Environment&Urbanization Brief – 27

The benefits and constraints of urbanization for gender equality

Cecilia Tacoli

SUMMARY: *Urbanization is often associated with greater independence and opportunity for women. But in many cities, there are also high risks of violence and constraints on employment, mobility and leadership that reflect deep gender-based inequalities. Among the key issues explored in this Brief are:*

- *where and when urban women enjoy advantages over their rural counterparts;*
- *community savings schemes that build women's leadership and support upgrading of informal settlements;*
- *how transport planning fails to respond to women's travel needs;*
- *how urban contexts can both reduce and increase gender-based violence;*
- *how income and ideology influence women's decision-making in rural and urban areas, drawing on research in Nicaragua;*
- *the changes in women's participation in labour markets in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the tensions this can generate within households;*
- *what was learnt from a project working with girls and boys with disabilities in Mumbai, India; and*
- *the particular roles of women in seeking to get better services for their low-income/informal neighbourhoods in Bengalaru, India.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is often associated with greater independence for women. This is the result of better opportunities than in rural areas to engage in paid employment outside the family. It is also the result of better access to services, lower fertility rates and some relaxation of the rigid social values and norms that define women as subordinate to their husbands and fathers, and to men generally. Yet, most urban women also experience profound disadvantages in their daily lives compared to men. The horrific attack, rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi has shocked and provoked anger and indignation not only in India but the whole world. Women experience increasingly high levels of sexual harassment in public spaces in many cities – for instance as documented in Cairo, despite their having played a major role in one of the most transformative events of the "Arab Spring".[1] Occasionally, these events attract much media attention, but fear for personal safety is a pervasive element of urban life for women. Such widespread levels of threat reflect the deep gender-based inequalities that persist in urban centres, even as gender relations are transformed by the economic, social and political changes linked to urbanization. Women make significant contributions to their households, neighbourhoods and the city through their paid and unpaid labour, building and consolidating shelter and compensating for shortfalls in essential services and infrastructure. Yet, they face persistent inequalities in terms of access to decent work, physical and financial assets, mobility, personal safety and security, and representation in formal structures of urban governance.[2]

This Brief draws on eight papers[3] that explore the nature of gender-based disadvantage in urban contexts by focusing on specific angles that take into account the often neglected impact of urban form and urban labour markets. This includes the disturbing pervasiveness of gender-based violence; the often ambivalent role of paid employment in promoting more equal gender relations; and the role of women in improving the infrastructure and services in low-income neighbourhoods and the constraints they face in securing recognition for this. To a large extent these themes overlap and are addressed in all the papers, although with varying emphasis. A theme common to all is the critical importance of avoiding the assumption that women are a homogenous category.

1. See the paper by Caren Levy listed on the back page.

2. See the paper by Sylvia Chant listed on the back page.

3. See *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 25, No 1, April 2013.

II. URBAN WOMEN: A HIGHLY HETEROGENEOUS GROUP

Urban women share a common identity based on the prevailing social norms that assign them the major responsibility for reproductive activities (which include not only biological reproduction but also social reproduction or care work). But they are also a highly diverse group. Poor women face very different constraints from those faced by higher-income women, who are likely to have greater access to education and incomes that enable them to hire domestic workers. Indeed, domestic work is one of the main employment opportunities for poor urban women as well as for young rural women migrating to the cities.[4] Urban centres also have higher proportions of women who are heads of household and who have a different set of responsibilities and often a heavier work burden. But in many cases they have more independence than women who live with a male partner. A woman's stage in her lifecycle – whether she is a young girl, a young woman with young children or an older woman – also makes a fundamental difference, as it determines her care responsibilities and her ability to combine these with paid work. It also largely defines her identity within the household as daughter, wife, mother or grandmother, each of which entails different gender relations.

In Dhaka, women are constrained by the different perceptions men have of their engagement in paid work.[5] Although low-income households in Dhaka desperately need women's earnings to survive, to have a wife work outside the home is also seen as a major detriment to social status, affecting the whole household's potential to improve their circumstances through access to patronage networks. But daughters' work in the garment industry is encouraged as it is not perceived in the same way – that is, as a failure of the male breadwinner to provide for his family. From a social perspective, daughters' work does not count, although from a financial perspective it is often crucial. Like all social relations, gender relations intersect with a multitude of other socially constructed positions that include age, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. Recognizing these multiple sources of identity is of critical importance to understanding the constraints experienced by disabled children in the Leonard Cheshire Asha Community-based Rehabilitation Project in a slum rehabilitation scheme in Mumbai.[6]

