



SPEECH

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REPORT ON "CULTURE
AND GENDER EQUALITY"





Good morning, good afternoon and good evening.

I'm so happy UCLG asked me to explore Local Actions Combining Culture and Gender Equality and to share part of this journey with you.

But first, let me say

- **The future is not sustainable without sustainable cities** where more than half the world lives, and more than two-thirds will by 2050. Without sustainable and equitable cities, we will be in deep trouble.
- Sustainable development will only happen when the economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions meld together – **something only culture can achieve, since the future we desire is moulded by the subconscious whisperings of cultural lexicons telling us what to aspire to.**

Culture is not just Art with a capital “A”. It permeates all aspects of human life: from dry legal texts to the vibrant colours, tempos and excitement of artistic and scientific creativity and play; from the grandiose to the everyday... in mega-cities and sleepy towns. It's how we assign meaning, welcome and bid life adieu. Culture is the prism through which we perceive – and are perceived by others. It modulates our understanding, response to, and engagement with our human, natural and manufactured worlds. Culture embodies our collective humanity: creative geniuses, pursuit of knowledge, innovation and pleasure but also the flip side: prejudices, discrimination and exclusionary behaviour. **Parts of culture that need to change.**

Make no mistake, culture **will** shape our future – the question is what that future will look like. This depends on whether we dare to rethink development; are brave enough to discard concepts we take for granted. That we must, is evident in the devastating fallout of climate change and COVID.

COVID surfaced deep-seated inequalities and exclusions, revealing ailments such as inadequate health systems, and disproportionately impacts the marginalised: religious and ethnic minorities, the poor, migrants, the differently-abled... and in each, women, girls and persons of non-binary identities even more so.

Existing gender constructs mean the pandemic **exacerbated gender inequalities**: domestic violence spiralled; more women were retrenched due to less secure jobs; women's care work multiplied as they looked after the ill – many never returned to



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paid jobs. Digital gender gaps meant fewer women and girls could access online resources, including cultural and other online initiatives. World-wide women **reject a return** to the **pre-pandemic so-called 'normality'**. UCLG leaders **call upon** local governments to adopt 'a system change approach to address pre-existing issues'¹.

With respect to Local Actions combining Culture and Gender Equality, there are three things to remember:

1. **Gender is deeply entrenched in every culture** because there are only three incontrovertible facts of life we all must address: birth, death and the existence of sexes. So, all societies construct gender systems defining roles, responsibilities and rights of girls/women and boys/men – and rewards for obedience and penalties for rebellion. Male/female binaries are also applied to non-binary identities.

¹ See the [UCLG Decalogue for the post COVID-19 Era \(2020\)](#), [The Live Learning Experience Knowledge Hub on Women's leadership \(2020\)](#) and [A Global Feminist Municipal Movement. The Transformative Commitment of Cities and Territories to Generation Equality \(2021\)](#).



2. **Cities and municipalities are pivotal levers for gender equality.** Cultural processes are always sites for contesting – and contested – meanings and values, jostling for acceptance. Nowhere is this more evident than in urban – and now digital – milieus.
3. **Every city has its narrative – a lexicon of meanings** in the names of streets, plazas, buildings, in who is reflected – and who not – in monuments, statues, and public imagery; in public events, celebrations and commemorations, in museums, cultural venues, guidebooks, schools and teaching materials. Meaning is conveyed in how public spaces are designed and who occupies these – and whether these are equally accessible to all at all times of the day and night. As Agenda 21 for culture says, ‘places and territories are social constructs [...] reflecting the history, identity, and values of the populations that inhabit them’. **City narratives reflect societal inclusions and exclusions;** they are rarely gender-inclusive and commonly exclude other marginalised groups. So, local governments have a responsibility to make city narratives, dynamics, and institutions more gender-equal, inclusive and democratic.

The good news is that the UCLG family is firmly committed to sustainable development that leaves no one and no place behind and to making **cities as accessible and enjoyable for women and girls as for men and boys**. The good news is that culture is increasingly recognized as having ‘**an important role in finding solutions to the complex issues of urban metropolises**’², including making **Women’s Rights to the City a living reality for all**.

The really good news is the **amazing plethora of initiatives taken by municipalities and local authorities in the cultural field across the world to refashion gender roles and urban lexicons**, often with civil society, cultural actors, academics, gender experts and the private sector. Impressive **civil society and transnational initiatives** add to the rich compendium of proven – though diverse – pathways to more gender-equal, diversity-inclusive sustainable cities.

