

SPOTLIGHT ON GOAL 11

# HARSH REALITIES: MARGINALIZED WOMEN IN CITIES OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD

'Harsh Realities: Marginalized Women in Cities of the Developing World' was written by Ginette Azcona, Antra Bhatt and Sara Duerto Valero at UN Women and Tanu Priya Uteng at the Institute of Transport Economics in Norway. The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable comments of Donatien Beguy, Sylvia Chant, Guillem Fortuny Fillo, Joshua Maviti, Cathy McIlwaine, Dennis Mwaniki, Robert Ndugwa, Shahra Razavi and Kerstin Sommer; they are also grateful for the excellent research assistance provided by Gabrielle Leite and Julia Brauchle.

This study is dedicated to Sylvia Chant, professor of development geography at the London School of Economics (24 December 1958 – 18 December 2019). Professor Chant was a world-renowned feminist geographer who helped shape the field of gender and international development. Despite her illness, she made time to review the manuscript in detail, and will be remembered for her compassion, intellectual rigour and fierce dedication to promoting the well-being of women everywhere.

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## SUMMARY

Today, more than half the world's population (55 per cent) live in urban areas, a share projected to reach 68 per cent by 2050.<sup>1</sup> The rate and scale of urban growth presents daunting challenges, including the need for investments in transportation, housing, sanitation, energy, and social and physical infrastructure. Where these investments are lacking, a greater number of individuals will be forced to live in areas that lack durable and secure housing, and that are cut off from essential services, such as clean water and sanitation. Globally, the number of people living in slums – neglected parts of cities characterized by poverty and substandard living conditions – is growing. The latest estimates put the number of slum dwellers worldwide at over 1 billion people – one sixth of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Women face multiple forms of discrimination in their everyday lives; they have an increased risk of poverty and limited negotiating power and access to resources. They also endure the greatest hardships resulting from the proliferation of underresourced and often spatially segregated urban areas. Despite the wide-ranging implications of this phenomenon, gender profiles of urban slum residents are scarce, with a limited focus on the deprivations faced by women in slum and slum-like settings.<sup>3</sup> In signing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, world leaders pledged to eliminate poverty, reach those furthest behind, and achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (Goal 5). They also promised to address the need for adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services among slum dwellers and those living in informal settlements (Goal 11).

A global indicator framework has been developed to monitor the 2030 Agenda and track implementation of its 17 Goals and targets. This framework, while highly ambitious, still fails to address the gender dimensions of informal settlements in an integrated manner. The analysis on the following pages discusses this gap and argues for an integrated approach. It presents new insights into the sex

composition of slums and the adverse outcomes experienced by women in these settings.

This analysis, based on data from 59 low- and middle-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, finds that women and their families bear the brunt of growing income inequality and failures to adequately plan for and respond to rapid urbanization. The data show that in 80 per cent of countries analysed, women are overrepresented in urban slums among those aged 15 to 49.<sup>4</sup> At the root of this phenomenon are gender-based inequalities that limit women's access to education, rights to housing and asset ownership. Gender inequalities also make it more difficult for women to engage in paid work, largely because they bear greater responsibility than men for unpaid care and domestic work.

## BACKGROUND

Most of the world's people now live in cities and towns, with urbanization proceeding at a stunning pace. By 2030, one in every three people will live in a city with at least 500,000 inhabitants.<sup>5,6</sup> For women and girls, moving from a remote rural setting to an urban area can be a source of liberation, particularly in the context of rigid gender norms. However, this positive transformation, which can include greater autonomy and empowerment, requires that women and girls have equal rights to the benefits and opportunities that cities offer. For many women who reside in slums, the reality of urban living is characterized by deep poverty and inequalities in access to services such as health and education and to decent work. They often experience restricted mobility, threats to their security and personal safety, and exclusion from decision-making,<sup>7</sup> all of which are compounded by the lack of secure tenure.

