



Building a Grassroots Global Movement: 25 years later

The Beijing 25th Anniversary
Reflections Series Summary
(2020)

Introduction

The Huairou Commission: Women Homes and Community is a women-led social movement of grassroots groups from poor urban, rural, and indigenous communities who collectively work together to improve living conditions and status. The Huairou Commission's mission is to work towards a world transformed with balanced power relations and sustainable, resilient communities where grassroots women leaders with their groups and communities are at the center of decision-making, where people lead lives free from poverty, inequality, violence, insecurity, and all forms of injustice.

During 2020, the Huairou Commission celebrated its 25th anniversary and used this landmark to reflect on its history, explore contributions of grassroots women to community development, and evaluate the impact of their work to empower women and strengthen capacities for local development. With the Beijing 25th Anniversary Reflection Series, Huairou Commission members determined future strategies to continue to advance the agenda of grassroots women around the world.

In 1995, 30,000 women from around the world attended the civil society meeting of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, China. While poor urban and rural women's groups were severely under-resourced, GROOTS International and the National Congress of Neighborhood Women obtained funding from UNIFEM and relentlessly negotiated to establish a Grassroots Tent at the NGO site of FWCW in Huairou near Beijing. For the first time, grassroots women had their own space at a UN Conference. Impressed by the energy and organizing of grassroots women and their partners in the Grassroots Tent, Wally N'Dow, then Executive Director of the UN Habitat, "commissioned" fifty women leaders to monitor Habitat II to be held the next year and named the group the Huairou Commission. This unprecedented act gave an organized group of grassroots women a central role in the human settlements arena. They capitalized on this opportunity to demonstrate the political power of locally connected grassroots women's groups coming together as a peer learning community.

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Now, the Huairou Commission is organizing in 42 countries with 101 member groups including grassroots organizations led by grassroots women; facilitating NGOs that work in partnership with grassroots women; networks of grassroots women's organizations; and the founding Huairou Commission networks. Secretariat of the organization is in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with leadership through a global Governing Council.

The Huairou Commission has created a learning community for grassroots women. Their work has strengthened capacities for bottom up local development and advocacy and connected them to global organizations to integrate their expertise on grassroots issues into policy decisions. Since Beijing, grassroots women have demonstrated that they are not dependent victims, but powerful change agents. They have developed and spotlighted a myriad of examples of good practices and evidence showing that grassroots women are leading strategic and holistic approaches, building alliances, and increasing women's social, economic and political capital. They are experts in their communities. Grassroots women have increased their participation at the local, national, regional, and global levels to secure space in formal structures in order to advocate for and raise community issues around gender, gender budgeting, decision-making, representation in government, and programming relevant to grassroots women.

STEERING COMMITTEE: JAN PETERSON & MARNIE TAMAKI (CO-CHAIRS), PAM RAMSON, CATHY HOLT, VIOLET SHIVUTSE, LANA FINIKIN, MAITE RODRIGUEZ
HUIROU STAFF SUPPORT: MOLLY VALLILLO, SANDY SCHILEN, ANA GABRIELE SABANCEVAITE
EXTENDED REPORT AUTHOR: PAMELA RANSOM PHD.,
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: CATHY HOLT, 2020

The Importance of Huairou Commission Tools

Through the reflections, grassroots women identified key tools they have developed and refined that were essential to advancing the grassroots agenda since B+25 and successfully impacting community development.



Mapping

Community mapping is a participatory research tool that can be used to identify various development risks and vulnerabilities, as well as resources. It raises awareness, informs decision-making, and engages community members in a structured learning, documenting and analysis process. Mapping is used to gather local data and mobilize community members and other stakeholders to identify and address community needs together through collective advocacy and action planning. Grassroots women's groups are recognized for the expertise they have developed in mapping communities to engage, and mobilize development programs. Mapping and risk assessment findings are frequently utilized in Local to Local dialogue sessions with local government officials to discuss community development priorities and lobby for priority actions.

Peer Learning

A Peer Learning Exchange is a learning tool for grassroots women leaders to share knowledge and practices. This horizontal learning process is anchored in experiences on the ground and locally obtained data results in collectively owned pools of practical knowledge that can be adapted in the local context. Peer exchanges are different from traditional training because grassroots women are both learners and teachers. The exchanges result in building transformative relationships between women from different countries and empowers women as leaders and experts of development issues. Women are now recognized for creating innovative community solutions while aligning their localized work with broader global processes like the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda. They are taking on public roles, gaining new identities as public planners, gatherers of local data to identify vulnerable groups, and advocates lobbying for gender equitable inclusive strategies.

