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Statement submitted by Human Rights Advocates, a 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

The need to recognize the relationship between housing and violence against women

Human Rights Advocates urges recognition of the relationship between inadequate housing and violence against women. The correlation between housing and violence against women is twofold: inadequate housing increases vulnerability to violence against women, while adequate housing lessens incidents of violence against women. This correlation is often not acknowledged. Because the link between housing and violence against women is not widely recognized, insufficient measures have been taken to combat violence against women through the means of housing. This is problematic because adequate housing can be a sustainable, preventative measure to reduce multiple forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, forced evictions, survival sex and rape.

The present statement presents two examples of the interrelationship between housing and violence against women. Each example addresses issues in two resolutions adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session: resolution 56/5 on women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS, and resolution 56/2 on gender equality and the empowerment of women in natural disasters. Those issues must be looked at in the context of the right to housing, which is protected by international treaties, custom and, frequently, domestic law. The right to housing mandates governments to implement measures ensuring that citizens can obtain housing that includes basic services. That requires making adequate housing accessible and affordable. It does not imply that governments need to provide physical structures to people, except in post-disaster or post-eviction situations.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognize the right to adequate housing (articles 25 and 11, respectively). Notably, General Comment No. 4, paragraph 9, states: “the right to adequate housing cannot be viewed in isolation from other human rights contained in the two International Covenants and other applicable international instruments”. Interpreting article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights under General Comment No. 4 bridges the gap between the right to housing and women’s right to be free from violence, provided for in various forms in numerous international treaties, and allows a direct connection to be drawn between them. The Special Rapporteurs on both adequate housing and violence against women, its causes and consequences have explicitly acknowledged this connection. Recognizing this correlation is an important first step towards implementing housing as a legitimate option to decrease the rate of violence against women. Efforts must be taken to ensure obligated governments are fulfilling their duty to provide affordable and accessible adequate housing to their citizens. In doing so, the right to housing can help to alleviate violence against women.

Women, the girl child, and HIV and AIDS

Many sources, including the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN-Women, recognize the connection between loss of property and HIV/AIDS that can lead to homelessness. At times when the male head of the household contracts HIV/AIDS

and passes away, his widow is left with little to no resources or, if the mother has already passed on, their children are orphaned. At other times, domestic violence or the stigmatism that attaches to people with HIV/AIDS drives women and girls from their homes. In both situations, females are disproportionately subjected to violence and/or homelessness as a direct result of HIV/AIDS.

The rates of HIV/AIDS among women exceeded the rates among men in sub-Saharan Africa, which hosts 68 per cent of all people living with HIV and about 76 per cent of the world's females living with the disease. Of the 22.9 million adults and children living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa, about 60 per cent are women and girls. In 2009, an estimated 16 million children were orphaned owing to HIV/AIDS. Those who lose their homes and cannot find a family to live with are left with extremely few resources and usually struggle to meet their basic needs. According to information available from the National Institutes of Health Public Access, the particular concern that such need can introduce an explicit power imbalance into sexual relations quickly manifests itself in these situations. In a male-dominated culture where resources are more readily available to, and acquired by, men, orphaned girls sometimes must resort to survival sex: they trade their only commodity, their bodies, in exchange for food, water or money to meet their basic needs. This same process leads to survival sex among poverty-stricken women as well, including those who are widowed or driven from their homes because of HIV/AIDS. The women and girls who are forced into survival sex work are thus exposed to, and spread, HIV. If those females had access to affordable housing, it could reduce their need to resort to survival sex and thus reduce the instance of this form of violence against women as well.

Gender equality and empowerment of women in natural disasters

The destruction caused by large-scale natural disasters frequently forces large numbers of vulnerable people from their homes. Often people become internally displaced persons and rely on camps for temporary shelter while awaiting governmental response. Haiti provides insight into the direct relationship between housing and violence against women in such a post-disaster situation.

The 2010 earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince left approximately 1,500,000 Haitians homeless; most sought shelter in camps for internally displaced persons. Such camps rarely offer access to food, water or sanitation, and conditions within them harbour serious safety risks.

There are very few police patrols inside the camps, so violence against women runs rampant because most perpetrators are not held accountable for committing violence. In addition, while the Government of Haiti implemented a rehousing plan soon after the earthquake, it generally failed to do more than evict people from the camps, thus driving them to other camps or back to the streets. Consequently, women continue to face a lack of shelter, access to basic needs, and protection by police or other government officials, and violence against women increases.

Increased homelessness and poverty, paired with conditions in internally displaced persons camps, have resulted in various forms of violence against women in Haiti since the earthquake. First, domestic violence within the home or temporary shelter forces women to choose between remaining victims to violence at the hands of family members, or taking to the streets and risking assault at the hands of a stranger. Second, sexual assault has resulted from and been exacerbated by insufficient security within such camps. According to a report issued by the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, more than 60 per cent of internally displaced

persons reported that sexual violence against women and girls was “common” within their camp. No female is safe; reports of rape include infant, elderly and disabled victims. Third, forced evictions are inherently violent because armed men forcibly remove people and destroy homes. The vulnerability of women to violence during and after eviction increases. They are more vulnerable to assault and, because they are often left after eviction without other means to meet their basic needs, they increasingly turn to survival sex.

Because most of these problems directly result from conditions in internally displaced persons camps and homelessness, providing adequate housing would ameliorate those instances of violence against women and prevent recurrence. Housing can also provide an avenue for female empowerment. In resolution 56/2, the Commission on the Status of Women stressed the importance of “a people-centred, holistic approach” to build “an inclusive society” through “community-based approaches” (E/2012/27, chap. I.D). Involving women in the planning and rebuilding in post-natural disasters in countries like Haiti can provide capacity-building. To effectuate measurable results, governments must support women to organize and to involve the organized women’s groups in housing efforts.

Some countries have successfully empowered women by implementing solutions that use housing to decrease the prevalence of violence against women. Turkey’s KEDV organization is particularly notable for creating temporary housing centres for women and children. Government support has enabled those centres to facilitate meetings with construction experts, local authorities and other women’s groups; they provided a space free from violence against women, where women were empowered to develop long-term housing solutions. Jamaica, India, Peru and the Philippines have also administered housing programmes specifically directed at addressing the disproportionate effect of inadequate housing on women. Those countries involved women in post-natural disaster housing projects to provide them with housing while empowering them, thereby effectively demonstrating women’s social value. In time, that could lead to decreased violence against women, especially if paired with community education. Combining the right to adequate housing with community education to work at the underlying social norms contributing to violence against women can help to reduce violence against women by raising awareness.

Recommendations

Based on the link between housing and violence against women, Human Rights Advocates recommends that the Commission:

- Acknowledge the correlations between inadequate housing and increased violence against women, as well as adequate housing and decreased violence against women.
- Recognize the role adequate housing can have in alleviating various forms of violence against women.
- Urge governments to fulfil their obligations to provide access to affordable and accessible housing to their citizens, especially during post-natural disaster situations which require providing physical housing.
- Include efforts towards increasing capacity-building and community education in order to maximize the long-term effect of adequate housing as an alleviation of violence against women.