



At the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), in Istanbul in 1996, the City Summit placed great importance on women's concerns and led to a series of commitments by national governments within the framework of the Habitat Programme. The Declaration of the first World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities committed members to: *“promoting and ensuring the full participation of women in the decision-making process at a municipal level by taking necessary measures for them to share power and authority”*.

The urban environment can be a site of both empowerment and exploitation for women. Cities offer many advantages for women; but there are also many challenges. Compared with rural areas, many cities offer better facilities and services, such as water, transport, education, child care and health care. They provide more opportunities for social, economic, cultural and political participation. Women can also usually access more diverse employment opportunities in cities. There are possibilities to engage in community politics at different levels. Enhanced access to information, including through the media and new information and communication technologies (ICT), is another advantage for women. In cities women can more easily access sports, recreation and cultural facilities.

Urban poverty can, however, negate the potential advantages of cities for women. Women in poor communities do not have the same access to infrastructure – including transport, services and employment opportunities - as affluent women in the same cities. Poor urban women are more likely to become victims of sexual violence or human trafficking. Urban poverty is linked to HIV transmission and reduces the likelihood of treatment.

It is important to recognize that women are not a homogeneous group and there

Women (are still far from being represented) in political and public life, and the pace of change is too slow. The

20 percent of councilors at the local level are women, while women make up only 9 percent of the world's mayors.

Prejudices against women's involvement can be more strongly held at local than at higher levels. Local government in many areas has been shown to be particularly responsive to informal institutions and relations of power, rather than more formal rules and procedures, which often advantages men rather than women. The male environment within political institutions can also deter women.

Violence against women and girls is unfortunately a feature of urban life. Violence in its various forms, from intimidation to sexual assault, restricts the ability of women to move in and around cities, reducing their freedom to seek work, social services and leisure activities. It is therefore very timely to consider this aspect in the context of the launch by the Secretary-General of his campaign on violence against women at the