



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 November 2019

English only

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-eighth session

10–19 February 2020

**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 Soroptimist 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for all to Address Homelessness

Soroptimist International presents this statement on behalf of its 75,000 members active in 122 countries and cosponsors: Zonta International with 28,500 members active in 63 Countries, Pan Pacific Southeast Asia Women's Organization with over 10,000 members in 23 countries and Associated Country Women of the World representing more than 9 million rural women in 82 countries amplifying the voices of women in rural, semi-rural, and non-urban communities so that the problems they face, and the solutions they raise, are heard and acknowledged by national and international policymakers and legislators.

Soroptimists work in partnership with women, girls and their communities to address gender discrimination, inequality and specific vulnerabilities. For nearly 100 years members' projects have addressed homelessness and its root causes, by supporting refugees and displaced persons, helping women and their families living in shelters, and providing training to women at risk of homelessness due to poverty. These projects use the Soroptimist approach of educate, empower and enable, supporting the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the Copenhagen Declaration, unlocking the potential of sustainable development and ensuring that no woman or girl gets left behind.

Homelessness is a universal challenge. Among the richest countries levels of homelessness are needlessly rising due to austerity measures which hit the most vulnerable hardest. Rising accommodation costs and family break-ups bring new challenges to single-income households, impacting women of all ages. Other countries shelter those who are displaced, migrating and homeless because of poverty, conflict, political turmoil, natural disasters, and climate change. Globally, many homeless people and temporary urban workers reside in temporary housing, be it shelters, in the homes of friends or family, hostels, in shanty towns or on the street. Life-long income disparities and inequitable social security benefits mean that many older women face homelessness after the death of a partner when they experience a dramatic loss of income. Rural women, living far from available support, are often disproportionately impacted by discriminatory inheritance and land ownership laws, and loss of income. All these risks are created by structural inequalities and discrimination.

Homelessness takes many forms; it is caused by and creates multiple vulnerabilities that have specific and disproportionate impacts on women of all ages, girls and their families. One policy cannot address all of the realities faced by women and girls; comprehensive measures must be developed and enacted. It is possible to eradicate homelessness and provide specialised support to homeless women and their families through gender-sensitive policies and by properly resourcing policy implementation. Homelessness only persists in the forms and degree that does because governments choose not to commit to act.

Homelessness and Violence Against Women

Domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual violence, abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence are significant causes of homelessness among women and girls as they leave harmful environments. Attempting to leave abusive situations and potentially facing homelessness is often when women are at greatest risk of violence. After leaving women are placed at risk once again. Those who sleep the street can face sexual violence, exploitation, and survival sex. Given the horrific prevalence of

gender-based violence worldwide, state services already stretched to the limit and chronically underfunded NGO and civil society organisations are left to fill the gap. Too often shelters have to turn vulnerable women away because the demand for their support is so high.

It must also be recognised that the isolation of women suffering violence outside of urban areas includes reduced access to policing and judicial services, and even less opportunity to escape their situation. Investment is needed across all countries, to ensure that rural women are not further marginalised. Appropriate training for law enforcement must be provided to avoid the pitfalls of prejudicial assumption and revictimisation.

The interconnected problems of gender-based violence and homelessness require integrated policies to support women and girls at a critical juncture. We recommend:

- Women’s shelters must be fully funded, resourced and safe. Services should be provided without discrimination. Where NGO and civil society organisations provide services, including advocacy, legal support, accommodation and psycho-social support, in lieu of the government, the government should provide funding to ensure comprehensive service access.
- Resources must be earmarked for essential services to women and their families escaping violent situations regardless of whether they can provide an address. Women’s shelters, healthcare providers, legal aid, social services, and education institutions all require increased support.
- Services for homeless women must provide specialised psycho-social support that help them re-establish a safe and stable living environment. This should include, but not be limited to, providing counselling for those who have experienced gender-based violence, income support, continued education and training, legal assistance, and childcare.

Safe Housing as a Woman’s Human Right

Access to stable, safe, and quality housing is a critical determining factor in the realisation of core human rights, including rights to health, work, education, participating in the cultural life in the community and to vote. Those who are homeless, without a registered address, or stable accommodation, often cannot access basic services. That safe housing underpins access to a wide range of human rights is affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN UDHR Article 25(1)). Eradicating homelessness is essential to the right to development (as shown by Article 8 in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development) and this right for rural women is further enforced through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW- Article 12). Additionally, specific protections are afforded to girls through the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 27(1)). The transformation of these international human rights obligations at the national level must recognise how different laws and policies can affect women’s and girls’ risks of homelessness. Laws that discriminate against women of all ages and girls on matters of inheritance, legal tenure of rights of use land and water rights, property ownership, employment opportunities, and access to social security benefits, among others, contribute to a legally created vulnerability that women and girls face.