Gender inequalities are universal, but the cultural parameters and dynamics of gender differ tremendously from one place to another, as do political systems and administrative structures. So, authorities can – and should – select and adapt the most suitable and doable in their context.

² See the platform “[Culture for All. ACCESS Action Planning Network](#)”.



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There is a **host of reasons for adopting cultural interventions to construct more gender-equal democratic landscapes**. On the one hand, measures such as increasing women in administration, decision-making and economic planning must be accompanied by a cultural shift in order to upturn deep-rooted gender roles.

On the other hand, cultural interventions and a gender-lens have economic and other dividends. The World Health Organisation confirms that cultural actions improve health. They reach the marginalized, reinforce resilience, catalyse new thinking and help groups, such as women survivors of violence, young mothers, the differently abled, abandoned children, communities living in extreme poverty, and migrants. They reduce municipal healthcare costs but remain an under-tapped resource.



INNOVATIONS MAKING MUNICIPALITIES MORE GENDER-EQUAL

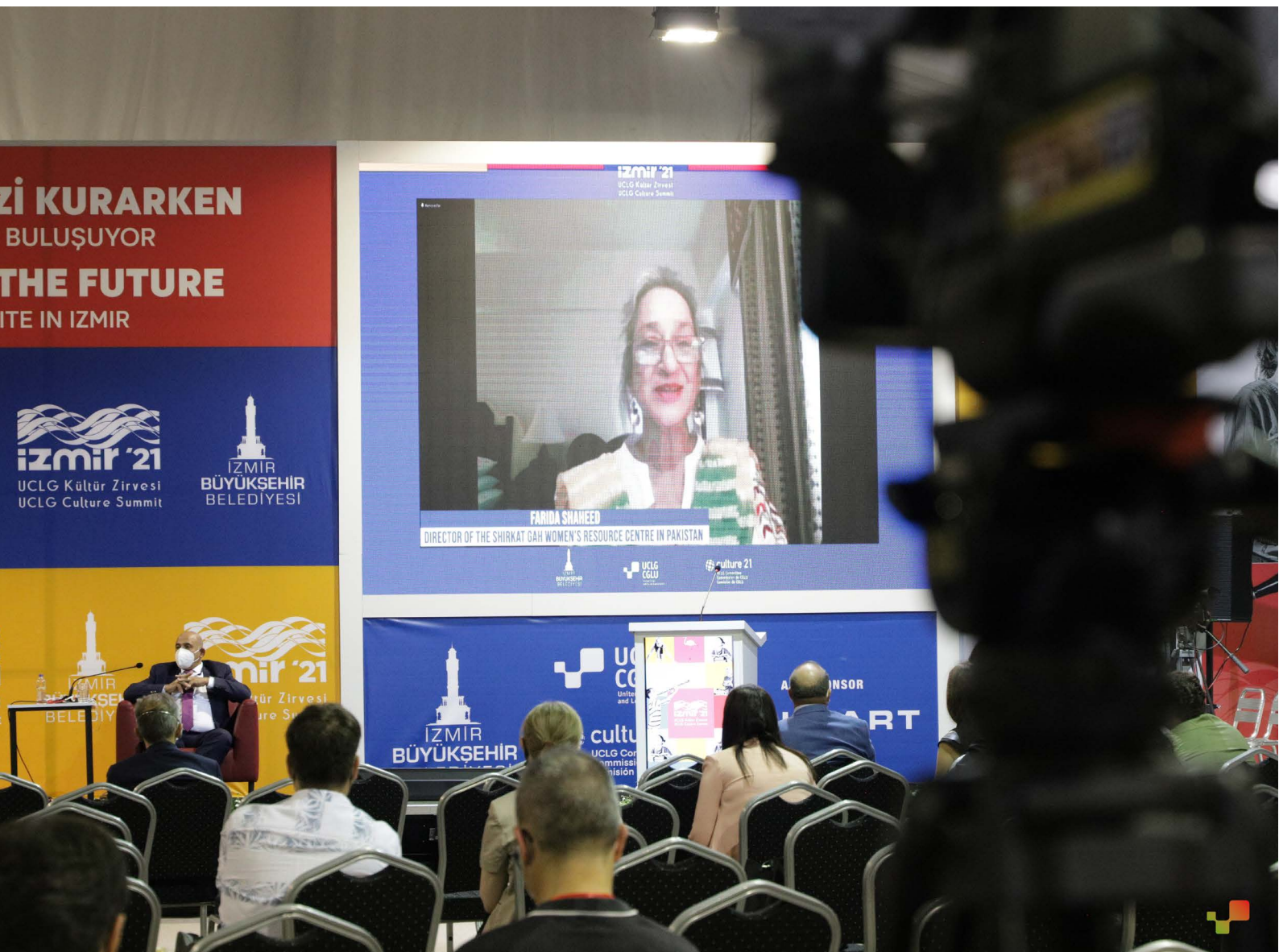
I cannot possibly share all the wonderful actions being taken in the cultural field, but these range from teaching **children new gender roles** in school and play... to promoting **new narratives in museums**, city tours, promotional materials, and creative engagements; from **rethinking masculinity** in media programmes, performances and new bedtime stories... to **revamping iconic cultural events**; from encouraging and **supporting women's engagements and self-expression** in community centres, performances, exhibitions, festivals, and neighbourhood activities to making **public spaces and events more comfortable and safer** for women and others, and encouraging more gender equitable use of public spaces by reserving times, giving women priority and arranging childcare.