III. URBAN FORM AND GENDER

The urban form in any city, including housing and infrastructure, is often undergoing rapid change. Urban planning is typically portrayed as technical and non-political, although it often results in spatial segregation. This is especially the case for intra-urban transport planning. Investment in and provision of public transport is such a central urban investment, with widespread implications for residents in each locality – from changes in land values and forced evictions to access to livelihoods and social opportunities. This can hardly be devoid of politics.[7] At the same time, transport provides access to urban spaces and to a range of activities that are important for everyday life. With urban growth, public transport is increasingly essential and, in many cases, expensive and time-consuming: in a growing number of cities such as Bangkok, Dar es Salaam and Accra, it is not unusual for people to leave home before dawn to reach their place of work. Patterns of transport use reflect differences in income, education and location in the city and are heavily shaped by gender responsibilities. Women are generally more likely to use public transport or walk and their mobility is related to a variety of activities, from work to shopping to school trips, unlike men who are more likely to move between their home and their workplace. Balancing paid work with domestic responsibilities increasingly requires mobility in more and more segregated urban spaces, where home and workplace, production and consumption (and social reproduction) are separated. At the same time, the growing cost of essentially private "public" transport in most cities, as well as the very real threat of sexual harassment and physical violence for women travelling alone on public transport or walking act as powerful restrictions on women's mobility and their right to the city.[8] Transport planning most often fails to recognize and respond to the particular needs of women.

A similar lack of recognition of diverse needs and constraints can be seen in Mumbai's Slum Rehabilitation Scheme.[9] In this scheme, slum dwellers who are not tenants are offered small apartments in the new blocks that are replacing their former homes. This has recognized benefits – such as the provision of water and sanitation – however, these are offset by the limited space, which makes it difficult to work at home, an important income-generating option for women with child care responsibilities. The move from low-rise, mainly pedestrianized slums to high-rise apartments with new neighbours can also contribute to feelings of social isolation. For young teenage girls with disabilities, this isolation is exacerbated by the expectation that they contribute to housework; moreover, because of their disability they are seen to be particularly at risk of sexual harassment and violence, especially since rehousing entails, in most cases, the loss of the protective networks of neighbours. Both limited mobility and domestic responsibilities seriously curtail their social interactions.

4. See Tacoli, Cecilia (2012), "Urbanization, gender and urban poverty: paid work and unpaid care work in the city", Working Paper 7, Urbanization and Emerging Population Issues Series, IIED/UNFPA, 48 pages.

5. See the paper by Nicola Banks listed on the back page.

6. See the paper by Julian Walker, Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Jean-François Trani listed on the back page.

7. See the paper by Caren Levy listed on the back page.

8. See the paper by Caren Levy listed on the back page.

9. See the paper by Julian Walker, Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Jean-François Trani listed on the back page.

PHOTO 1:	Street activity, Karachi, Pakistan

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IV. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND URBAN CHANGE

In so many cities, women and girls are very vulnerable to attacks both in public spaces and within the home. Cities themselves do not generate gender-based violence; rather, processes of urbanization can heighten the risk factors for women, making them more vulnerable to violence while simultaneously creating economic resources and institutional support for them to deal more effectively with it, whether through informal or formal means.[10] The urban-specific factors that can lead to the greater incidence of violence in cities include more fragmented social relations, which erode support for the most vulnerable.[11] Engagement in certain occupations also exposes women to violence, and sex workers are particularly vulnerable to attacks.[12] For factory workers in Dhaka, sexual harassment both on their way to work and in the workplace is a routine occurrence.[13] For a very large number of women in urban areas, the constant threats, from verbal harassment to outright violence whenever they leave the home, are an unwelcome reality. This can significantly affect women's health and their ability to work.[14]

10. See the paper by Cathy McIlwaine listed on the back page.

11. As noted in the paper by Julian Walker, Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Jean-François Trani listed on the back page.

12. See the paper by Cathy McIlwaine listed on the back page.

13. See the paper by Nicola Banks listed on the back page.

14. See the paper by Cathy McIlwaine listed on the back page.

15. See, for instance, Amnesty International (2010), "Insecurity and indignity: women's experiences in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya", Amnesty International Publications, London, 59 pages.

