review some of the issues raised during the 2020 Urban October events and where we are today concerning those issues.

In reviewing the 2020 theme, there should be a reflection on the poor housing situations in our communities, particularly for those homeless persons, who live on the streets, those evicted and displaced from their homes and lands, those living in over- crowded homes with inadequate water and sanitation facilities, those people living in poverty, majority of whom are women.

A major hindrance to women's economic advancement and effective participation in development activities in many parts of the world, especially the global south, is the traditional resistance to women's ownership of land and property. Women and girls in Africa are often denied access to land use, inheritance and control of land and private property.

It is also important to note that access to land, housing and tenure security for women in Africa is fundamental for the realization of their human rights. Land tenure security is crucial for women's empowerment and a prerequisite for building secure and resilient communities.

It offers women a way out of insecurity and poverty and is the foundation from which women can support themselves and their children and start to create better lives for themselves and their families.

According to Land Tenure and Women's Empowerment, USAID 2016, "In sub-Saharan Africa, women comprise 48.7 percent of the agricultural labor force, but only 15 percent of agricultural land holders. In the Middle East and North Africa, the numbers are even lower, with women comprising 40 percent of agricultural labor and 5 percent landowners. In Latin America, the systematic denial of women's land and property rights is recognized as patrimonial violence in several Latin America constitutions.

Globally, women's assets are seldom worth even half of the value of men's assets. Unequal access to land, shelter, inheritance and credit are among the many factors driving the "feminization of poverty," a term given to the increasing gap between men and women caught in the circle of poverty. (*Land Tenure and Women's Empowerment, USAID 2016, Fact Sheet*: <https://www.land-links.org/issuebrief/fact-sheet-land-tenure-womens-empowerment/>)

Most importantly, women face discrimination through inheritance under customary practices. Inheritance affects girls and women at two phases in their lives. The first one is inheritance from parents and the second is inheritance from husbands or marital families. Researches have shown so far is that laws and policies are not the main problems for women in relation to land and housing. Rather the problem is with the adherence to laws and policies within families due to deeply entrenched traditions and cultural practices.

Further researches reveal that most African countries, if not all have constitutions, laws and even administrative mechanisms for protecting women's and girl's rights. Despite the provisions of the constitutions, many communities in Africa still go ahead with their customary practices of denying women and girls their habitat rights. These customary practices guide most community leaders in Africa to believe that it is wrong for a girl to inherit a house or a piece of land, and that brothers of a deceased man have more right to inherit his house and land than his wife or daughters.

It should be noted that in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was adopted by 189 Member States, including Africa States, that participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in September 1995, said that they were determined to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity.

Member States also said that they were convinced that women's rights are human rights, and as such they were determined to promote and protect all human rights of women and girls.

In 2015, Member States, adopted the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development Goals. In doing that, they committed to achieving sustainable development for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. They pledged that no one would be left behind and to reach the furthest behind first.

Article 18 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, calls on all States Parties to eliminate every discrimination against women and to ensure the protection of the rights of women as stipulated in international declarations and conventions.

In Article 2, which talks about the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the African States committed to taking corrective and positive action in those areas where discrimination against women in law and in fact continues to exist. They also committed to supporting the local, national, regional and continental initiatives directed at eradicating all forms of discrimination against women. We are yet to see any action on these.

Similarly, in the New Urban Agenda, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), held in Quito in October 2016, Member States also committed to providing basic services for all citizens. These services include access to housing, safe drinking water and sanitation and other services.

Having a secure place to live, is one of the fundamental elements for human dignity, physical and mental health and overall quality of life, which enables one's development.

The right to adequate housing has been recognized in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and in other international instruments.

In addition, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 states that: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment..."

