

Giving women a voice in Urban Governance – Experiences from UMP-Asia

By Girija Shrestha and Ranjith Perera

IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT WOMEN'S participation in public decision-making is minimal compared to that of men. In a pattern prevalent in most government and local administrative sectors in the Asia-Pacific region, women constitute only 6 percent of mayors and 18 percent of city councillors.

This under-representation means that the needs and priorities of women, especially those living in urban poverty, are excluded from the decision-making process at every level and thus from the development process.

The Urban Management Programme sought to redress this by using the city consultation system to solicit the concerns of women and bring them into the decision, planning and implementation phases of city development.

The UMP led by anchor institutions in the region, is now called the Urban Resource Network for Asia Pacific (URNAP). The Bangkok-based Asian Institute of Technology serves as a regional secretariat of URNAP, while the All India Institute of Local Self Government is a sub regional secretariat. Using available limited resources, it strives for gender sensitive city consultations, and seeks to ensure that city-level government officers understand the concerns and needs of women. It has also been conducting workshops and seminars to share knowledge and even arranged a local government contest on gender sensitivity.

For example, it held a series of urban poverty reduction seminars focused

on the needs of women in Phnom Penh, Vientiane, New Delhi, and Lalitpur, Nepal – each different in socio-economic terms and the way it is administered. The consultations covered shelter, capacity building for women in poverty, HIV/AIDS and other key problems.

The UMP intervention in Delhi, has had a visible impact on the status of slum women, who are now much more aware and better informed of their position and status on land tenure and the right to shelter. They are also in a better position to negotiate for their demands of basic services and land tenure with the authorities. At a household level, being engaged in micro-credit activities, women have more bargaining power and more say at home.

Similarly, in Lalitpur, self-help groups were formed and women's leadership was developed. The consultation approach gave these slum dwellers confidence that they have the potential to be the biggest agent of change.

The consultation in Vientiane showed that bringing women into the implementation of infrastructure development is pivotal to the success of any given project, and the UMP gender consultation has expanded from 3 to 40 villages with assistance of Asian Development Bank funding.

Despite the differences between the cities, a common approach was adopted to ensure better commitment of gender needs at the leadership level, to bring more women representatives into the process, encourage reporting that takes wom-

en's concerns into account, and raising awareness so that gender sensitive action plans are implemented.

The consultations found that gender awareness does not come naturally to professionals and decision-makers whether they are men or women, and that changes in organizational culture are required. It was also found that inclusive partnerships in urban governance must also take into account the obstacles to women's involvement in public life, such as a lack of confidence or skills, and the burden of multiple responsibilities.

The experiences of the UMP have shown that participation in the decision-making body is the first step to meet gender equality. The capacity building activities can be conducted in parallel to it to make them more efficient and confident as well as sustainable.

Women leaders said the UMP consultations had helped lead to a change for the better in their social status, encouraged more women to join in, increased confidence, raised their economic empowerment and given them a stronger voice in their communities and their homes.

UMP evidence clearly shows that a project designed with an understanding of the needs of disadvantaged people not only improves their living conditions but also raises their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Girija Shrestha and Ranjith Perera are faculty members of the Asian Institute of Technology coordinating UMP activities in the region.

Women slum dwellers in this New Delhi neighbourhood felt they had benefited from the UMP consultations. Photo ©: Girija Shrestha.