Obligations to provide safe housing for women, girls and their families already exist, as shown through a network of human rights instruments. The burden now rests with states to implement their commitments. Failing to act is a breach of those human rights obligations, which structurally create and perpetuate the intersecting

vulnerabilities that women face, meaning a government has failed to provide for the needs of their citizens. We call upon states to:

- Ratify CEDAW and its Optional Protocols fully, remove all reservations, and take immediate and effective action to ensure the realisation of gender equality and women’s rights contained within CEDAW and its Optional Protocols. National legislation must be reformed to ensure gender equality within the law, including, the equal right and ability to access to courts, own land, and legal identity documents without which homeless are deprived of social protection and justice.
- Include safe housing as a guaranteed social protection floor and take action to ensure all homeless women and girls have safe accommodation.

Ensure homeless women and girls access essential services including education at all stages of life, healthcare, legal and banking services, and have the ability to vote.

The Copenhagen Declaration and the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 1995 the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development reaffirmed international consensus on the right to shelter, and viewed adequate housing as a dimension, and root cause, of poverty. In the 2030 Agenda, SDG11.1 commits states to “ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums” as part of making settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. That homelessness was not more explicitly included in the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals was a missed opportunity, and an omission member states must address. Still, the homelessness of women and girls has cross-cutting relevance to the SDGs. As long as there are homeless women and girls, SDG5 on gender equality, SDG1 on poverty or SDG2 on food security will not be achieved. Therefore, homelessness must continue to be understood as a dimension of poverty and social development, as described by the Copenhagen Declaration.

To address homelessness as part of sustainable development, we recommend that:

- Member states develop an internationally agreed definition of homelessness that includes people living on the streets or open places, people living in temporary or crisis accommodation, those in insecure and inadequate accommodation, and those without access to affordable accommodation. This definition should be used when collecting data to formulate evidence driven policymaking.

The prevalence of homelessness must be considered a development marker; steps must be taken to ensure there is good quality disaggregated data on homelessness.

- The data on homelessness must include qualitative data on the experiences of homeless women and girls. Policies and service provision should respond to qualitative and quantitative data.
- The reliability and uniformity of data be addressed so that women are not undercounted in data collection. Alternative data collection methods to ‘by household’ must be found, as women are infrequently able to provide their own data as a household member, and homeless women are not in households.
- Housing protection and provision must be made a social protection floor. Poverty interventions should contain measures to reduce the risks of homelessness. Continued support, including housing and further education, should be provided to girls leaving the state care system to prevent them becoming homeless.

- States should commit to a minimum period of time during which shelter, support and mentoring will be provided to homeless women and their families. This minimum time should be guided by evidence-based research on best practice for breaking cycles of homelessness. This will prove more cost-effective in the long run and reduce the pressure on services.

Using Education to Prevent and Address Homelessness

High-quality, life-long education and (vocational) training is a vital tool for addressing the root causes of homelessness and supports women and girls leaving situations of homelessness to re-establish safe and stable lives. Education helps women transform their lives, providing them with skills to have independent, economically stable, healthy lives and to share those benefits with their families. Specialised and targeted education and training programmes should be developed for homeless women and girls that address their specific needs and accentuated vulnerabilities. We recommend these programmes provide:

- Psycho-social care, including specialised counselling for gender-based violence, be available through education institutions.
- Safe education facilities and safe transport routes to those facilities.
- Education and support in managing personal finances should be made accessible to all women and girls.
- Access to education must be made available to all, regardless of housing status or the ability to provide a permanent address.

Conclusion

A home is the most basic human need without which human beings cannot fulfil their potential or exercise their rights. Homelessness can be eradicated by 2030 if all member states decide to act now by including it as a social protection floor. Effective actions to lift women and girls out of homelessness require a nuanced understanding of the root causes of homelessness, including gender-based violence, economic instability, conflict and climate change. Counseling, housing stability and financial independence skills are important components in treating the effects of homelessness and helping survivors. Eradicating homelessness is the first step in eradication of poverty and achieving equality of all women and girls, ensuring that no one is left behind.

This statement has been jointly submitted by:

Associated Country Women of the World
Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association
Soroptimist International
Zonta International

This statement has been supported by:

African Women in Leadership Organization
International Alliance of Women
Servas
Widows Rights
Women for Water Partnership