Despite signing and the ratification of these key treaties and charters concerning women's land and habitat rights, violations continue to take place

To achieve a better urban future, we need to urgently concern ourselves on how to develop and improve on the living environment and the quality of urban life of the

poor, if we must leave no one behind and attain the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, with emphasis on Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

### **3. HIC at the United Nations Commission on Social Development:**

The Priority theme for the 58<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission on Social Development was: Affordable Housing and Social Protection for All to End Homelessness

Habitat International Coalition and Women in Development and Environment Nigeria, hosted an event on the margins of that Session. The event highlighted issues on Human Rights Habitat approach, Housing Finance and Incremental Housing as well as Social Production of housing to address affordable housing and end homelessness. We believe that if these approaches and strategies are adopted, the issue of Housing for All and a better Urban Future will be assured.

### **4. Urban October 2021.**

The focus of 2021 Urban October is on the climate crisis which is also the theme of UN-Habitat's campaign Climate Action 4Cities, though activities can be about any aspect of sustainable urbanization. While the overall theme for 2021 is 'Better City, Better Life', the specific theme for this year is '**Adapting Cities for Climate Resilience**'.

Whatever theme chosen to mark Urban October, the purpose is for us to reflect on the state of our towns and cities, and on the basic rights of all to adequate shelter.

The purpose should also be to remind the world that we all have the power and the responsibility to shape the future of our cities and towns. Most importantly, it should be a time to reflect on the situation of millions of women who have been denied their rights to adequate housing and land.

The HIC Women and Habitat Africa Working Group, while identifying with the overall theme for 2021 which is 'Better City, Better Life', our major concern in the Urban October is drawing attention to the following issues as they affect women:

- I. How do women connect and interact with the city and what are their needs and priorities - as mothers, employees, traders, employees, home owners, renters, slum dwellers, land owners etc.
- II. How do women gain access, use, inherit, control and own housing and land in cities and what are the challenges they face?
- III. How can we enhance the way women gain access to opportunities, livelihoods and employment in cities?

- IV. How can we design better human settlements and cities for women from a gender perspective, that takes into consideration their needs, priorities and well-being?
- V. How do we enhance the representation and participation of women in community, city and national decision-making bodies related to housing and city development and ensure that their voice is heard?
- VI. Women come to the city in search of jobs. They end up doing menial jobs and live in slums due to high cost of housing. How do we guaranty Safe spaces for women in the cities?

## **5. Better City, Better Life'**

To achieve Better City, Better Life', we need to focus on and address the needs of women everywhere. In the Habitat II Agenda of 1996, Member states committed to "The empowerment of women and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society'. There is an urgent need to implement and enforce the many global policies and instruments which were signed and ratified by African governments.

## **6. Adapting Cities for Climate Resilience'**

There is an important connection between women and the environment. Climate change affects more women than men, because women depend a lot on natural resources for their livelihoods. They also have the least capacity to respond to natural hazards, such as droughts, landslides, floods and hurricanes. In addition, women face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change. Majority of women live in poverty, and suffer gender discrimination in terms of leadership roles, decision-making processes and poor economic power.

Despite that, women can play critical roles in addressing climate change. They possess the local knowledge of resource management. Building the climate resilience of women, particularly those that are living in slums and informal settlements in Africa is very crucial.

Women commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from the impacts of climate change because of their high level of poverty. This calls for an increase in the level of awareness created on the process of climate change adaptation.

## **7. Our Position and Way Forward**

- Civil Society should work with partners to revise, upgrade and make Land Use Act and housing policies more gender-inclusive and sensitive

- Advocate for implementation and enforcement of treaties, commitments and obligations made by Member States within regional and international frameworks and bodies.
- Social interest communiques/petitions highlighting disinheritance of women should be submitted to the African Union.
- Continuous grassroots women's land and habitat rights education campaign with national, regional, international partners, including the United Nations.
- Lobby/advocate for strengthening of promotion and protection mechanisms
- Develop a civil society monitoring and evaluation mechanism for women's land and habitat rights violations in the region.
- Policies and legal frameworks already in place should be activated to protect women's rights to land and housing.
- Sensitization programs aiming to create further awareness on gender equality in rural communities should become regular, targeting leaders of such communities.