Data from 61 low- and middle-income countries show that, across a diverse set of outcomes, women living in urban settings do better on average than women in rural areas. The median years of education among female urban residents, for

example, are greater than those of their rural counterparts.<sup>8</sup> The demand for family planning satisfied with modern contraceptives tends to be higher in urban than in rural areas; and when asked if they have a say in decision-making at home, urban women generally are more likely to say they do.<sup>9</sup> In the aggregate, city life offers a new world of opportunities, but the benefits are often skewed in their distribution, with slum dwellers remaining furthest behind. The following pages examine the deleterious effects of multidimensional poverty in urban areas. They also look at the extent to which deprivations in basic living conditions are 'gendered', with urban women facing greater exposure to life in slum-like conditions than urban men.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Information on the sex composition of household members living in slum housing conditions is available. However, it has not, until now, been used to create gender profiles of urban residents living in these conditions. In this study, data from the most recent Demographic and Health Surveys, from 2007 or later, are used to address this analytical gap and provide new insights into the gender<sup>10</sup> profiles of some of the world's largest slums (see Box 1). Differences in the well-being of slum and non-slum residents are also explored through selected measures, including access to education and decent work.

### BOX 1

#### SLUM HOUSEHOLD CLASSIFICATION: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 11.1.1 classifies 'slum households' as households that meet at least one of the following five criteria: (1) lack of access to improved water source, (2) lack of access to improved sanitation facilities, (3) lack of sufficient living area,<sup>11</sup> (4) lack of housing durability and (5) lack of security of tenure. These criteria utilize the international definition of slum households as agreed by UN-Habitat, the United Nations Statistics Division and the Cities Alliance. In practice, however, the methodology and questions proposed for measuring land tenure security (criterion 5) are not in place. Thus, slum status is assessed using the first four criteria only.

A prominent characteristic of urban poverty in developing countries is lack of durable housing and secure tenure. Among the urban poor, women, ethnic minorities, migrants and other disadvantaged groups, the right to housing is often tenuous and the fear of eviction ever present. Lack of tenure data, however, means that it is often excluded from slum determination, including in this study. Accordingly, the term 'slum dwellers' used here refers to individuals who are living in slum-like conditions – that is, who meet at least one of four available criteria. For readability, however, the terms 'slum' and 'slum-like' are used interchangeably.

This study uses household-level data from 59 developing countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa to create gender profiles of slum residents and to assess whether women are overrepresented among slum dwellers: are they a greater share of the slum population? How do sex ratios in slum settings compare to sex ratios in urban non-slum settings, and in rural areas? The main data source, the Demographic and Health Survey, focuses primarily on the well-being outcomes of women and girls of reproductive age. Individual-level measures of well-being for those aged 50 and older, in particular, are not collected. Due to this data restriction, the gendered analysis of living conditions in slum settings is limited to women and girls and men and boys aged 15 to 49. Therefore, while sex ratios and well-being outcomes among the urban poor living in slum-like conditions aged 0-14 and 50+ are highly relevant and important, they are beyond the scope of this study.

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## WOMEN ARE BECOMING A GROWING SHARE OF THE URBAN POPULATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Globally, urban sex ratios favour men. That is, for every 100 men in the world's cities, there are about 96 women.<sup>12</sup> Key contributors to this broad trend include gender-differentiated rural-urban migration patterns resulting from discriminatory social norms and expectations, power imbalances and gender inequality, which hinder women's ability to move freely. That said, the demographic reality of the urban landscape is changing rapidly and already varies widely by age and region.<sup>13</sup> For example, among children and individuals aged 15 to 49, men outnumber women in urban areas.<sup>14</sup> However, among individuals aged 50 or older, urban sex ratios skew heavily female: For every 100 men aged 50+ and 60+, there are 113 and 122 women, respectively.

When disaggregated by geographic region, urban sex ratios present a diverse picture, especially for those aged 15 to 49. In Latin America and the Caribbean, a highly urbanized region, urban sex ratios have favoured women since the 1980s. In El Salvador and Guatemala, for example, 15 and 12 more women per 100 men aged 15 to 49 live in urban areas, respectively. Recent trends also point to greater feminization of urban sex ratios in some countries in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>15</sup> In Lesotho, for instance, 13 more women per 100 men live in urban areas.

***The demographic reality of the urban landscape is changing rapidly and already varies widely by age and region.***

In other regions, sex ratios among urban individuals aged 15 to 49 are more balanced: In Central Asia, Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Asia, there are 3 more women per 100 men, and in Australia, New Zealand and Northern Africa, the numbers are

equal. In contrast, in Eastern and Southern Asia, a significantly greater number of men than women in this age group live in urban areas. This is a trend driven by the world's two most populated countries – China and India – where overall and urban sex ratios remain heavily biased towards men, with 92 and 88 women for every 100 men aged 15 to 49 in urban areas, respectively.<sup>16</sup> The urban sex ratios in all these countries and regions, however, are expected to become increasingly skewed as more urban women outlive men and female rural-to-urban migration increases.