Women's contributions to cities and territories are being made visible by new visual imagery and renaming streets and public places.

Women's creativity, perspectives, voices and struggles are being promoted and projected by libraries and museums collecting feminist writings, materials and images of women's movements to share in special events and schools; by adopting gender equality yardsticks for competitions and events or making these women-exclusive; populating public narratives with female and non-binary perspectives through cartoon competitions and the refashioning of traditional folktales, for example. Many independent libraries and museums are also revising gender notions, transforming narratives and stimulating feminist thinking.

Municipalities from all regions and continents have been brave enough to accept the challenge of comprehensively restructuring and revamping the entire cityscape and cultural lexicon. These include **Izmir itself** and – in no particular order – **Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Umeå, Lyon, Paris**, and **Mexico City**. Others taking multiple actions include **Taipei, Reggio Emilia, Malmö, Dublin** and **Vaudreuil-Dorion**. **Terrassa** and **Victoria** have launched ambitious cultural and gender equality journeys.

Where transversal change is not yet on the agenda, cities are using cultural interventions to leverage incremental changes such as **Jeonju, Xi'an**, and **Konya**. There must be many more I missed out on because of my limited time and language skills.



Some actions focus on particular issues. Addressing violence against women and girls (**Puebla**) and tackling the transformation of machismo (**Bogotá**) are some of them.

Others aim to ensure the inclusion of particular groups of residents such as migrants, ethnic and religious minorities, those living with disabilities and the LGBTQI communities.



MUNICIPAL ACTIONS ARE COMPLEMENTED BY ACTIONS BY OTHER ACTORS

Durban-based [Empatheatre](#)'s new form of research-based co-created theatre promotes **reflexive listening, empathy and discussion around issues of public concern**. Cape Town's Magnet Theatre changes fatherhood notions through 'baby theatre'.

WOW (Women of the World) and EUNIC use the **power of arts and culture to create dialogue, to challenge and overturn gender inequality attitudes** across the world.

Mujeres por la Cultura, the International Union of Cinemas, the Cayeye Films Foundation and UNESCO supported initiatives to promote women's voices, perspectives and analysis in film, music and other art forms.

CHALLENGES

It is not easy to refashion deeply embedded notions of gender **and challenges abound**. Ingrained beliefs may need to be tackled through the education system but teachers may resist new curricula they feel is "culturally alien".

Values formally expressed in constitutions and policy documents may clash with people's traditional cultural paradigms. **Traditional male leaders** may be seen "as the **custodians of the city**" even if they occupy no official posts. Conversely, key decision-makers, such as mayors, may still be viewed more like 'kings' than civil servants accountable to citizens. Promoting common values can be especially challenging for large cities that host multiple cultures and communities, and where **relationships amongst the diverse city dwellers, and between them and authorities** may need to be reset.

Overcoming hurdles requires ingenuity, creating spaces for interaction and debate, especially at a local level, and discussions around difficult topics to forge a way forward.

