Malaysian Urban Forum 2019

Women Assembly

Opening Speech

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Honourable YB Zuraida Kamaruddin, Minister of Housing & Local Government

Salutations _____

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning to you all!

I hope you are all well rested after yesterday's very busy and engaging day. I am excited and energized to see all of you influential, innovative and smart women in this room.

I very much enjoyed yesterday's debates. It is my sincere wish that today's sessions will be as change-inducing, inspiring and innovative. But looking at you now, I have no doubt about that!

Many of you know my personal and professional commitment for promoting and implementing inclusion and gender equality. When I was a mayor in Malaysia, gender equality and empowering women and girls was at the centre of my agenda.

This remains the case at UN-Habitat. Gender equality and inclusion are at the centre of everything that we do – we apply a Human Rights-based Approach to all of our work to analyze and address inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress. In the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, the issues faced by women and girls are well documented.

Gender-based discrimination persists in many parts of the world. As the world witnesses an increased feminization of poverty, women and girls make up a large proportion of the informal sector of employment in cities and are disproportionately affected by limited access to safe places of work, education and skill development, health care, resources and technology. To illustrate my point, allow me to use the example of education. According to UNESCO, In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 30 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 are out of school. Some of these children will start at a later age but many more will remain entirely excluded, with girls facing the biggest barriers. Within this marginalized group, 9.5 million girls will never set foot in a classroom compared to 5 million boys.

The gender gap is even wider in South and West Asia, where 80% of girls out of school will never start compared to 16% of out-of-school boys. About 4 million girls across the region will remain excluded from education compared to almost 1 million boys.

Today around the world, women tend to be poorer, earn less, and have fewer opportunities in most aspects of life than men. In more than 100 countries studied by the United Nations, women are legally excluded from some jobs because of their gender, and in 18 countries, women need their husband's approval to work.

Gender discrimination can further intersect with, and compound, discrimination on other grounds, such as ethnicity, migration status, and age and thus exacerbates marginalization of certain groups, curtailing their abilities to fully participate in and benefit from sustainable urban development.

Twenty years ago, the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action marked a turning point in the history of women's rights. This progressive blueprint, to the realization of which 189 governments committed, remains a powerful source of inspiration in the effort to realize equal opportunities for women and girls.

But while much progress has been made in the intervening decades, much more remains to be done to ensure that women and girls are guaranteed the opportunity to

live up to their fullest potential. It is only in 42 countries that women hold more than 30% of seats in the national legislature, and girls still do not have the same educational and development opportunities as boys in many regions.

Gender equality is not just the concern of half of the world's population; it is a human right, a concern for us all, because no society can develop – economically, politically, or socially – when half of its population is marginalized. We must take stronger action to ensure that we leave no one behind.

For this Assembly, I would like to make a bold proposal: Instead of focusing on the issues as it is often the case, let us focus on the solutions and opportunities.

What active roles can women play in the process of building a sustainable urban nation, as agents of change?

How can UN-Habitat support you, the key women in urbanization in Malaysia?

On women as agents of change.

We, today's women, have unprecedented access to opportunities. I am reminded of my late beloved mother, who provided us her children with sustenance and the opportunity to be educated in a language she herself did not know. Today, we have opportunities that our mothers could only dream about. We excel in all fields, from exploring the universe as astronauts to leading nations. In situations where women

are marginalized, we are wasting the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world. With perseverance and determination, women around the world and through the ages have reached the pinnacle of success, often against all the odds.

As women scale new heights and expand their horizons, their struggle to overcome the shackles of inequality and discrimination continues. As another female political leader who experienced her fair share of obstacles, Hillary Clinton, rightly said, **"the status of the world's women is not only a matter of morality and justice. It is also a political, economic, and social imperative"**. Put simply, the world cannot make lasting progress towards achieving the SDGs if women and girls in the 21st century are denied their rights and are left behind.

In this regard, we must do more!

We must do more in working toward achieving SDG 5 on gender equality and empower all women and girls.

We must do more in supporting national and local governments, particularly mayors, in localizing the gender equality dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In order to continue to fuel this fire within us, the women of today's world, nations across the world must not only revolutionize their economic, social and

cultural structure to one that supports the progress of women, but must also take active measures to include women in all of the political structure of the country as well.

Women must have adequate representation in governments world-wide. Inclusive decision-making is long overdue.

