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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 C-Fam, Inc., 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.



Statement

Strategies and programs to address homelessness cannot be effective without addressing family breakdown and instability.

Surveys across many countries have consistently found that one of the most commonly cited causes of homelessness is the break-down of the family. This will not come as a surprise to those familiar with the overwhelming social science research that shows the financial and economic benefit of marriage and family stability for individuals and their families.

When the family breaks down or when men and women are unable to exercise their fundamental human right to marry and found a family because of social, economic, or legal factors persons become more vulnerable to financial insecurity, poverty, and ultimately homelessness.

The urgency of protecting and strengthening the family is underlined by the magnitude of the importance of the family as the sole social safety net for five billion people around the world. According to the International Labor Organization, only twenty-nine percent of the global population enjoys comprehensive social security. That leaves over seventy percent of the world's population with either an inadequate patchwork of social security protections or no public social assistance at all. For these more than five billion people the family is the only recourse when they become vulnerable to homelessness.

As the General Assembly has already recognized, it is essential to develop laws and policies to aid family formation and to make particular efforts to protect children and youth by promoting family stability and supporting families in providing mutual support, including in their role as nurturers and educators of children.

This can be achieved first and foremost by protecting the rights of the family already enshrined in human rights law, and by fulfilling already existing political commitments to strengthen and protect the family. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and binding international instruments reserve singular protections for the family in recognition of the family's irreplaceable role as "natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children." Empowering and protecting the family is not just smart policy. It is a human rights imperative.

It is not accurate to say that international law does not define the family. Article 16 Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines the family as "the natural and fundamental group unit of society" and declares that it is "entitled to protection by society and the State." These words are repeated across several widely ratified human rights treaties as well as the laws and constitutions of a majority of member states. International law further predicates the complementarity and equal rights of women and men in the context of marriage and family formation.

Governments need to stop debating what counts as a family and start protecting the family as it has always been understood in international law. International law establishes that the family is formed when a man and a woman exercise their right to freely "marry and found a family." States may extend social protections to other types of bonds between individuals, such as friendships or even sentimental attachments between persons of the same sex or other relations. But only the family is "entitled" by international law to protection by society and the state. In this sense, the family is unique, no doubt because of its role anstatus as "nural and fundamental group unit of society."

Indeed, the family is a proper subject of human rights and a bearer of rights. The Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, for example, referred to the “rights of families.” Similarly, the Programme of Action of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development recognized that the family is “entitled to receive comprehensive protection and support.”

When it comes to social and economic rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights does not merely “entitle” the family to generic social and economic protection and assistance, like other international human rights treaties, but requires states to provide the family with the “widest possible” protection and assistance. This must be applied in the field of housing and urban planning in particular, and to other structural causes of homelessness. And it must be understood as part of the right to an adequate standard of living, which international law predicates not just for the individual, but for the individual “and his family.”

It is not at all accurate to claim that the treatment of the family in international law is an exclusive western construct as if single-parent families or multi-generational families were not understood to come under its protection. The singular protections reserved for the family under international law should not be understood in an exclusive sense. Far from it, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly states that motherhood deserves “special protections” and that children are entitled to the same protections regardless of whether they are born in and out of wedlock.

That is why in the General Assembly and at the Copenhagen Social Summit governments explicitly committed to improving the condition of the single parent in society and ensuring that single-parent families and female-headed or female-maintained households receive the social support they need, including support for adequate housing, child-care, and recognition.

Let’s face it, comprehensive social protection for all by 2030 is not going to happen without policies to protect and strengthen the family. Nor is it realistic to expect it by 2050. Several demographic factors, combined with the rapid pace of urbanization make the protection of the family an urgent priority.

Fiscal projections for both developed and developing countries are dire because of low fertility worldwide. Social security systems premised on inter-generational transfers of wealth are slowly but surely collapsing. Some demographers project social and economic strife as a result. Workforces in some developed and developing countries are already shrinking. And demographers warn that migration is a short term stop-gap that cannot work in the long run.

There is evidence that laws and social policies to empower and protect the family, through baby bonuses, eliminating marriage tax penalties, promoting work-family balance, recognition of unpaid care, helping families with adequate housing, promoting and improving family stability, and other such policies are successful in supporting families. These policies would also help defuse social tensions by strengthening inter-generational family bonds.

In a world where the family is the most important social safety net, and where social protection systems are at the breaking point, the international community and governments have to make sure it is the focus of social protection policies. The family is the last and best hope for too many people around the world for the international community to continue to ignore it.