The UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) estimates that the year 2007 saw the number of slum dwellers in the world reach the one billion mark. This means that, on average, one in every three city residents is now a slum dweller. To be sure, the growth of cities and towns throughout the world has created both opportunities and enormous difficulties.
While most urban growth is due to natural population growth, not migration, migration into the world’s major cities nonetheless continues unabated. While urbanisation in and of itself is not inherently problematic, the pace and sheer scale of urbanisation has, in many places, far exceeded local government capacity or willingness to provide basic amenities to city residents, including adequate housing, water, electricity, and sanitation. This problem has been particularly pronounced in developing countries. As a result, urbanisation in many places has resulted in the creation of vast urban slums, where thousands and sometimes millions of urban residents live in sub-standard housing conditions, without access to even the most basic services.

Slum life has never been easy for the urban poor insofar as housing and living conditions are concerned. For women, the problems are especially acute. In slums across the world, there is a noticeable lack of basic services. For women, the phenomena of urbanisation and the growth of city slums have unique causes and unique consequences. Today, about half of international and national migrants globally are women. While previous studies revealed that most women accompany or join family members – most often their husbands – in the city, this trend appears to be changing. New trends show an increasing number of female migrants migrating on their own, as an increasing number of women are now the principal wage earners for themselves and their families. Women move to urban areas for a number of different reasons, ranging from seeking income opportunities, to fleeing conflict, environmental degradation, or family problems (especially those resulting from discrimination), to coping with health related problems like HIV/AIDS and...
Examining the Causes and Consequences

infrastructure, services, and basic shelter. Moreover, with the growing influx of slum dwellers to the informal and unplanned settlements they find themselves in, governments around the world are using increasingly callous methods to ‘beautify’ cities, erase the urban poor from sight, and clear urban lands (which are skyrocketing in value) for ‘development’.

In many slums, the majority of occupants living in densely packed shacks in fact do not own them, but rather rent them from landlords. Owners often rent out their shacks at high costs relative to the income of the majority of occupants, and this is especially problematic for indigent women who tend to be the lowest income earners. Add to this the fact that women are even less likely to have recognised rights over their homes, as these rights, in practice, are vested with the husband. Women living in slums are also often susceptible to forced evictions.

often desperate to escape personal problems and depressing social conditions in their own home areas, women from country towns and rural areas set out in search of better livelihoods. Women are often convinced that cities have better opportunities to offer than what they can achieve in their own home villages or towns. They are hopeful that even with a little capital – or none at all – their prospects of making ends meet are still better in the big cities.

What is an Urban Slum?

The world’s slums are characterised as lacking adequate housing, sufficient living area, access to improved water, access to sanitation, and security of tenure.
COHRE has documented that under many systems of customary law, women – regardless of their marital status – cannot own, control, or inherit land, property, and housing in their own right. In many parts of Africa, for example, men control household land (and the house on that land) because community authorities, who are predominantly male, allocate land to male household heads.

Many widowed women throughout the world are excluded from ‘inherit-ing’ housing, land, and property, and they are certainly not afforded equal rights over marital property during the time that their husbands are alive. An informal survey conducted by COHRE in the slums of Accra, Ghana showed that approximately one third of women had been victims of disinheritance and due to this reason they were now residing in the slum.

Women's Migration to the Cities:

Violence Against Women

Violence against women is endemic in all corners of the globe and is one of the world’s foremost human rights crises. It is a crisis which fundamentally reflects women’s low status within societies. Within the context of urbanisation, victims of domestic violence face the stark ‘choice’ of leaving the security of their home or being beaten by a partner. In many cases, victims of domestic violence have difficulty accessing alternative housing because of lack of domestic violence shelters, transitional housing programmes, and public or market rate housing which is affordable to poor women. This is especially true in non-urban settings where the resources available to domestic violence victims are next to nil, and women must rely as best they can on family or social support networks. For many women, gender-based violence in the home may force them to flee their homes in search of safety and better opportunities for themselves and their children.
Understanding the 'Push' and 'Pull' Factors

The international community has come to recognise that women are particularly disadvantaged by forced evictions: “Women...suffer disproportionately from the practice of forced evictions. Women in all groups are especially vulnerable given the extent to statutory and other forms of discrimination which often apply in relation to property rights (including home ownership) or rights of access to property or accommodation”, and women experience a heightened risk of violence and sexual abuse when they are rendered homeless.

