Mobility as Access: Equitable Urban Mobility – Supporting the Empowerment of Women and Girls

Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Aïsa Kirabo Kacyira
Formerly invites members of the press to a Special Event at the
Commission for the Status of Women

From 1830-1945 on Tuesday 18 April 2014
In Conference Room 2
At the United Nations Headquarters, New York

“In peri-urban areas in developing countries, women typically incur longer waiting times and higher transport costs” according to UN-Habitat

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Nairobi, 13 March 2014: Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Aïsa Kacyira, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Kate Gilmore will speak at a special event at the Commission for the Status of Women in New York on Tuesday 18 March.

The event will also launch a new mobile phone app that enables users to both access and upload safety related information about an area such as lighting, access and frequency of use. As part of the launch journalists and participants are also invited on a neighbourhood walk immediately following the event to give a live demonstration on how the app will contribute to increasing the safety of women and girls in urban areas.

Background

More than three billion people currently reside in cities, a figure expected to rise to five billion by 2050. While cities can be sites of safety, opportunity, and access to services — factors that can contribute to poverty alleviation — they can also concentrate risks of violence and insecurity, especially to vulnerable groups such as women and adolescent girls. Unplanned urban growth driven by rapid urbanization has had profound impacts on the dynamics of mobility and transport planning in increasingly complex, socially segregated urban settings.

While affordability of transport for the urban poor, accessibility and, economic and social equity have recently become topical concerns of urban mobility; the gender specific challenges of urban travel are often neglected. There is a strong relationship between poverty and lack of access to adequate urban mobility. The extent of how women and girls may be disproportionately affected by poor urban mobility is not sufficiently well known or quantified. To achieve a better understanding of this impact, mobility should be thought not only as access to desired goods, services and activities; but also, in terms of women’s safety and access to education, training, employment, health care and social networks.
Considering mobility as access encourages urban policy and planning to reflect the empowering potential of transport for women and girls in achieving enhanced lifestyle opportunities.

Urban women and girls not only experience the city differently than men and boys; they also face particular risks in urban environments when transiting in the city. In many countries of the world, they have fewer transport options than men and, moreover, they are less likely to have access to private motorized transport. As income earners, childcare providers, household managers, maintainers of community networks etc. women move around urban areas in complex ways, with non-motorized travel often accounting for a majority of daily trips. Therefore, fixed buses routes are often impractical, requiring the use of more expensive or unsafe door-to-door modes of transport. In peri-urban areas in developing countries, women typically incur longer waiting times and higher transport costs, according to Planning and Design for Sustainable Urban Mobility: The Global Report on Human Settlements 2013, which can put a lot of financial pressure on households where financial pressures already exist. Given that women’s travel patterns are different from men’s and these differences are characterized by deep and persistent inequalities, ultimately they have inferior access to public means of transport.

Furthermore, safety and security in public transport and when commuting on foot are issues that disproportionately affect women. Significant levels of sexual harassment of women on urban public transport systems are frequently reported worldwide and can be further complicated by local cultural factors such as the prohibiting of mixing men and women in public etc. These barriers to urban mobility impact on educational possibilities, access to employment, to health care and to social networks. Indeed, urban mobility is not just about developing transport infrastructure and services but about overcoming the social, economic, political and physical barriers to movement, such as class, gender relations, poverty, physical disabilities and affordability.

Research has shown the pivotal role that spatial mobility plays in the everyday lives of young people, including young women, underscoring further the significance of a well-functioning transportation structure to access these resources, from training opportunities to real employment. In UN-Habitat’s State of the Urban Youth Report 2012/2013, young women in the four cities studied repeatedly talked about unequal access to transportation, thereby presenting a significant impediment to their mobility. One African study in this report, conducted in Accra, found that children from southern ethnic groups were not encouraged to cycle by their families. Among boys it was perceived as dangerous: the behaviour of ‘rebellious, deviant school age males’. If girls dared to ride, they were considered of ‘questionable sexuality’.

In this context, designing gender-sensitive non-motorised and motorised transport solutions essentially means changing the very fabric and mind-set of urban policy making so that urban mobility is perceived as access to economic, social and political opportunities for all of society, including marginalized and vulnerable groups. The recognition of transport as a means to empower those belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups links with the objective that will be in line with the realization of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda.

**UN-Habitat and Urban Mobility**

“Transport” is seen as a means and not an end itself - the ultimate objective of all transportation being access to opportunities, goods services and amenities. UN-Habitat’s growing portfolio of urban mobility work reflects this overall vision and a unique people-centred approach towards better urban mobility. UN-Habitat adopts a human rights based approach to mobility planning to ensure equitable access for all to education, employment, city services etc, with a focus on the most vulnerable groups and cross-cutting issues including gender and environmental sustainability. UN-Habitat promotes public transport and non-motorised transport as part of an overall “Avoid-Shift-Improve” strategy for better urban mobility. The focus is also on better coordination and integration between land-use and transport planning. UN-Habitat works with a range of partners including national and local governments, other UN agencies and a number of specialised and knowledge-based organisations.

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