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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority Theme: Affordable housing and social protection
systems for all to address homelessness

Statement submitted by UNANIMA International, non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

UNANIMA International, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Casa Generalizia della Società del Sacro Cuore, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Loreto Generalate welcome the United Nation's decision to choose the theme "Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness" as the Priority Theme for the 58th Session of the Commission for Social Development.

Family Homelessness is unfortunately a growing global phenomenon. Homelessness affects families and individuals no matter their social, economic, environmental or geographic context. It is often considered embarrassing, a taboo subject, and governments tend to underestimate the problem. We believe what is called for is a global action towards a paradigm shift in how we perceive the problems of Homelessness and Poverty. We urgently need to shift away from the many abusive attitudes and beliefs that circulate around homelessness and start a dialogue that views and treats Homelessness as what it is: a human and civil rights issue.

The issue of Homelessness is amplified by the presence of inequalities, specifically for individuals and families in vulnerable situations. Women, Children and their families are among those made most vulnerable. The impact of homelessness on mothers is profound. Many experience anger, self-blame, sadness, stigma, fear and hopelessness. Mothers experiencing homelessness often have significant histories of domestic violence. Children also experience high rates of acute health problems while homeless. They are bombarded with stressful and traumatic experiences which have profoundly negative effects on their development and ability to learn. Violence also plays a significant role in the lives of children. Children who witness violence are more likely than those who have not to exhibit frequent aggressive and antisocial behavior, increased fearfulness, experience higher levels of depression and have a greater acceptance of violence as a means of resolving conflict.

Homeless Families, their children (specifically girls) are one of the societies most disadvantaged and at-risk populations. What was viewed as episodic and situational, has become chronic. Adequate housing is essential to ending homelessness, but it is not sufficient. Families need basic support beyond decent affordable housing in order to thrive. Food, education, employment, social protection (including floors), holistic health and support, trauma informed care, and childcare services are among the significant support services needed to successfully break the cycle of homelessness.

Since the UN Expert Group meeting on 'Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness' (May 2019 Nairobi), UNANIMA International has adopted the groups working definition of homelessness, considering it within the context of Family Homelessness: "Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. Homelessness is a manifestation of poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights". This is an inclusive and holistic definition that can be applied to the social, cultural, and economic context of any given state. Adopting this global definition will enable data collection, comparative analysis, and successful policy design to be implemented, thus promoting the eradication of Homelessness being experienced by individuals and families. We strongly recommend that the UN adopt this as the global definition for Homelessness.

The family is a fundamental social unit of all modern societies. They are the base from which we learn to communicate, empathize, compromise, and adapt within

vital social structures. The importance of the family is reflected in many national public policies, which play an important role in national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given the realities and understanding of how families contribute to social progress, they are key to finding the most effective route to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Combatting family homelessness specifically, is integral in achieving the 2030 Agenda. Progress in achieving the eradication of homelessness underpins and can hinder the success and achievement of various goals and their indicators: Goal 11: "Make Cities and Human Settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable"; Goal 1: "End Poverty in all its forms everywhere": and Goal 16: "Promote Peaceful and Inclusive Societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels". Each have targets that can be directly associated with homelessness.

The most direct reference to ending homelessness is target 11.1: "By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and upgrading slums." Equally, target 1.3: "Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors," could provide economic security for families over their life cycle, especially when at risk of homelessness. Homelessness poses a threat to the achievement of all 17 goals which are inherently intertwined.

In Habitat's Factsheet on the Right to Adequate Housing it was highlighted that poverty is a common denominator in the experience of homelessness. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, has published several reports which display the interlinkages between poverty and homelessness. Often directly associated with a lack of social security systems, including access to adequate and affordable housing, employment, protection when faced with disasters and conflicts, families experiencing homelessness are made even more vulnerable.

It is well established in international human rights law and its interpretations that adequate housing is not just a physical structure of a roof and walls. The term adequate housing is referenced in a vast range of goals, indicators, and rights, laid out in a number of UN official documents including, but not limited to:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

The Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements (1996)

The New Urban Agenda (2016)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)

Access to adequate housing is among the most basic of human rights. Without it, states are not adhering to the commitments they have made. Housing is essential to ending homelessness, but housing alone is not sufficient. To address the issue of homelessness, adequate housing must ensure that the physical, security and social (human) needs of the individual or family are met.

Globally a number of nations have implemented a range of housing, social policies, and programs to combat homelessness with varying successes. Among the many approaches, there have been two approaches to address homelessness that have proved to be successful. The first is to address the outcomes of homelessness, the second is to actively address the structural and situational drivers of homelessness.

Policies and programs to address homelessness come in a variety of forms, but to be successful they must ensure women, children and the most vulnerable are not left behind. UNANIMA International asks that the following recommendations be considered:

We encourage Member States to fully recognize the commitments they made through the 2030 Agenda, and the above-mentioned documents, as well as actively work to achieve them.

We encourage Nation States to address the nature of family homelessness, specifically policies that meet the unique needs of women and children, through gender-sensitive policies and resource allocation.

We encourage Nation States to not only address the outcomes of homelessness but also its structural and situational drivers.

We encourage Nation States to implement housing-led initiatives.

We encourage Nation States to provide adequate housing with support services for families to address the trauma of homelessness, in an effort to break the cycle of generational homelessness.

We encourage Nation States to expand Government Support for the development of affordable family-sized housing

We encourage Nation States to move towards the Implementation of Social Protection Policies and Programs, and specifically, ones that ensure access to housing and support systems. Such policies and programs enable women, children and the family to break the cycle of poverty and reduce inequalities.

We encourage Nation States to recognize access to affordable and adequate housing as a social service noted in point 10.a of ILO Recommendation 202.

We encourage Nation States to push for government policies that finance, promote and invest in civil society and private sector partnerships, with organizations who already service the needs of the homeless.

We encourage Nation States to make policy changes to secure flexible funding for the implementation of recommendations

We encourage Nation States to actively collect disaggregated data on homelessness specifically in relation to family homelessness, women, and children/girls.

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