Local to Local Dialogues

The grassroots members of the Huairou Commission have developed Local-to-Local Dialogues (L2Ls) to position grassroots women as community leaders and representatives of community constituencies in the political arena. L2Ls raise awareness about community issues by collectively convening and informing local decision makers. L2Ls also provide opportunities for grassroots women to organize around their own priorities and negotiate with local authorities to improve access and control over resources and services, and to influence development planning and implementation. They support women to influence public decisions by placing community priorities and practices on local government agendas. Frequently, L2Ls generate political leverage for grassroots women and lay foundations for formal partnerships between grassroots women's groups and local authorities.

Grassroots Academies

Grassroots Academies (GA) are another form of peer learning where grassroots organizations meet as learners and teachers to exchange successful community development and resilience strategies, discuss barriers, and make policy recommendations at the global, regional and national levels. Over the years, the Huairou Commission has facilitated grassroots academies prior to each major global meeting. They function as opportunities for grassroots women to strengthen partnerships and amplify the impact of local practices by involving mainstream actors (NGOs, government, funders, academia, and private sector partners) in interactive analysis and problem-solving sessions.



Leadership Support Process (LSP)

The Leadership Support Process is a series of agreements on how to communicate effectively to support Huairou Commission members in their organizing capacities while nurturing respect and trust. LSP utilizes techniques and methods of grounding to ensure attentive, active and respectful listening and participation in group meetings, which in turn set the stage for productive and empathetic organizing. LSP builds strong organizations, partnerships and movements by developing connected, reflective and empowered individual leaders.

Leadership Development Process

Throughout its history, the Huairou Commission has supported engagement processes aimed at upscaling the leadership capacities of grassroots women. The leadership development process uses peer learning tools as well as the establishment of leadership schools and centers to engage grassroots women in advancing leadership capacities. Trained leaders participate as mentors to others to advance the network of evolving leaders and support them in building their leadership skills. The Huairou Commission uses a sourcebook to guide leadership capacity building and engage women in strategies for effective community development.

Watchdog Groups/Vigilance Committees

More recently, grassroots women have developed and instituted community monitoring groups, sometimes known as Watch-Dog groups or Vigilance Committees, to ensure institutional accountability and transparency. These groups surveil government actions with regards to such issues as women's rights, illegal land grabbing, or crimes against women. They also promote institutional accountability by monitoring compliance with implementation of agreed upon community development plans, and financing. A recent addition to community monitoring is remapping; a process where grassroots women and governments develop a work plan on a particular issue that establishes dates for government compliance to implement agreements. Remapping provides the basis for monitoring compliance by government authorities.

Theory of Change

Since its inception, the Huairou Commission has positioned itself as a unifying force committed to a global movement for grassroots women's empowerment in and for development. Its members believe that effective development occurs from the grassroots up. In 2015, members have consolidated their distinct approach to a Theory of Change, which organizes work around four pathways for change. This intersecting “diamond” is used for building community resilience, women's leadership and a local to global movement. The four pathways are:

**Strengthen Grassroots
Women's Organizing
and Leadership**

**Nurture Grassroots
Women's Knowledge
and Good Practice to
Promote Gender-Just
and Resilient
Development**

**Influence and
Change Public Policy
and Processes
(Local, Regional
International)**

**Build Constituencies
and Networks**





Global Linkages

Since its beginning, the Huairou Commission has provided structure and resources, and opened spaces to grassroots women's groups to share learning, nurture leadership development, enhance community development work and lift up the voices of women in all levels of the development and decision-making processes.



The organization supported grassroots women in localizing its tools and incorporated movement building concepts that supported organizing and activating women to work collectively and individually towards shared goals. The Huairou Commission and its members have developed multiple linkages, partnerships, global policy engagements, and leadership roles in a wide range of local, national, regional and global entities to advance the movement of grassroots women's leadership and inclusion, while emphasizing bottom up development practices.



Partnerships and Collaborations

The Huairou Commission was a driving force in UN entities such as UN Habitat, World Urban Forum, UN Women, Commission on the Status of Women, UNDRR, and the World Bank. It has also been an active member of the International Land Coalition at the global level, advancing women land rights within the action coalition and reference group on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Huairou Commission continued to center their engagement on grassroots issues that has shaped gendered programs, policies, and central platforms.

