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### **Might urban areas help women?**

Often faced with poor access to education and health services, women and girls stand to gain the most from urbanization. But in the run up to this week's Habitat III Conference in Quito, Ecuador, experts told Devex they are concerned the role of women and girls in urbanizing economies will be taken for granted.

Officials from the [Organization for Economic Cooperation Development](#) and the [United Nations Human Settlements Program](#), or U.N. Habitat, are calling on policymakers to acknowledge and address the relationship between urbanization, child marriage and girls' education in the run up to the approval of the New Urban Agenda this week.

The [World Health Organization](#) reported in 2013 that one in every four girls in developing countries are married before the age of 19, and one in nine is married before 15. The plight of these girls and women is linked to urbanization, according to Laurent Bossard, director of the OECD Secretariat for sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel.

"The three worst countries in Africa in terms of child marriage, are Chad, Mali and Niger, and the same three countries also have the lowest level of urbanization," Bossard told Devex on the sidelines of the OECD Africa Forum on Sept. 29, referencing soon-to-be-published research by the organization.

"Not only that, but the same three countries also have the highest number of children per woman and the lowest rate of girls in school," he said. "There's a convergence of poverty, low urbanization and the situation of women and therefore population growth. These things are linked."

Several academic studies have found that girls [gain better access](#) to education when they relocate to more urban areas. Experts also [widely agree](#) that access to education drives down rates of child marriage, female genital mutilation and other forms of gender-based violence.

But as Bossard pointed out, policymakers and leaders haven't yet connected the dots in approaches to more sustainable urbanization.

"There's still no consensus," he told Devex. "Many leaders in Africa for example say we should stop urbanization, it's much better if people live in villages, there's less violence, less insecurity."

Bossard acknowledged that with rising numbers of displaced people and rapidly growing slums, these concerns are legitimate, but still don't outweigh the benefits to the most vulnerable. "The fact is, most will be very likely worse off if all they stay in rural areas."

### **Careful planning**

Still, the risks posed by rapid urbanization — poor access to health services, inadequate water and sanitation, for example — could outweigh the benefits to women and girls if progress isn't sensitive to their needs, Aisa Kirabo Kacyira, deputy secretary-general of U.N. Habitat told Devex during an interview at the forum.

"What we have seen is that urbanization provides a huge opportunity but also creates vulnerability, especially if we're not intentional about it, for the women and girl children," she told Devex.

"The urban environment brings in different values, different cultures and systems. If well-planned it enables women and girls to have better access to education and health services, but when we don't plan well for it, women

and girls are the first to be disconnected,” she said. “If there is not sufficient safety, then they cannot use the space, they can’t access the opportunities.”

When urbanization doesn’t consider the role that women play in the economy, and “how and where women and girls go about their day,” Kacyira said, urban planners and policymakers miss out on swathes of human capital, much of which can be unlocked by tapping into the informal sector.

“Many girls and women in countries with large aging populations for example work in the caring industry, if I may call it that, but the growth in this industry is often informal,” she said.

She explained that women and girls relegated to informal work are less likely to have access to health services and more likely to suffer from exploitation.

### **Liberating the informal sector**

Bossard argued the solution is not necessarily driving workers into the formal economy, particularly in contexts such as sub-Saharan Africa, where [more than 80 percent of the labor force](#) relies on the informal economy. Instead, Bossard said, “You need to informalize the rules, not formalize the people.”

By acknowledging an industry as a thriving and crucial segment of the economy, then shaping services around that market, policymakers can adapt more holistic policies for urbanization, he explained.

“Today if you want to become a butcher in Bamako, you need to respect the same rules as in Paris. The result is that there’s not one single ‘formal’ butcher in Bamako, so you need to adapt the rules to the reality and not the reverse,” he told Devex.

Finally, both the product and driver of more inclusive urbanization will be more women in leadership positions, nipping in the bud problems faced by women and girls in rapidly urbanizing environments.

“Even in the planning of a building or a street,” Kacyira explained, “or planning lighting, sanitation, these women leaders will quickly tell you: ‘yes, this is what we need.’”

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### **The work load of girls**

Girls spend 40% more time performing unpaid household chores than boys, a new report from the UN children's agency has noted.

Unicef said the difference in time spent working amounted to 160 million extra hours a day worldwide.

Two out of three girls cook and clean in the home, and almost half collect water or firewood.

They also perform more "less visible" domestic work like childcare or looking after the elderly, the report says.

It also found that the extra workload increased with time: between ages five and nine, girls spend 30% more time on chores - by 14, it rises to 50%

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-37126628>

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### **Radio – girls and empowerment**

This year, the International Day of the Girl Child focuses particularly on the UN SDGs and their relation to adolescent girls and the pursuit of gender equality. In fragile contexts like Sierra Leone, which have been affected by both conflict and disaster, adolescent girls experience a range of cross-cutting vulnerabilities. It is therefore a good time to both reflect upon and highlight innovative approaches to empower girls and women in difficult circumstances. One such approach is the “Pikin to Pikin Tok” radio for education project implemented by UK based children’s rights agency, Child to Child, in partnership with local agency the Pikin to Pikin Movement (Pikin to Pikin means Child to Child in the local Krio language).

<http://www.childtochild.org.uk/>

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