When considering rates of violence against women in urban and rural contexts, the main differences seem to lie in its nature rather than its incidence, with violence by non-partners higher in cities than in rural settings. This is exacerbated by features of poverty, especially in low-income and informal settlements with poor infrastructure and limited, if any, sanitary facilities.[15] The distressingly high number of murders of women workers in Mexico's *maquiladoras* (assembly factories) suggests that important factors that increase risk include living in low-income settlements that lack street lighting and have secluded, un-policed spaces; also having to walk home at night and the women's migrant status and lack of social networks.

V. EMPLOYMENT

16. See the paper by Sylvia Chant listed on the back page.

Paid employment and the generally greater opportunities for income generation offered by urban centres are a critical element of transformation in gender relations. But women are more likely than men to be employed informally and tend to have less well-paid and more insecure jobs.[16] Even in emerging new economic sectors such as information technology services, women tend to be concentrated in low-end occupations as labour markets remain heavily segregated along lines of gender, caste and class. Despite these limitations, paid employment is widely seen as providing opportunities for independence and self-development. This does not necessarily translate into more equal relations between men and women within the household, especially with regard to decision-making.[17] Comparing the perceptions of rural and urban women and their male partners, it is not so much income and earnings but, rather, the value attached to women's contributions to the household that is important. Crucially, a large proportion of men and rural women do not recognize unpaid care work as a contribution, unlike urban women who also appear to understand the opportunity costs of paid work.[18]

17. See the paper by Sarah Bradshaw listed on the back page.

18. See the paper by Sarah Bradshaw listed on the back page.

However, it is important to take into account the fact that in many cases, women's work is not so much a choice as a lack of choice. Women's work is essential for the survival of urban poor households and is especially high among the poorest households; at the same time, it is not a guarantee of moving out of poverty. Balancing paid work and care work remains one of the major constraints for urban women, and especially for poor urban women. Life in the city is more expensive than in rural areas and, in many cases, is most expensive for the residents of low-income settlements who have to pay higher prices for inadequate accommodation, for water provided by private vendors and for access to latrines, where these exist. The cost of poor health, exacerbated by lack of sanitation and living in locations with high concentrations of environmental hazards, is also high. Here, missing a day's work when sick or injured can mean a considerable reduction in income, even if the pay is low. But there are also huge work burdens for those who are responsible for unpaid care work. Poor housing conditions, distance from health services and schools, unsafe neighbourhoods – both because of environmental hazards and high rates of violence and crime – and limited access to water and sanitation places an additional burden on those who are responsible for child care, food preparation, cleaning and washing. These are typically women's responsibilities, to which they often have to add paid work. The resulting time poverty and emotional stress are important non-income elements of urban poverty, which are made much worse during economic crises when prices rise, incomes decline and public service provision is cut.

VI. WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE IMPROVEMENT OF LOW-INCOME SETTLEMENTS' INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

19. See the paper by Celine d'Cruz and Patience Mudimu listed on the back page.

Despite these heavy constraints, women increasingly play a key role in urban poor movements, and their active participation in broad-based urban poor networks has transformed perceptions of urban poor mobilizations. In many nations, community savings groups managed by women form the basis of citywide and national federations, and they have also formed their own international umbrella organization (Shack/Slum Dwellers International).[19] Building on communities' strengths rather than on their weaknesses helps develop a voice and identity, and these federations can negotiate with governments and other stakeholders to improve and upgrade their settlements. One crucial aspect of this is the influence of women leaders in moving from the control of information and resources often typical of male leadership,[20] to a more open sharing of information and to seeking negotiation and dialogue with local governments rather than confrontation.

20. As described for Dhaka in the paper by Nicola Banks listed on the back page.

21. As Kaveri Haritas points out in her case study of Bengaluru listed on the back page.

Women's engagement in improving living conditions beyond their home is, to a large extent, an extension of their domestic responsibilities. The neighbourhood is an extension of the home and neighbourhood activities are considered to be domestic, especially since domestic chores depend heavily on neighbourhood conditions. The gendered division of domestic responsibilities enables women's entry into the public sphere, but also limits their engagement at the neighbourhood level.[21] This is especially the case for women who need to balance care work with paid employment: for the poorest women, a day's missed wages has a tangible impact on the family's expenditure and can

restrict their ability to pay for food, education and health services. In a case study of Bengaluru, it was almost always women not engaged in paid work, and with relatively fewer domestic responsibilities, who were able to dedicate their time and energy to community initiatives and leadership.[22] This, again, highlights the importance of recognizing the heterogeneity of urban women. While all of them juggle domestic responsibilities, marital relationships and paid work, they do so in different ways and with varying levels of constraints.

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