Members are also active drivers of groups at regional and local levels such as the Woman's Land Link Africa (WLLA) by organizing academies that have been an important platform for grassroots women members to share issues related to land. In Latin America, groups are participating in the global campaign called Stand for Our Land. Other partnerships and activities include the Right to the City, Women and Habitat, and the New York Civil Society Habitat Working Group. The Huairou Commission has also partnered with researchers, universities, governments and other strategic alliances to center women in the transfer of knowledge and participation in decision-making.



Working with the United Nations



Since its inception, the Huairou Commission has developed multiple linkages, partnerships, global policy engagements, and leadership roles in a wide range of UN entities.

Through these linkages with the UN, the Huairou Commission has:

- Advised and supported the UN in its restructuring.
- Ensured global institutions evolve to recognize the expertise of grassroots women and open spaces for their active participation, thus shaping global initiatives.
- Provided concrete feedback with localized data through mapping, which is critical to policy and program implementation.
- Made UN gender empowerment work more democratized and increased the impact of UN work by creating space for other civil society organizations.
- Inspired bureaucratic hierarchies to create space for the role of grassroots women, civil society and participatory agenda setting
- Changed donor/assistance models to ensure grassroots are properly resourced and valued as partners not beneficiaries.
- Localized the SDGs and other global agendas.



UN Women

The Huairou Commission was an active presence for many years in the civil society group GEAR (gender/equality/architecture/reform) that was instrumental in the formation of UN Women. It was a driving force in creating and implementing the UN Women's global initiative: Safe Cities Free of Violence Against Women and Girls. Huairou Commission members have focused on women's rights in public space, which includes the right to live free from fear, free from experience of violence, and political organizing.

The expertise of Huairou Commission members around women's economic autonomy and access to skills, training, credit, and employment is an extremely important area of work and has impacted global policy. Members provided examples of holistically working directly with local governments on various neglected issues such as housing, land rights, governance, and sanitation. This approach connected UN Women's work with cities and national governments, helping to provide meaningful bottom up guidance.

UN Habitat

The Huairou Commission has continued to influence UN Habitat. It was a co-founder of the Global Land Tools Network (GLTN) contributing to the development of evaluation criteria and tools that are gender sensitive and linked to women's empowerment. The Huairou Commission played an instrumental role in the creation of UN Habitat's Advisory Group on Gender (AGGI). It also helped organize Urban Thinkers Campuses (UTC) that allowed women to focus on gender concerns while allowing for sharing of best community practices on inclusive urbanization. These UTC processes provided linkages to other groups such as civil engineers, city planners and government officials.

Collaboration with UN Habitat resulted in the agency opening spaces and providing resources for grassroots women at forums, policy unit discussion, women's caucuses and conferences organized by UN Habitat. This participation has given voice to hundreds of women's views and perspectives on gender policy and agenda setting. The Huairou Commission was also tasked with organizing and facilitating an expert group meeting on gender for policy inputs to the New Urban Agenda.

Most recently, grassroots women were recognized for their expertise on community and risk mapping in the COVID 19 pandemic, and for identifying weaknesses in health systems.

Grassroots Women and Agenda Setting

Group participation in national, regional and global meetings and processes provide not only an opportunity for governments to learn more about the bottom up work of grassroots women, but allow key actors to value their expertise and important contributions in a variety of policy areas. Women are being recognized for their localized knowledge as speakers at conferences or as policy experts. The grassroots women's practices are now demonstrated, consolidated and incorporated into public policies to reflect issues and concerns of women on the ground in many decision-making bodies. Members emphasize that this participation and recognition has increased their power because they are actively taking collective positions on critical policy issues. They believe that governments give them more space to spotlight activities and inform other actors because of their participation in UN and other global conferences. Working through the Huairou Commission, grassroots women have provided their unique expertise and mapping of best practices in community development organizing that has influenced both programming and policies in global organizations.



The Huairou Commission's Impact

The Women's Movement

Grassroots women embrace many feminist concepts such as full social, economic, and political, equality for women. However, many poor women do not identify as feminists due to differences in how grassroots women and feminists frame certain issues.