## OPPORTUNITY AND ESCAPE FROM PATRIARCHAL NORMS ARE DRIVERS OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION

The forces driving working-age rural women to urban areas vary. They range from economic factors – such as rural women's disadvantage in land ownership and inheritance as well as the growing demand for female labour in the urban manufacturing sector – to the social. These include women's attempts to escape cultural, normative and physical restrictions often aggravated by strong kinship relations in rural areas.<sup>17</sup>

Studies show, for example, that women migrate to larger cities within their own countries to avoid early and forced marriage and other forms of violence against women in the family, including, in extreme cases, the threat of femicide.<sup>18</sup> For others, the lack of viable income-generating activities in rural areas is the driving force in the decision to migrate to urban centres, often for jobs in private households as domestic workers and caregivers.<sup>19</sup> In Cambodia, the increasing demand for women over men labourers in the garment industry has prompted greater numbers of rural women to migrate to urban areas.<sup>20</sup> Other factors are also at play. For example, in the United Republic of Tanzania, HIV-positive women report better access to medical treatment and reduced stigma as motivating factors for the move

to cities and towns.<sup>21</sup> The decline in land productivity, resulting from extreme weather shocks, premature male death and desertion,<sup>22</sup> and the need to diversify and spread risk, are other drivers of rural-urban migration.

## IN MANY COUNTRIES, WOMEN ARE OVERREPRESENTED IN URBAN SLUMS

Every week, 3 million people around the world move from rural to urban areas, often in search of greater opportunities and a higher standard of living. Social and physical barriers, however, often confine these new urban dwellers to a life of poverty, with substandard housing conditions, inadequate access to public services and insecure property rights. This is especially the case for women.<sup>23</sup>

Data from 59 developing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa show that sex ratios in slums among those aged 15 to 49 tend to favour women (see Figure 1). In fact, women are overrepresented in slums in 80 per cent of 59 developing countries where data are available. In Kenya, home to the world's fourth largest slum<sup>24</sup> (when measured by population size), there are 116 women for every 100 men living in slum conditions. The figure is 120 (or more) women aged 15 to 49 for every 100 men in the same age group in other countries, including Gabon, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti and Lesotho. In 61 per cent of the 59 developing countries analysed, more than half of the female urban population in that age group live in slums; the share is 56 per cent for men.

***Social and physical barriers often confine new urban dwellers, especially women, to a life of poverty, with substandard housing conditions, inadequate access to public services and insecure property rights.***

Four broad gender profile patterns emerge from the available data. However, further research is needed to understand the economic, social, demographic and cultural factors that drive them. The first set of countries (Group 1 in Figure 1) are those for which sex ratios in slum settings favour women, particularly in comparison to sex ratios in rural areas and/or non-slum urban settings. In South Africa, for example, urban sex ratios are balanced overall, but slum and slum-like areas skew heavily female (119 women for every 100 men). This means that while women and men are equally likely to live in urban areas, more women live in sections of the city that are characterized by extreme poverty and lack of basic services. Similarly, in Ghana, gender parity is observed among urban residents in non-slum settings. A starkly different picture, however, emerges among slum dwellers, where there are almost 30 more women aged 15 to 49 for every 100 men in that age group.

The second group of countries (Group 2 in Figure 1) are examples of contexts where urban sex ratios skew female, but where women are not overrepresented in slums (that is, the urban slum sex ratio is the same or below the overall urban sex ratio). The dynamics at play here are likely country-specific. But higher demand for women (compared to men) in manufacturing jobs and as domestic workers and declining job prospects for men could be a driving factor. In Bangladesh, for example, the garment industry relies heavily on young unmarried women from rural areas to meet their demand for cheap labour. In other cases, the work generally performed by women dictates special living arrangements. For example, women who migrate to the city for jobs as live-in domestic workers, residing most of the week with their employer, are not necessarily counted as residents in slum households.<sup>25</sup> In some contexts, women may also benefit from low-income urban housing schemes whose target beneficiaries are single mothers and other women living in poor communities. These include the Global Housing Programme in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia/Namibia Housing Action Group project in Namibia, both of which have been recognized as best practices by UN-Habitat.<sup>26</sup>

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***Women living in slums are being left behind across a range of well-being outcomes, from access to education and health services to opportunities for paid work.***