After they have been forcibly evicted from their communities, whether in urban, semi-urban, or rural areas, the resulting insecurity and isolation may convince some women to take shelter in an urban slum community.

Through previous research and advocacy, COHRE has shown that when women’s housing rights are respected and protected – including when women and girls are able to exercise control over housing, land, and property – women and girls are better able to cope with the detrimental effects of HIV/AIDS. Because housing security leads to better living conditions, access to livelihood, and access to education, women and girls living in secure housing situations are often better able to mitigate the negative personal and financial impacts of HIV/AIDS.
Searching for a Better Life in the Cities:

Women, while they may not have control over their own housing situation, nonetheless have to deal with all of the problems that come along with inadequate housing in the slums. Construction and repair of slum housing is appallingly inadequate most of the time, exposing occupants to leaking roofs, abysmal sanitation, security risks, flooding, and fire outbreaks. It is women who are disproportionately affected by all of these problems, as they spend more time in the home and community caring for their families and their households.

In slums throughout the world, women – who constitute the majority of lowest income earners – find it very difficult to afford adequate housing. In Ghana, women interviewed by COHRE reported resorting to group-renting a room in a shack in order to share the living expenses. This meant that anywhere between ten to thirty young women would collectively rent a single, tiny room in a dilapidated shack on either a weekly or monthly basis.

The overall consequence of any form of violence against women and girls is the denial of fundamental human rights, including nullifying or impairing their enjoyment of the right to secure tenure and adequate housing. COHRE’s research has shown that in many places, violence against women in the slums is rampant and time and time again, violence against women and women’s insecurity in the slums emerge as principal and recurrent issues. For example, in Accra, porter women have reported incidents of rape and sexual abuse, with little to no response from the police. In Mumbai, women have expressed fear about going to the toilet at night for fear of being attacked, as it is not safe for them to venture outside of their homes. In Nairobi, domestic violence in the slums emerged as a serious concern.
FACT: While on average urban residents have in recent years experienced better living standards than have their rural counterparts, the tide is expected to turn. According to the UN Committee on Poverty Reduction, “[t]here is evidence that [poverty] is becoming an urban rather than a rural problem. Unless urban poverty is addressed, continued urbanisation will result in increases in urban poverty and inequality.”

For women, the burdens of urban poverty are all the more acute due to gender-based discrimination and prejudice. Indeed, the feminisation of poverty can be every bit as unrelenting in the cities as it is elsewhere.

“People move to the cities not because they will be better off, but because they expect to be better off.”

– Anna Tibaijuka
Executive Director
UN-HABITAT

Women’s Experiences in the World’s Slums

“I lost my husband, and I am looking after five children.”

Currently, there is no room for us to sleep in. Children sleep anywhere. I have no help because I have no money. The landlord took away all the property when we failed to pay. Before I came here, I lived in the Central Region ... I lost my husband and was left to look after our five children. My husband’s relatives shared the property [amongst themselves]; I did not have anyone to look after me. That is why I came to Asabaiman: to fight for my survival. But, I have no house for us to stay in. My children sleep anywhere. I beg you to get me a place where I can sleep. My husband did not leave behind a house or land, and when the household property was taken by my relatives and I came here, I worked hard and bought land back at home. I cannot sell it or go back home where the land is, because there is no work to do there. At least here, I can do petty trade and afford to feed my family. I cannot sell the land in my home town because I am saving it for my girl children [I have no boys]. If the government got me an affordable house, I would be willing to pay rent.”

– A woman living in the slum community of Ashaiman (Accra, Ghana)
Testimonies and Experiences of

Brazil

“I lost everything when my house burned down because of an electric failure. Fires are very common in our neighbourhood and one of the things we feared the most. The electric system is very unstable, and our houses are made of wood and inflammable materials. ...I had to rebuild everything again with no help from the government.”