Some grassroots women expressed concerns that feminism has professionalized the work on women's empowerment and gender equality often excluding the expertise of grassroots women. By not recognizing the diversity of poor and marginalized women, the current women's movement has undermined grassroots activism, organizing and diversity work. Members voiced concern that the current feminist movement operates on biases and stereotypes that grassroots women are culturally and religiously traditional, pro-family, lack education and feminine consciousness. These misperceptions can create distance and mistrust among grassroots and feminist leaders.

Grassroots women have contributed a vital bottom up vision that is influencing ways to make feminism reach into all the corners of women's lives and has re-framed the perceptions of grassroots women not as victims, but as experts in their communities.



Grassroots women also have influenced the feminist movement by focusing on the inter-sectional identities of women and the holistic approach they use in community development. Grassroots women frame their activities based on the power of collective action that empowers everyone who participates. It is not hierarchical, but rather democratized, especially in terms of interaction as groups and agenda setting, particularly in terms of role distribution.

Grassroots women have emerged as expert leaders driving impactful results, which is also the goal of feminists in social movements. The Huairou Commission has demonstrated exceptional policy fluency and actively and concretely participate in setting policy agendas. Attendance at global conferences and exchanges with other women's groups has increased the awareness and understanding of a gender perspective and resulted in focusing new levels of attention to gender mainstreaming and the movement beyond the previous gender-blind approach.

A challenge to grassroots and feminist collaboration is a rivalry for resources. Problems of hierarchies and competition around resources must be recognized. International NGOs have sometimes co-opted women's voices and grassroots groups, and incorporated them into an agenda that is not grassroots woman-centered. These disparities of money and power create tension and distrust among the groups working on goals of the women's movement.



Community Resilience

For the past 25 years, Huairou Commission members have actively mobilized in community recovery and reconstruction post disasters. The process created an opening for rebuilding communities and providing new entry points in decision-making on community planning. Over the years the emphasis of members has shifted from disaster response, to recovery and now to resilience. Huairou Commission members have been operationalizing and implementing such action frameworks as Hyogo and Sendai and countering the representation of grassroots women as a vulnerable group of passive victims. The subsequent Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) increasingly recognized grassroots women as a legitimate stakeholder group that creates innovative climate adaptive solutions.

Additionally, the Huairou Commission utilizes the Community Resilience Fund (CRF), which operates across 21 countries and channels resources to organized groups of women in poor, rural, and urban hazard-prone settlements. These resources enable them to mobilize collaborative resilience practices that reduce community vulnerability to natural hazards and climate change. Through their activities, grassroots women have demonstrated innovations and expertise, attracting greater public recognition and support for their roles in addressing climate change and development challenges

Member organizations have used CRF to:

- enable grassroots women to take public leadership in identifying and addressing climate, disaster and other risks;
- collaborate with local governments to leverage resources, and
- sustain and scale up grassroots-led resilience-building efforts.

Similarly, the Community Practitioners Platform for Resilience was launched to counter the notion that only NGOs should be the voice of civil society. Using the Huairou Commission theory of change, women are organizing, networking, and building coalitions and partnerships to ensure the voices of grassroots women, who doing the actual work on the ground, and experiencing disasters, should have a voice at the decision-making table in policy dialogues.

Land Rights

The Huairou Commission have been actively addressing land rights for women since its inception. Consistent with its theory of change tool, members created various platforms to increase grassroots women's knowledge on land issues such as legalities of accessing and owning land, tenure rights, role of land rights in advancing grassroots economic empowerment, and other best practices to promote gender-just land use. Mapping of local land ownership and use is the first step in determining the realities on the ground. The Huairou Commission's land campaign integrated work on land and housing with other tools such as the local to local dialogues and collaborating with land rights groups to spotlight gender-equitable land policies.

Building on the past, the Huairou Commission's work in the area of land is focusing on three main objectives

- Promote grassroots women's representation in land governance structures, local to global
- Ensure women's access to and control over land in order to enhance their response to shocks, either internal or external, through improvement of their livelihoods
- Negotiate with local authorities for gender sensitive land policies, including land tenure, inheritance and decisions on land use

Focusing on the rural and urban nexus, challenges of community land rights, as well as collective ownership, member groups are active in efforts to provide lands for grassroots women to sustain both rural and urban economies. Members have successfully impacted the introduction at the country level of gender evaluation criteria, that determine if a land tool is engendered or not.