In the third group (Group 3 in Figure 1) are countries where migration to urban areas appears to occur predominantly among males, with significantly more women than men remaining in rural areas. In Guinea, for example, there are 29 more women per 100 men aged 15 to 49 in rural areas. In comparison, urban sex ratios in that country show 106 women for every 100 men. In a number of these countries, when women do move to urban areas, they appear more likely than their male counterparts to live in slum-like settings, struggling to survive, often in informal shelters with little to no access to basic services. In Sierra Leone, urban women and men are equally likely to live in non-slum areas, but women are overrepresented in slum settings: 120 women aged 15 to 49 for every 100 men in the same age group.

Finally, for a small group of countries identified as Group 4 in Figure 1, no differences in sex ratios are

observed across any setting – urban/rural and slum/non-slum.

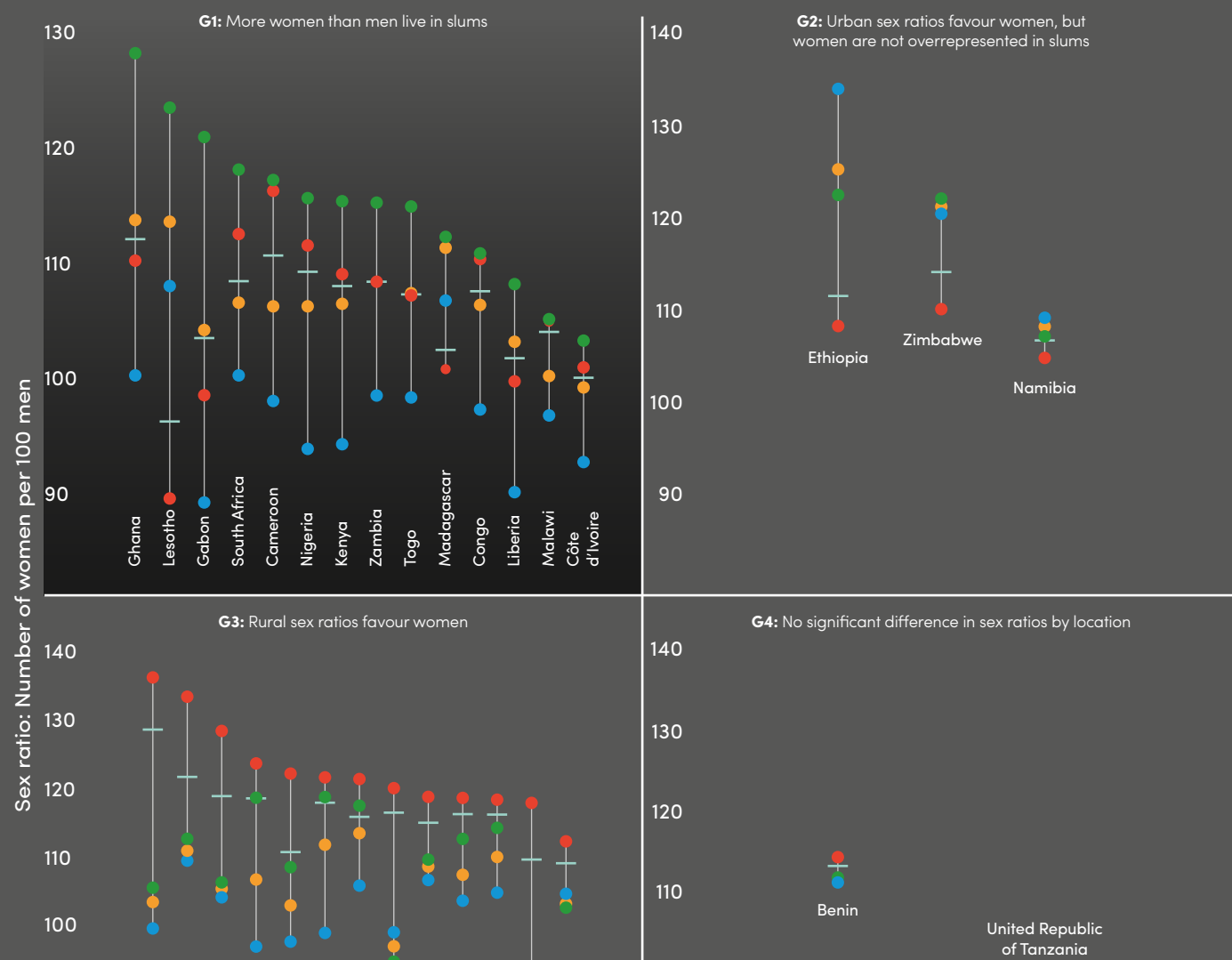
As the evidence shows, cities in developing regions are becoming increasingly feminized. And urban poverty, characterized by informal settlements and inadequate access to shelter and services, is also increasingly affecting women and girls. Researchers in this field point to gender-specific injustices that women in urban and slum settings face, including disparities in power, rights and assets, in divisions of labour, and in spatial mobility and connectivity; typically, they also lack easy access to sexual and reproductive health care.<sup>27</sup> Chant and McIlwaine (2016) refer to this multidimensional concept of gender inequality in urban settings as the 'gender-urban interface'. They and others call for 'engendering' urban analysis as a critical first step in addressing women's equal rights in urban areas. Key dimensions of this approach are elaborated further in the following section, which looks simultaneously at gender and spatial disparities in critical areas of well-being. The analysis shows that women living in slums and slum-like settings are being left behind across a range of well-being outcomes, from access to education and health services to opportunities for paid work.



