



LUND UNIVERSITY

Young women and urbanization - trying to cope in crowded cities

Arvidsson, Matilda; Kiwala, Lucia

Published in:
Habitat Debate

2003

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Arvidsson, M., & Kiwala, L. (2003). Young women and urbanization - trying to cope in crowded cities. *Habitat Debate*, 9(2), 10-10.

Total number of authors:
2

Creative Commons License:
Unspecified

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Young women and urbanization *trying to cope in crowded cities*

By Lucia Kiwala and Matilda Arvidsson

Deborah, 18, has always dreamed of a better life and better job prospects in Nairobi. But she is also discovering the grim realities of today's rapidly urbanizing world – a world in which young people like her often end up in slums that are potentially dangerous places for young women.

Driven by poverty, many young women leave their rural homes to try their luck in the city. According to a study last year by the African Population and Research Centre, slum populations in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, are growing mainly because of rural to urban migration.

The slums, lacking security of tenure, are the only places young people can find cheaper accommodation. Often sharing with friends or total strangers, they live in over-crowded and dangerous environments. Some are introduced to sex and drugs at an early age, and many find themselves having sexual relationships and babies prematurely. Others mix with criminals and drug barons and become victims as well as offenders. Not surprisingly, the study found young girls to be at much higher risk in the slums than at home in the countryside.

This is also true for young girls and women who get a formal education. Because of peer pressure and town influence, some become teenage mothers without any hope of continuing their education, and have to find their way in the world as unskilled single mothers without child-care help or support from their parents.

Some countries have revised their educational policies to allow teenage mothers to continue with their education. But in many developing countries, society does not tolerate this. Should this status quo be maintained given the level of development, modernisation and rapid urbanization?

Depending on the level of education, many young women do not fit into the formal employment system. They then have to resort to working as domestic servants, or shop and bar attendants, or market vendors, hawkers, or employees in garment factories in the free trade zones. They encounter exploitation and abuse. In many countries, they work long hours for low pay, surviving on meagre incomes which they have to share with extended families back home in the rural areas.

The long working hours expose them to the added dangers of getting to and

from work in the dark. According to Lydia Alpizar of *Elige*, a Mexican NGO, many young women, mostly working in the export processing zones have been murdered since 1993 in Mexico City. Forty per cent of the murders recorded in Mexico City were young women aged 15-19. In Mexico City, they have been the victims of the drug trade, trafficking in persons, and the human organ trade. Many criminal gangs benefit from violence against women.



Through years of conflict, women in Afghanistan have suffered every form of discrimination and degradation. Can this mother and her daughters hope for a better future? Photo: © UN-HABITAT

The victims of murders and other crimes are often attributed to prostitutes, thus drawing scant sympathy or understanding from the criminal justice system.

As the debate on legalising prostitution rages, the human rights of young women are grossly violated, and others are denied the fundamental right to life. The situation is dreadful, given that many are forced into prostitution.

Commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of young women and children is well documented. In its October 2000 report on *Rape for Profit*, Human Rights Watch documents the plight of young women working in the brothels in Bombay and other parts of India, brought from Nepal and other neighbouring countries.

John Frederick, author of *Fallen Angels: The Sex Workers of South Asia*, caused a stir three years ago when he

argued that most young women from the hills of Nepal were not in fact “tricked” into prostitution by crafty outsiders, or drugged and kidnapped by Indian gangsters only to wake up several days later in a Mumbai brothel. He argued instead that many villagers knowingly sold their daughters into prostitution because they had no other means of survival. In other words, prostitution in South Asia is not primarily a criminal issue, but a social problem caused by poverty and caste discrimination in a strictly hierarchical society.

Trafficking of young women and children from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia to Europe, North America, and the Middle East is also documented, as are the links between trafficking, conflict and urbanized areas. One of the latest examples is the involvement by International Police Task Force (IPTF) officers in Bosnia and Herzegovina in trafficking, as reported by Human Rights Watch in 2002. What is being done to stop these crimes against young women? Are existing national and international laws adequate? Are the needs of young women understood and therefore addressed by most urban policies? This is the situation for young girls in an urbanizing world.

Considerably more remains to be done to sensitise the entire criminal justice system on promoting the human rights of women and children, and on general issues related to gender equality and justice. Good examples include initiatives such as UNIFEM's work in Yemen where judges, prosecutors and lawyers are trained to deal with cases of violence against women, with special attention to remedying sole reliance on tribal law.

In the developing world not much attention is being paid to international or national laws on trafficking, prostitution, sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children. But it is a fact that poverty drives parents to send their children abroad to earn money.

So addressing poverty in general and urban poverty in particular, while creating viable employment opportunities for young women and men, must be seriously considered by governments, development agencies, private sector and civil society activists engaged in planning and developing policies and programmes for urban areas.

It is imperative to understand the needs and priorities of young women and men. This would have a real impact for people like Deborah and her contemporaries in the Nairobi slums.

Lucia Kiwala is the Chief of UN-HABITAT's Gender Mainstreaming Unit. Matilda Arvidsson is doing an internship with UN-HABITAT.