In urban areas, the focus of member groups is land for housing, economic security, and public space for all. Huairou Commission members have focused efforts to help poor women access land, housing finance and low interest loans. Major challenges include problems of land grabbing, evictions, speculation, and difficulties protecting member groups from investors seeking to use land as an asset. Women are not always prepared to defend land rights from land grabs because of the complex policies and legal proof of land ownership. More recently, members have been active in creating social protections with municipalities such as community land trusts and other communal ownership arrangements. Groups have also been successful in influencing negotiations with governments to change plans for evictions and relocations in various communities. Often, these alliances are built around land allocation to reduce the impact of climate change, where grassroots women plant trees and grow vegetables, increasing community resilience and economic prosperity to poor women.

In rural areas, Huairou Commission groups have also worked on building grassroots capacities to advance agricultural activities. Grassroots women have created exchanges on defending land rights and understanding how to buy viable land. Many groups share their knowledge not just on land, but also on production technology, heirloom and indigenous seed storage, and financing and revenue of crops.



The Way Forward

The tools of the Huairou Commission's peer learning community have proven effective in mobilizing grassroots women, building their capacities, and increasing leadership in policy and decision-making spaces. Future plans should include more exchanges, trainings, mentoring processes, and resource allocation to continue to build knowledge bases, relationships, grassroots resilience and leadership capacities.

Working with partners and in collaboration with other organizations provides pathways to building better networks while influencing development policy and processes. Working with the UN or other local, regional, or global organizations, opens up opportunities to showcase the agendas and accomplishments of grassroots women's groups, while garnering recognition of grassroots women as experts in their communities. As the Huairou Commission has developed, it has expanded its impact on UN agencies and other global and regional entities. Going forward members feel they must map current member group collaborations and strategic alliances, define partnerships through MOUs, and increase interaction and communication within the organization, as well as with UN agencies including their local representatives. Members must insist on equity in voice in partnerships they undertake in order to best represent their members and families who are being affected by inequality. By building expertise, knowledge base, and skills, and communicating these externally, members establish credibility as authorities on women's issues rather than victims or beneficiaries of development.

With regards to agenda setting, the Huairou Commission should increase its visibility in selected agenda areas or global issues, like it has with land/housing and community resilience, in order to enter spaces not previously occupied by the Huairou Commission. Expanding its networking provides opportunities to reframe policy and decision-making to include the grassroots women's perspectives and needs in new spheres of influence while shattering the cultures of others speaking for or about grassroots women.



In the future, member groups identified the need for the Huairou Commission to take a lead role in the debate surrounding climate justice. Mapping methods should be updated to use digital and real-time data to assess risks, resources, and resilience of communities. The grassroots response to COVID 19 has demonstrated that grassroots groups have established preparedness, networks and strategies to lead recovery from crises both natural and manmade. Fundraising for the Community Resilience Fund should continue to increase resources available to upgrade these networks. Members should continue to collaborate with local governments for resources for risk mapping, risk response training and resource allocation to reduce vulnerabilities and implement relief when needed. Member groups must continue to monitor government social policies and agreements during crises through a Watchdog process.

Land rights and gender justice continue to challenge many grassroots women. Moving forward, the Huairou Commission should review its strategic positioning in the Beijing+25 process and leadership in the Action Coalition on Economic Justice. Consider using various spaces to work with other organizations and help organize and coordinate around issues that matter to grassroots women, like land and poverty. The organization should explore new funding strategies for land and housing to obtain capital for land access and slum upgrading from a grassroots perspective. These holistic strategies should look beyond only access or land acquisition and integrate ideas around resources for production technology and funds for land maintenance. The Huairou Commission should review community land trusts and communal ownership strategies, as well as, business strategies, future income-generating strategies, or strategies for organizational space to integrate with land and credit access for women.



Organizational Needs

Training and mentoring are key movement building activities that should be continued and fortified. The Huairou Commission should develop a documented plan of how the organization's tools are offered and taught on an ongoing basis through a systematic training program. Training and mentoring should include peer exchanges and familiarization with Huairou Commission practices, values and tools.

Digital technology has demonstrated the opportunities for communication and training modalities. The Huairou Commission should support the increased access to technology in rural areas for grassroots groups while providing training to improve their technological skills.

The Huairou Commission should review the staffing needs from the perspectives of increasing internal and external communications, supporting the up-scaling of member innovations, advancing training and leadership development, resourcing member group implementation of grassroots women's agendas, and membership development and expansion.

The findings and recommendations of this reflection series (see full report) should be incorporated into future strategic planning of the Huairou Commission, Regional Coordinating Councils and member groups.