A **common challenge is government structures**. Sector-wise vertical operations are ill-suited to address gender that cuts across all sectors. The **culture sector** may have **many authorities** responsible for specific aspects; big festivals may be the remit of tourism, smaller local events the remit of other authorities for example. The **result is segmented decision-making based on fragmented data, undermining the effectiveness of planning, execution and review**.



So, let me share some key lessons from what works:

1. **Public institutions** must be **explicitly committed to gender equality**, instill these values in staff. **Policies** must be **receptive to** and **supportive of female** and non-binary creations and **regulations less onerous**. Protocols and SOPs help to ensure compliance.
2. A **gender equality/women's empowerment** municipal entity – with a seat at the central decision-making table and healthy budget is crucial as are **strong interlinkages** of gender-equality, diversity and cultural decision-making processes and institutions.



3. **Comprehensive transversal gender-equality frameworks** are preferable. These require the input of many actors and institutions and robust coordination among relevant government departments and institutions as well as other actors.

Small-scale and standalone actions are useful but risk becoming more tokens of intent than catalysts of change.

For example, supporting **women's economic or social activities in the cultural arena**, may answer women's **practical needs** but not the strategic need for a system change and new cultural lexicon. Paid work will not alter gender dynamics if earnings are too small or women do not control the income. **Conversely**, changing cultural practices that have symbolic significance do catalyse new gender norms and practices. Public signifiers vary significantly and different examples exist: from **Taipei** introducing women as musicians and deacons in Confucius Temple ceremonies to **Montevideo** eliminating Queens and Crowns in carnivals.

4. **Authorities alone do not shape or reshape cities.** Sustainable transformation demands the full participation and ownership of residents. **An open-door policy for** citizens and specific communities to meet top officials combined with officials proactively meeting the marginalised and more vulnerable communities **shows that the city cares and promotes greater ownership of official initiatives**; it is especially important for women who do not approach authorities because they fear they will not be heard or be taken seriously.

So, the processes are as vital as the actions.

Consultative processes and community conversations make policies – which most people will never read – come alive.

Community participation in planning, implementation and assessments processes helps to ensure municipalities are responsive to and inclusive of all inhabitants, assures community ownership and maximizes the chances of success.

5. **Multi-faceted collaboration** in planning, execution and evaluation **across** government entities, and with other actors, **increases success.**

It is vital to **link up with academia and gender experts and to partner with** artists, creators' groups and the private sector as well as civil society actors,



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especially feminist groups. **Academia and experts** offer robust evidence gathering, analysis to better understand issues, and help surface women's contributions. **Women's groups, especially feminist ones** bring new insights and innovative approaches. Those working at the grassroots are well-attuned to the issues and what will work best for diverse women. In many cities, **transformation** has and is being catalysed and/or supported by **feminists and social justice actors joining hands with local authorities**.

6. **Documentation and data analysis** help evidence-based policy decisions. A simple first step is to count women in cultural events, awards and institutions, educational materials, public imagery and names, public spaces and facilities. **Documentation and research help formulate effective new narratives and initiatives.**



7. Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge and address the disparities of gender and other factors in digital connectivity – that the young consider a lifeline and is creating new forms of cultural expressions every day.

Ultimately, Women's Rights to the City will only be realised when the city truly reflects not only their past and current realities but their aspirations. **We need context-specific transformative strategic thinking.** Pathways may differ. What works in one place may not in other places; what works for smaller cities may not be right for larger ones, etc. But change demands **new feminist** approaches, and policies and institutions committed to eliminating all forms of gender discrimination and harmful practices in which **cultural interventions are only one – albeit vital – part of the equation.** Women, girls and other gendered people must be supported – including financially and through spaces and trainings – to be **co-creators of cultural life and lexicon, to shape new multi-voice urban narratives and development that is truly sustainable and meaningful for all.**

Thank you. I look forward to continue to learn from other panellists and everyone here.

P.S.

1. Adopting a gender-lens in policy formulation and **gender responsive budgeting** are crucial. All policies have gender-differentiated impacts. Even seemingly gender-neutral activities such as clearing snow. In Sweden, Karlsloga municipality saved health costs when it changed its policy after a gender analysis.
2. **Addressing masculinities** and overcoming toxic masculinities is as vital as reshaping what being a girl or woman means. At home I often say to end gender-based violence requires changing what it means to be a man in Pakistan.





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