Through this, women and girls will finally be given the chance to initiate change and overcome obstructions in all spheres, from traditional and cultural to economic and social barriers.

The United Nations defines women's empowerment in the context of five main components:

- Women's sense of self-worth;
- Their right to have and to determine choices;
- Their right to have access to opportunities and resources;
- Their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and
- Their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

These rights must be implemented, protected, promoted and used as guiding principles in the battle against gender inequality and discrimination.

How can UN-Habitat help?

When it comes to discussing inclusion, gender equality is a central topic. One way of reflecting women's issues in development and planning agendas is to ensure their effective participation in governance – both in political and planning structures.

UN-Habitat has developed a Gender Equality Marker in addition to its human rights focus, which is used to ensure that every project at the project planning phase is gender-responsive and is designed to empower women and create equal opportunities and benefits.

In terms of normative work, we have several guidelines highlighting the importance of involving women in governance and the decision-making process, such as the "Gender Mainstreaming in Spatial Planning: A step-by-step approach for municipalities." I would gladly share these with you if you have not seen them already.

With regard to operational work done by UN-Habitat, initiatives such as the "Safe and Sustainable Cities for All Joint Programme", which was launched in June 2011 in collaboration with UN Women and UNICEF, is a community-led, results-oriented programme enabling local authorities and women's, youth and children's advocates

to take action to increase safety, and prevent and reduce violence, including sexual violence and harassment against women and girls.

This initiative has been launched in the cities of Greater Beirut (Lebanon), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Metro Manila (Philippines), Marrakesh (Morocco), Nairobi (Kenya), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and San José (Costa Rica), and has helped these cities to develop a platform upon which a more inclusive decision-making process can be built.

I know from our partners Think City and KL City Hall that there is a social inclusion programme in Downtown KL associated with Local Agenda 21. I would like to tell you that you are not working alone, for globally more and more countries and cities are realizing the importance of social inclusion, particularly safety for women and girls.

In 2008 UN-Habitat also launched the "Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme". The programme's approach is grounded on its emphasis on integrating slum dwellers into the broader urban fabric using city-wide participatory planning methods. Inclusiveness and gender mainstreaming are core concepts within the scope of this programme, ensuring that women, youth and other vulnerable groups are involved in the decision-making process.

This provides a positive practical experience of inclusive integrated slum upgrading through which all stakeholders learn key lessons and feel confident to adopt participatory planning in other upgrading and planning processes.

In Afghanistan, the UN-Habitat country team has developed Community Development Councils that operate in every province. These councils are gender-balanced and provide an open, safe and effective forum for women to speak up and participate in decision-making. These Councils have proven to be a strong platform for building trust and community cohesion. Through the Community Development Councils, women have played a key role in peacebuilding in the country.

In Sri Lanka, UN-Habitat has implemented community-led housing development in small townships and rural areas, with a focus on the engagement of women. We have built over 25,000 houses as well as trained local communities in construction and use of appropriate technologies. These projects have had a focus on engagement of local women in decision making and development processes.

More recently, with partners, we have co-sponsored the launch of the "Global Compact on Inclusive and Accessible Cities" – which I encourage all cities and mayors to join. The Compact highlights the importance of planning cities for and with people living with disabilities and older persons.

These are a number of demonstration projects and examples we can learn from as we continue to transform lives around the world. In this respect, at UN-Habitat, we are proud that women, girls and youth are among the main beneficiaries of our interventions, which, in the past two years, have led to:

- About two million people benefiting from improved access to water and sanitation.
- Four million slum dwellers being positively impacted by participatory slum upgrading interventions.
- Over 500,000 people enjoying safety and access to 40 public spaces upgraded in 12 countries.
- 25,000 people having access to sustainable energy supply.

Finally, I am proud to announce that the new UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2020-2025 has placed issues related to gender equality, children, youth, older persons and disability at its centre. This will ensure that all of UN-Habitat's programmes and work will prioritize inclusiveness for all as we work towards fulfilling the premise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: to leave no one behind.

We count on your partnership and support to implement this vision and look forward to working with all of your and our partners to fulfil human rights in cities and to ensure inclusive and accessible cities for all.

It takes all us to change the world, to make the world a fair place for everyone, a place where women and girls are truly equal. We owe it to our mothers who have fought before us, and our daughters, so that they grow up with unlimited potential. Let’s make them proud, together.

I thank you for your attention!