

**“Women, gender equality and governance in cities”**

**Keynote address by Carolyn Hannan  
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**At the Asia Women’s Network Roundtable:  
“Envisioning gender governance strategies for Asian cities”**

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Distinguished roundtable organizers, panellists and participants,

It is an honour to make the keynote address at this roundtable on a critically important issue – women, gender equality and governance of cities. I wish to commend the organizers – the Seoul Foundation of Women and Family, the Seoul Metropolitan Government and the Seoul Regional Office of the Metropolis Women International Network – on the initiative to bring together so many actors to share visions and strategies on increasing the participation and influence of women in the governance of cities. I look forward to hearing more on the practical experiences from many cities in Asia later this afternoon.

The Second Metropolis Women International Network Forum, of which this roundtable is a part, is particularly timely in the context of the 15-year review of implementation of the global framework on gender equality, the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The issue of women’s participation in decision-making is one of the critical areas in the Platform where reliable data and information is lacking (with the exception of information on representation in national parliaments). The information that is available indicates a serious lack of progress in women’s involvement in decision-making processes in many areas. Women’s participation in governance in cities is one area on which there is still very little easily accessible information. The Forum and this roundtable will therefore make an important contribution in the context of the 15-year review.

**The United Nations context**

‘Governance’ has been defined by the United Nations as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels – including local city level. Governance refers essentially to the manner in which power is distributed and exercised in society – how decisions are taken and how citizens have their say. It covers both formal and informal institutions and processes and cannot be narrowly defined in terms of political decision-making processes. In its broadest sense, governance is equally related to social processes and concerns the exercise of power in the management of resources which are critical for human wellbeing. Consultation of all stakeholders and development of participatory approaches are critical to effective people-centred governance.



Local Government; and developed regional training materials. The national summits held in four countries led to the establishment of national networks and the development of national strategies and action plans as well as training materials. This work provides important lessons learned and promising practices which can be built on in the region.

### **Gender-sensitive governance of cities**

There are significant development and democracy dividends from women's agency and more effective partnerships between women and men in all spheres of life. Where women are empowered politically, socially and economically and can actively participate in public life, including in cities, the greatest gains are achieved by societies. Increasing the participation of women in decision-making in cities constitutes an important step towards democracy – among other things, women's participation ensures diversity in contributions to policy-making and can offer new perspectives and priorities. Broader participation of women at local levels of decision-making may also be an important first step towards increased political participation at the national level.

The planning and management of urban areas – including housing, facilities, services and infrastructure - should be based on the needs, priorities and contributions of women as well as men. Women's voices are, however, not systematically brought into the consultation and dialogue around city planning. Women are still far from being represented equitably in political and administrative decision-making. As a result, city institutions, facilities, and services are not always conceived with women's needs, priorities and contributions in mind, which can result in, among other things, neglect of critical areas or inefficient public services.

Given the importance of women's equitable participation, there is a clear need for accelerated efforts to ensure their involvement and influence in local government in cities. The 2006 figures from United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) indicate that women constitute only 9 per cent of mayors and 20 per cent of councillors globally. In 2001, data collected by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) showed that in 13 countries the representation of women in local government ranged from 33 to 2 per cent. According to the 2007 monitoring report of the joint project on Women's Participation in Society of the Asian Network of Major Cities 21 (ANMC21-WPS), women make up less than 15 percent of local assemblies and councils.

Increasing women's participation in decision-making in cities requires actions on a number of fronts. Three broad strategies can be identified under which specific actions/measures need to be identified. Firstly, ***equal representation in decision making*** must be promoted to ensure that the needs of women as well as men will be taken into consideration in municipal planning and management. Successfully implementing this strategy requires political will by municipal authorities and clear targets, backed if necessary by legislation, for example legislation to reserve a percentage of seats in municipal bodies for women. Secondly, women must also be encouraged to ***participate in the***

*management*



Since 1995, a number of persistent obstacles to









women's participation is secured, the institutional environments are also not always conducive to women's participation because activity schedules and the lack of child care facilities cause conflicts with family obligations. Rather than treating this as a "women's issue", the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, as recently as March 2009, stressed the need for equal sharing of these responsibilities between women and men and for ensuring that both women and men can have public and family roles. This must be taken fully into account in urban planning and management.

In some local government contexts, efforts have been made to more effectively utilize the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (C-4no).



the development of training programmes, tools and guidelines and the organization of seminars and conferences, as well as regular monitoring and reporting on progress.

### **Conclusions**

Fundamental to the promotion of gender equality is the opportunity for women as well as men to develop basic human capabilities and participate in all aspects of political, economic, and social decision-making, including at city level. Women in decision-making positions contribute to redefining socio-economic and political priorities, placing new issues on the agenda that reflect and address women's specific values, experiences and priorities, and providing new perspectives on mainstream issues. The broader the base of participation in power structures and decision-making processes, the greater the transparency and accountability. The impact of efforts to bring gender equality perspectives to bear in urban government must, however, be assessed not only in terms of the number of women in decision-making positions, but also by outcomes which bring needed change in the lives of women and girls.

The positive links between gender equality and empowerment of women and the effective and sustainable development of cities and the improvement of the quality of life for all citizens are increasingly clear. Women represent half the resources and half the potential and are important agents of change in all contexts, including in cities. Policies, plans, resource allocations and programmes in cities need to more effectively target the particular needs and priorities of, and build on the contributions of, women as well as men to guarantee more effective and sustainable management of cities. An effective means of increasing attention to gender equality perspectives in city government could be to systematically highlighting the costs of not consulting and involving women and including gender equality perspectives in policies, legislation, programmes and activities.

The conviction expressed by the Heads of State in the United Nations in 2005 that “progress for women is progress for all”, is also true in the cities of the world. The full involvement of women and gender-sensitive development is needed to ensure that cities provide safe and empowering living conditions and can contribute to equitable, effective and sustainable urban development for the benefit of all.

Finally, the concerns of the Network and of this Roundtable and Forum take on increased