**FIGURE 1** SEX RATIOS FOR INDIVIDUALS AGED 15-49 BY LOCATION, 2007 OR LATER

### Sub-Saharan Africa

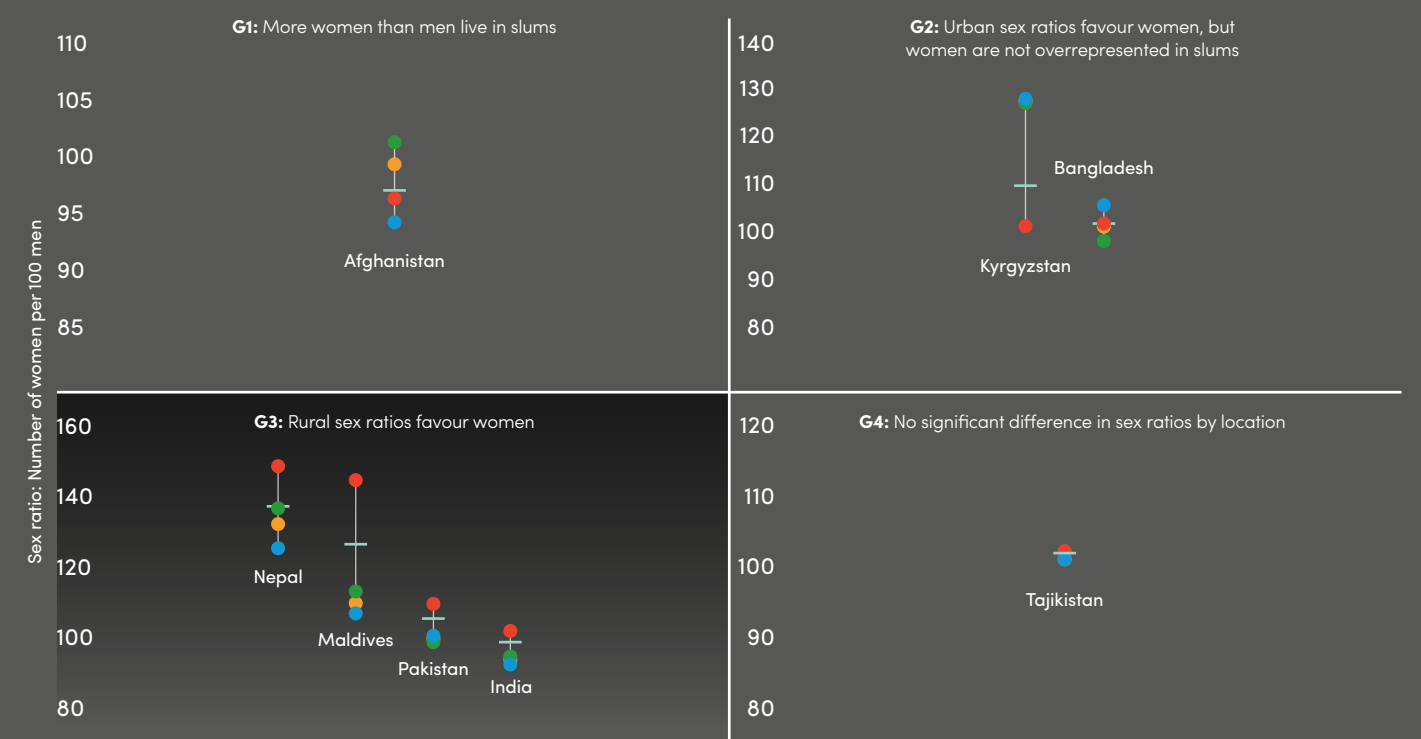
In the majority of countries sampled, more women than men live in slums