– A woman living in the Jardim Celeste favela (São Paulo, Brazil)

India

“I came with my husband with dreams of a better life in Mumbai.

But after coming here, I was shocked to see the conditions I was subjected to live in. I’m completely [at] the mercy of my husband here. He abuses me and hits me for no reason. Seeing his behaviour towards me, my two sons also don’t respect me at all. I don’t understand where to go to get rid of this life. I cannot go back, as my father is no more, and mother is living with my brother’s family. My husband doesn’t allow me to work and doesn’t give me money, as well. So, I take up the embroidery assignments to generate some income for myself. Sometimes, I just feel like dying, as I don’t have any reason to live.”

– A young mother living in Azmi Nagar Slum (Mumbai, India)

Sri Lanka

“They say our houses may be torn down...that’s the biggest fear we have to live with.”

– A woman living in the slums of Colombo, Sri Lanka
“I came to Buenos Aires all by myself, no husband or family, looking for better living conditions. The worse part was finding a place where to live. Finally, I rented a room in a crowded house in the oldest part of the slum. At that time, safety was one of my biggest concerns. As a woman, all by myself, I feared something could happen to me. However, immediately I became friends with other women that helped [me] to get a job and a better kept company. The support from other women and friends was very important to get through.”

– A woman living in Villa 31 bis Slum (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The actual triggers for women’s migration to the cities are many times related to patterns of gender-based discrimination and violence which serve to push them deeper into poverty or which otherwise land them in a crisis situation. For example, women whose economic situation suddenly worsens as a result of disinheritance, divorce, or domestic violence cannot be said to be moving to urban centres out of a ‘gender-neutral’ desire to work.

Still, if governments prioritise women’s rights and women’s empowerment, and show the sufficient will to act, positive change is within grasp. Women themselves have pointed the way as they call for better services, safer streets, control over housing, security of tenure, economic empowerment, and an end to violence perpetrated against them.

The solutions are available and known. What is needed is the determination and the resolve to put those solutions to work.
In an era of increasing urbanisation, women must be able to take their rightful place in the city, as fully equal citizens able to live in dignity, peace, and security. Secure tenure is one of the indispensable pillars of the human right to adequate housing. Without security of tenure, the full enjoyment of housing rights is not possible, and forced eviction can become a real and perpetual threat. All people should have legal protection against threats of forced eviction and harassment, especially because secure tenure is linked with so many other aspects of a full and dignified life. As such, States should – as a matter of priority – provide legal security of tenure to all people living in slums, including women and their families.

States should also ensure that their domestic legal protections appropriately reflect their obligations under international human rights law. States should further ensure effective implementation of domestic legal protections and ensure that women’s rights to equality and non-discrimination are at all times upheld.

Slums around the world are in desperate need of investment and upgrading. If governments fail in their human rights obligations, the grinding poverty and abysmal living conditions we see in the slums today are only expected to worsen in coming years. Women should be able to effectively participate in all decisions pertaining to housing policy development which impact them, and they should have their interests directly represented at the level of city management. Women should benefit from slum upgrading schemes and should be allowed to meaningfully participate in the conceptualisation, design, and implementation of those schemes. Upgrading programmes should take into consideration women’s immediate needs and strategic priorities.
States should redouble their efforts to combat violence against women in both rural and urban areas, and such efforts should also prioritise eliminating violence against women within slum communities themselves.

As such, governments must recognise the inter-linkages between domestic violence and women’s housing rights, and work to ensure that inability to access adequate housing does not become a barrier to women who wish to leave violent relationships. Public policies designed to combat domestic violence should take steps to grant, inter alia, alternative housing solutions to women. Alternatively, States may provide for the removal of abusive spouses from the home, ensuring that women’s personal and housing security is not threatened.

Ownership systems, including titling, should be designed to secure women’s legal rights to housing on an equal basis with men. States must ensure that where housing, land, and property are allocated to slum residents, ownership should be provided jointly to both spouses. Joint ownership, including titling, should be the default policy of governments, as this approach best secures women’s de facto equality.