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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Human Rights Advocates Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 February 2023]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



# **Ensuring The Right to Adequate Housing Following The COVID-19 Pandemic**

## **I. Introduction**

The right to adequate housing is more than ensuring someone has shelter. The right to adequate housing is much broader and is intended to “ensure that everyone has a safe and secure place to live in peace and dignity.”<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increased strain on the right to adequate housing globally as it led to an increased risk of domestic violence and abuse borne disproportionately by women.<sup>2</sup> This “shadow pandemic” was the result of deficient support services and networks, insufficient policy responses, and the continuation of discriminatory housing application requirements.

International human rights law recognizes the right to adequate housing. The primary instrument that protects the right to adequate housing is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution which included a call upon states to ensure women’s equal right to adequate housing in all aspects of housing policies and furthermore, called upon states to implement actions to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence and domestic violence.<sup>4</sup> The pandemic exacerbated the need for states to ensure the right to adequate housing for women across the world. This statement from Human Rights Advocates will highlight examples of violations of the right to adequate housing intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and includes policy responses that have moved towards fulfilling the right to adequate housing.

## **II. “Shadow Pandemic”**

Domestic violence and abuse have been instigating factors in experiencing homelessness.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the pandemic, violence against women increased to unprecedented levels with cases increasing by 25% to 33% globally.<sup>6</sup> It logically follows that when someone is no longer safe in their home, that they will likely look for a way to escape and leave. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to find emergency or transitional housing for someone fleeing violence and/or abuse, which leads to a heightened risk of experiencing homelessness and/or remaining in an unsafe home.<sup>7</sup> Following are some examples of the issue.

### **A. United States of America**

During 2020, the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice reported an increase in domestic violence by about 8% in the United States of America following lockdown orders.<sup>8</sup> Among women and children, domestic and sexual violence is the leading cause of homelessness.<sup>9</sup> With the implementation of stay-at-home orders, domestic violence incidents increased, and left many without safe and thus, adequate housing and at-risk of experiencing homelessness.

As more women and children became at-risk of experiencing homelessness and in-need of finding safe housing, the pandemic simultaneously strained housing and support services. As a result of COVID-19, programs saw reduced shelter and service capacity as they attempted to maintain the safety of providers and clients.<sup>10</sup> The pandemic also led to fewer resources for survivors due to the economic fallout of the pandemic, the need to redirect resources, and the closure of community-based programs that had once provided support and resources.<sup>11</sup>

### **B. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**

The Women’s Aid Federation of England provided a report indicating that for women living with an abuser, COVID-19 led to an intensification of abuse and simultaneously reduced options for escape.<sup>12</sup> Of the 31 women living with an abuser who were surveyed, 29 reported that the pandemic impacted their abuse and 19 reported the violence and/or abuse got worse. 21 responded that they felt like they had no one to turn to for help during the lockdown.<sup>13</sup> The pandemic resulted in an increase in women living in unsafe situations across the United

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, while simultaneously leading to an increase in isolation and lack of adequate support services to help people flee unsafe housing situations.

### **C. Bangladesh**

A recent study published by UN Women revealed high levels of violence against women had preceded the pandemic in Bangladesh with nearly 93% of women surveyed reporting they had experienced such violence at some point in their lives.<sup>14</sup> Even so, 15% of the women surveyed in Bangladesh reported that the pandemic had made them feel less safe at home and 26% reported that COVID-19 had made conflicts between adults in the household more frequent. An astonishingly high, 81% of women surveyed, which ranked second highest among 13 countries, reported that they believed physical or verbal abuse by a spouse/partner had increased in their community during the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> With violence against women increasing as a result of COVID-19, more women were left without access to safe, and thus, adequate housing.

## **III. Learning from COVID-19**

Many states made attempts to respond to this increase in domestic violence and abuse. In the United States of America, a policy was enacted that provided flex funding grants to be distributed directly from community organizations to people experiencing unsafe housing.<sup>16</sup> Important features that made this resource successful were: (1) distributing funds to community-based organizations beyond those solely focused on serving domestic violence survivors and (2) easing requirements for application to receive funds.<sup>17</sup> The UN Women study reported that COVID-19 resulted in an increase of financial stress making it more difficult for women to flee unsafe situations.<sup>18</sup> By providing funds directly to women through a variety of community-based organizations, women can be better equipped to flee and find adequate housing.

It is also critical for states to understand what resources and support networks women are likely to turn to if experiencing domestic violence or abuse. The UN Women study highlighted that women feel most inclined to seek support from their own family with 49% of women surveyed reporting that they would seek help from their family when experiencing violence or abuse. Alternatively, only 11% reported that they would reach out to police and only 10% reported that they would go to women's support centers or groups.<sup>19</sup> This highlights the need to understand where women are likely to go to adequately distribute resources and reach women in need of safe housing options. One way to ensure women are heard and that policies respond to trends among women, is to provide women an adequate avenue to be heard when policies are being considered. The UN Women study found women made up less than a quarter of COVID task-force members globally.<sup>20</sup> Task forces need to involve those most impacted and those providing front-line services to survivors to best fit policy mechanisms to the issue at-hand.

## **IV. Conclusion**

COVID-19 required efficient responses globally to contain the spread and prevent serious illness. Stay-at-home orders and reducing physical mobility were an effective way to stop the spread of COVID-19. These policies also left people isolated and resulted in a "shadow pandemic" of domestic violence/abuse disproportionately impacting women globally. The right to adequate housing includes the right to safe housing. We must learn from COVID-19 and ensure that people are not left stranded when most in-need.

## **V. Recommendations:**

1. HRA urges the Human Rights Council to:

a. Urge all States to consider the implications COVID-19 had on the right to adequate housing and adopt measures that create resilient support networks to prevent homelessness and unsafe housing situations.

2. HRA urges the Special Rapporteur to:

a. Further compile information to help States implement policies that respond to domestic violence and abuse survivors' needs pertaining to adequate housing; and

b. Further study States' domestic policies' roles in ensuring domestic violence and abuse survivors have access to the necessary resources and support networks to flee unsafe situations and find safe, long-term housing.

3. HRA urges States to:

a. Study, implement, and experiment with policies that ensure safe housing as a human right.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights with UN-HABITAT, The Right to Adequate Housing, Fact Sheet No. 21 (Rev. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19, UN Women, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> ICESCR, art. 11 (1976).

<sup>4</sup> A/HRC/RES/49/17.

<sup>5</sup> Safe Housing Partnerships, The Intersection of Domestic Violence and Homelessness

<sup>6</sup> Liz Mineo, 'Shadow pandemic' of domestic violence, The Harvard Gazette (June 29, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Safe Housing Partnerships.

<sup>8</sup> Alex R. Piquero et al., Domestic Violence During the COVID-19, National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, February 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Safe Housing Partnerships.

<sup>10</sup> Safe Housing Partnerships.

<sup>11</sup> Safe Housing Partnerships.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Davidge, A Perfect Storm, Women's Aid Federation, August 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Women's Aid Federation, 9.

<sup>14</sup> UN Women, Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> UN Women, 10-15.

<sup>16</sup> Suzanne Marcus, Reaching BIPOC Survivors with COVID-relief, Safe Housing Alliance, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Safe Housing Alliance, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> 19.

<sup>19</sup> UN Women, 14

<sup>20</sup> UN Women, 19.