In 80 per cent of countries sampled, women are overrepresented in urban slums where they lack at least one of the following: access to clean water, durable housing, improved sanitation facilities and sufficient living area.

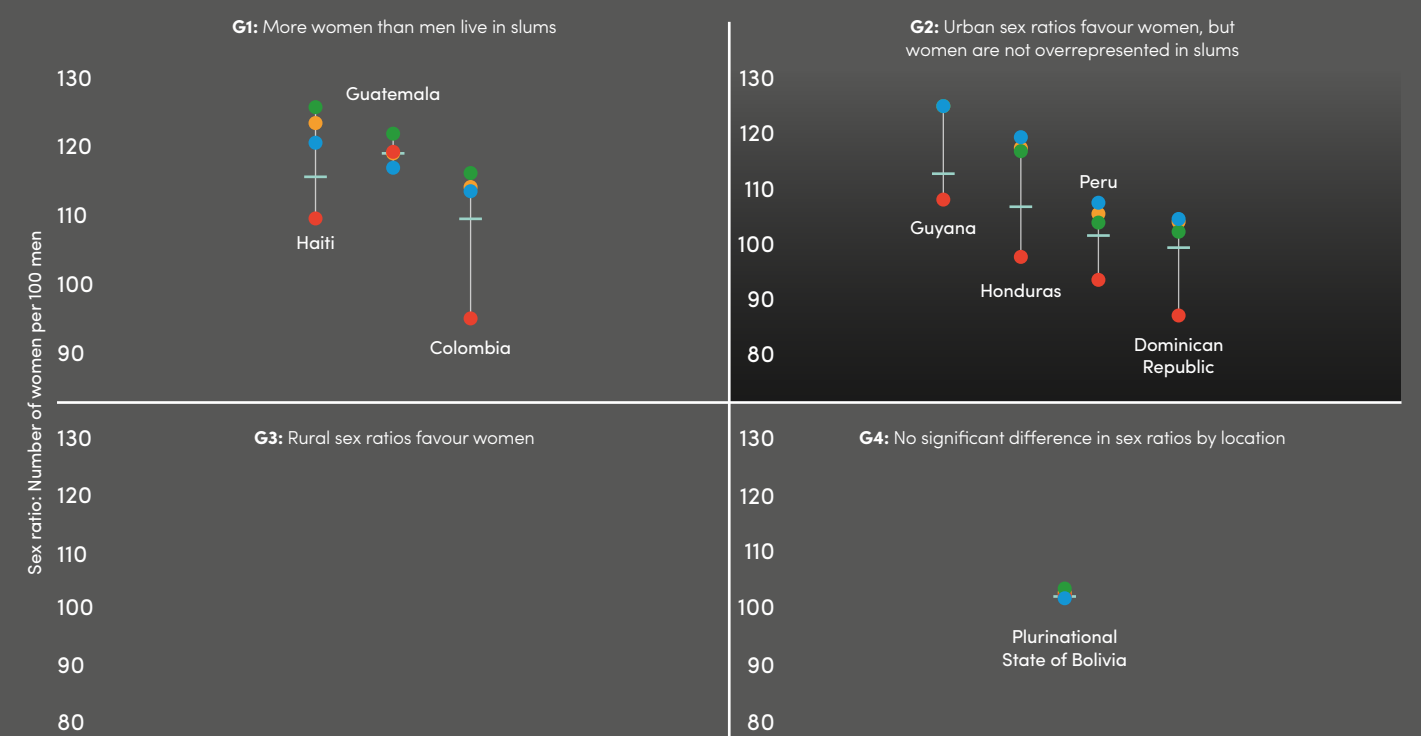
### Central and Southern Asia

In half of the eight countries sampled, rural sex ratios favour women



### Latin America and the Caribbean

In this highly urbanized region, urban sex ratios tend to favour women, but women are not always overrepresented in slums



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