



# Economic and Social Council

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## Commission on the Status of Women

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by UNANIMA International, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Including people with lived experiences in decision-making spaces authenticates the proceedings, benefits the outcomes, and empowers participants themselves. Elizabeth Madden, International Advocate with lived experience of homelessness, shared with UNANIMA International:

“In terms of addressing Family Homelessness at the United Nations, partnerships between people with lived experience and NGOs are crucial to policy development, personal change and overall societal change...I attended [the 58th session of the Commission for Social Development] to speak of my lived experience. I was valued, and when I spoke, people listened. These are the first steps towards addressing any social issues. In the UN, I was treated with great respect and equality, and this gave me a sense of confidence. When a person has high self-esteem, they believe in themselves and can believe that they can achieve greater things in life. They believe they deserve a home, a job, an education. The mere fact that the UN is including lived experiences is showing human progression, not just progression around housing and homelessness.”

Women are powerful agents of change, and when not seen simply as “victims,” Women can be central in pathways to sustainability and pursuit of social justice; true and in-depth progress in these areas is not possible without Women at the center. Gender Equality is crucial to Sustainable Development, with its own and important Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5). Gender bias is still deeply rooted in cultures, economies, and political/social Institutions around the world. Women and Girls face unacceptable levels of discrimination and abuse, which prevents them from taking their rightful place in society and decision making at every level. Gender bias fosters conditions that create homelessness/housing insecurity, and traumatize Women, Children/Girls, and families.

We know Women make up approximately half the world’s population, however the Global Poverty Project estimates Women comprise 70 per cent of people experiencing poverty. Women living in poverty face great inequalities and injustices from birth to death. From poor education to low-wage employment, poor nutrition and health disparities, these areas of discrimination may have a woman suffer during her entire life which is unacceptable. The solution according to the World Bank is that, “putting resources into poor Women’s hands while promoting gender equality in the household and society results in large development payoffs.” It is fundamental to nurture the lives of Women and Children/Girls as well as increase the livelihood of whole communities. Barriers to Women’s livelihoods reported to UNANIMA International in field work range from, losing possessions in evictions to being denied service by financial institutions, spending time and energy seeking daily assistance for survival, exposure to risks of human trafficking, and more.

The 2014 report “Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities” revealed that in Canada, a personal history of homelessness doubled the likelihood for violent victimization for women with a disability. The traumatic experiences of homelessness/displacement lead to exposure to a variety of other physical, emotional, and mental traumas. Risks are increased for groups further marginalized by their society’s ill treatment in response to identities including disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, or even being a linguistic minority.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda includes goals/targets addressing the elimination of discrimination against Women and Children/Girls. Achieving gender equality and Women’s empowerment is integral to the 17 goals; each goal intersects with addressing and preventing homelessness/displacement and trauma. Only by ensuring the achievement of the agenda and fulfillment of Women’s and

Children/Girls' rights, will we see justice, inclusion, economies that work for all, and protections for our shared environment.

Trauma is often intergenerational, affecting not only the livelihood of the person experiencing trauma, but also their household and community, and in these global times, our international community. From testimonies we have heard, such as Elizabeth's mentioned above – experiences of Family Homelessness/Displacement, many related to social exclusion, violence, and other traumas – we must respond accordingly in keeping these voices at the United Nations, and even adjusting our international diplomatic institutions to include elements of Trauma-Informed Care, which will ultimately benefit all people.

Trauma is a barrier to Women's full engagement and participation in society. Trauma may cause isolation, distrust of people or systems, and when it's ongoing in the home resulting from abuse, it constitutes a form of hidden homelessness for the individual or family experiencing it – who are disproportionately Women and Children/Girls. At a UNANIMA International focus group with single mothers in the Mukuru Slum of Nairobi, Kenya, one woman shared, "sometimes you are so stressed and find you are not thinking straight. This is psychological torture."

Trauma-informed public spaces and institutions are essential to being sensitive to the experiences of everyone in a society, but also to ensuring people are safe in situations where they are hoping to participate in decision making and other elements of public life. Effective participation means allowing for new visions and approaches – which will surely come when groups who've been traditionally marginalized and excluded, are ultimately welcomed to take their spot as valued stakeholders in multilateral issues and processes to address them. Empowerment and inclusive development comes from all stakeholders listening to experiences, ideas and traumas they may not understand, and responding accordingly. We must tap into our own experiences and compassion in order to respond effectively.

In many past efforts to address poverty and exclusion, Women have been left behind. Welfare programs in many countries have proven to be sexist, which can openly or covertly deter decision-makers from addressing drivers present in most cultural contexts. In UNANIMA International's February event Hidden Faces of Homelessness, former UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, stated: "Women have been systematically excluded or poorly treated in the context of social protection issues."

Different human rights instruments acknowledge the decisive role played by education in the achievement of gender equality and the elimination of gender-based violence and discrimination. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women's general recommendation 35 on gender based violence against Women/Girls and recommendation 36 where the emphasis is placed on the right to have access to education, rights with education, and rights through education. We must also educate the current decision-makers on the reality of increasing Family Homelessness/Displacement and Trauma for Women globally. These issues are reflective of unsustainable development.

Multilateral, multisectorial issues like Homelessness disproportionately affect Women and Children/Girls, and necessitate sustained international political attention, strategy, and action. Creating political will – at all levels – in order to meet the global goals, in particular at intersections of Family Homelessness/Displacement and Trauma, is essential to progressing on the broader issue of Gender Inequality, and the subsequent question of how Women's participation can be inclusive and full.

UNANIMA International assert the need for a paradigm shift to understand homelessness as what it is, a human and civil rights issue. This would also have

underlying requirements, such as recognizing human dignity, recognizing adequate housing as defined in general comment 4 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and as guided by Special Rapporteur reports, civil society – including the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness – and necessitated through meeting articles of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international laws and agendas, such as the New Urban Agenda. We affirm the definition of homelessness created by the United Nations Expert Group Meeting in Nairobi, May of 2019, and later affirmed by the United Nations Economic and Social Council on 18 June, 2020: “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 extreme poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights.”

In order to shift to sustainable development, to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda, to create conditions for Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, and to work towards the elimination of violence, to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all Women/Girls, we must acknowledge the hidden faces and voices of homelessness, and continue inviting people with lived experience to the table, particularly Women.

Statement is endorsed by:

Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary;  
School Sisters of Notre Dame;  
Soroptimist International;  
VIVAT International;  
Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Inc;  
Dominican Leadership Conference;  
Sisters of Charity Federation;  
Haiti Cholera Research Funding Foundation Inc;  
WorldWIDE Network Nigeria: Women in Development and Environment;  
Shorab Ali Dewan Cultural Society.

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