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Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of the Mission, International Association of Charities, International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and Sisters of Charity Federation, non-governmental organizations 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

If women and girls are, literally, not to be left out in the cold, accelerated action is needed to address homelessness. As the sixty-fourth session of the Commission on the Status of Women focuses on review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, we urge the Commission to consider the situation of homeless women. Homelessness and inadequate housing were noted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as an impact of poverty in 1995. Yet, in 2019, women still are finding shelter in tents, in cardboard, in cemeteries, on buses, in parks, in abandoned buildings, and other makeshift accommodations.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called upon governments to, “enable women to obtain affordable housing and access to land by, among other things, removing all obstacles to access, with special emphasis on meeting the needs of women, especially those living in poverty and female heads of household.” However, affordable housing remains a mere aspiration for millions, men and women alike. Land access continues to be a challenge for women. Homelessness has multiple impacts upon women and girls, affecting education and jeopardizing health and well-being, among other implications.

Women who experience homelessness remain invisible, because statistical measurement is lacking. Not all governments have initiated counting systems and many women without homes avoid detection to minimize safety risks. The lack of a clear, universal definition of homelessness presents an additional obstacle in gathering accurate statistics. Without a universal definition and measurement of persons experiencing homelessness, duty bearers can too easily say, “We don’t have a problem”.

One is hard-pressed to find global numbers of women experiencing homelessness. According to Yale Global, about 150 million persons worldwide experience homelessness, while the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) indicates that about 1.6 billion people may not have adequate housing. By any count, too many people are without the dignity of a home, women included.

Women experiencing homelessness are subject to unique pressures. Domestic violence drives many women towards heading for the streets rather than facing danger at home, and heightens the need for health and trauma services. Other issues faced by women without homes include difficulty in accessing jobs, vulnerability to trafficking, assault, robbery, food insecurity, addiction, transportation challenges, mental health concerns, problems accessing feminine hygiene products, and more. As caregivers, many mothers must juggle the pressure of homelessness with that of providing safety, routine, security, and basic necessities for their children.

The World Economic Forum reports that women own only 20 per cent of land globally, and that in the Middle East and North Africa, about 25 million urban women lack equal constitutional land and statutory property rights. Widows can lose their homes in some locations after their spouses die.

There are multiple drivers of homelessness. The shift in housing from a social phenomenon to one of profit is causing housing costs to skyrocket, particularly in urban areas. Urban expansion, natural disasters, conflict, war, breakdown in families, domestic violence, lack of care for elders, evictions by municipalities, lack of appropriate social protections, evictions of widows and divorced women from family homes, and lack of sufficient affordable housing units are among them. Environmental disasters disproportionately impact women in agricultural roles and,

in some cases, force them to migrate, which can present housing challenges. These drivers must be addressed intentionally if homelessness is to end.

There is a close nexus between homelessness and many of the Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., poverty, hunger, health and well-being, gender equality, inequalities, and sustainable cities). Yet, homelessness is peripheral in the Sustainable Development Goals. The closest allusion to homelessness appears in Target 11.1, which calls for “access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and upgrade slums”. Stronger efforts are needed to link the Sustainable Development Goals with ending homelessness.

That women (and all persons) are entitled to housing is expressed in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which states, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services.”

Article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) addresses the rights of rural women. Article 14 (2)(h) indicates that States are obligated to ensure the rights of women “to enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing”.

The Vincentian Family includes hundreds of thousands of members in over 200 organizations. It has launched multiple initiatives to address the plight of persons experiencing homelessness.

We emphasize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development and ending homelessness. To end the scourge of homelessness upon women, we recommend that:

1. Member States develop a universal definition of homelessness. We embrace the definition suggested by the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs expert group meeting, held in May 2019 in Nairobi. According to the Group’s definition, “homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights, and ability to enjoy political participation and social relations, including birth recognition and legal identity, and safety; that it is a manifestation of extreme poverty, growing inequalities and of the failure to implement earlier decisions on social protection systems and human rights”.
2. Member States implement categories of homelessness and align regular measurement of homelessness via street counts or collection of ongoing administrative data, as well as enlist the United Nations Statistical Commission to assist in developing categories, measurement tools, and data collection and quality, in partnership with civil society organizations and academics.
3. Member States actively and regularly collect disaggregated data on demographics related to homelessness, including but not limited to, data on women.
4. All relevant stakeholders share good practices related to programmes and policies that address homelessness and promote the active participation of those experiencing homelessness in the design and implementation of such programmes and policies.
5. The United Nations System, its programmes and specialized agencies, international financial institutions, and civil society provide technical and other assistance to governments to formulate and implement national strategies to measure and address homelessness with required social support services, relating housing to all aspects of social protection floors (International Labour Organization (ILO) and

the World Health Organization (WHO), Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization, 2009).

6. Member States, in their national sustainable development frameworks and the associated integrated financing frameworks, formulate and implement concrete national strategies to provide homeless services and adequate housing to all women, which is habitable and safe, provide security of tenure, and enables habitants to enjoy culturally-appropriate social relations; (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs expert group meeting, Nairobi 2019).

7. Member States, when designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating social protection programmes ensure gender mainstreaming, promotion, and protection of all human rights in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law throughout the process (United Nations General Assembly, [A/RES/71/186](#), paragraph 11).

8. United Nations specialized agencies, programmes, funds, and related organizations ensure that housing and homelessness are explicitly considered in relation to social protection floors as well as in social and economic development programmes and policies, including monitoring and evaluation of the establishment, mutual coherence, implementation and progress.
