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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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Family homelessness is a growing social problem detrimentally affecting women and girls around the world. Understood and manifesting in diverse economic, social, cultural, and linguistic contexts globally, family homelessness has a multitude of variables causing and contributing to it. This phenomenon is also occurring on a heightened scale in the form of displacement. This displacement manifests both in a way traditionally associated with the term (mass shifts in settlement due to natural or man-made disaster), and in another way, which must be recognized as nonetheless pervasive and dangerous: gentrification, evictions, and segregation of groups into impoverished neighbourhoods and slums.

Women and girls experiencing homelessness remain among the most vulnerable of populations, whose situation is often exacerbated by their distinct lack of access to public services and support. With no formal address, women, girls, and their families struggle to obtain even basic services, including education, health services, and social protection. These instances continue to add to the feeling of marginalization experienced during difficult situations.

Women and girls experiencing homelessness face unique challenges, many of which cause the individual and their family to experience financial, social, emotional, and physical trauma. The ongoing trauma associated with family homelessness, especially for girls, is carried through the life cycle. Communities are complexly challenged, often unaware of the full extent of the issue and at a loss for how to rectify it. We must realize it is an investment to take action towards ending family homelessness; this requires the acknowledgment that children are the future and childhoods are intimately tied with future successes.

We are happy to see a shift in international issue salience towards addressing homelessness, which is evidenced by the February 2020 Commission for Social Development. But as UNANIMA International has said in the past and may gain a reputation for repeating, the most vulnerable within this issue are left behind: families, women, and children. Those who are experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, particularly chronically, intergenerationally, and/or communally, are the most marginalized. This issue must be addressed multilaterally.

There is a strong link between our work and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, especially since it is characterized by its aim to reach the most marginalized. While close to its beginning, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action states, “acknowledging the voices of all women and girls everywhere”, it is undeniable that you can’t hear the silenced, and you can’t see the invisible. For this reason, UNANIMA International has undertaken research on family homelessness, displacement, and trauma. The research has both quantitative and qualitative elements, not limited to the documentation of lived experience through various methods, collaboration, and testimony from service providers, and the creation of data estimates for family homelessness in country cases. Lived experience, research partnerships, and expert knowledge are essential to the research. We desire to share our findings further, as well as to create a paradigm shift, changing how homelessness is viewed and characterized.

In 1995, the gathering looked towards a world where women and girls would feel safe from violence and abuse. Without safe and adequate housing, such security is plainly impossible to ensure. Access to adequate housing has been ratified in numerous United Nations documents, but this is not enough. Those experiencing homelessness also need support systems ensured by good social protection policies and access to public services. We need to start this dialogue by viewing and treating

family homelessness as a human and civil rights issue, as well as a structural and systemic issue.

Family homelessness and displacement may seem harrowing when intersectioning with human trafficking, incarceration, asylum seeking, and eviction. Unfortunately, family homelessness intersects with all 12 critical areas of concern laid out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This may relay to you the difficulty in the addressing of root causes, as permeated in different country cases. Moreover, we can't understand this issue without a constructivist lens; we acknowledge that the history of States can't be isolated from the contemporary manifestations of the issue. Addressal and prevention is needed on all societal and governmental levels, and for this to be successful, coordination is necessary.

But is that not the point of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action? Bringing together our knowledge of all that is wrong and needs to change, with a vision of gender equality, driven by human rights as both a means and an end? An obvious marker of effective governance is not simply policy changes or proclaimed ideological developments, but implementation and changes on local levels, meaning the level of the family and the individuals therein. In her book *Beyond Beijing*, Sister Joan Chittister reflected, "my heart, long-starved for more than principle, rose up with a new kind of hope". The conference's vast, spirited feminine mass presented significant contrast with past political meetings. The excitement of the conference and opportunities therein couldn't be diminished by bureaucratic disorganization or complaints of the conference space, because these things ultimately weren't the most important.

It is true that there had been progress for women before, but too frequently, women were excluded from processes and discussions that drive progress. Such exclusion has undoubtedly slowed and subdued what progress there has been. Multilateral diplomacy, particularly as it has evolved to allow non-governmental organizations, such as UNANIMA International – and therefore those with a focused concern for women and children – into addressal of global issues, presents opportunities for collaboration to the benefit of women that was unseen before that point. We run into parallel problems to those of the 1995 conference in efforts to address multilateral issues (which family homelessness should be counted among) today. Disorganization and bureaucracy may hinder real progress and actualization of objectives. Also, tradition of where budgets, time, and energy are spent persists strongly.

The declaration and coordinated platform of the 1995 conference, as many will note, needs to be applied to specific contexts. In the following decades, the United Nations had in various ways acknowledged the importance of families, and additionally, adequate housing. We intend to contextualize the relevancy of family homelessness to these issues and documents, particularly the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In doing so, we believe that looking towards Beijing+50, all those acting in the best interest of women and girls will be bolstered. We contend that the tools of implementation, including the New Urban Agenda, can be used appropriately in the context of addressing family homelessness. Moreover, all salient issues at the United Nations intersect with family homelessness, displacement, and trauma; knowledge of this brings perspective to their discussion.

UNANIMA International specifically shares concern around: women's human rights; women and poverty; violence against women; women and health; and much more. While we complete our research mandate, we encourage the following:

1. Implement social protection policies and programmes, specifically ones that ensure access to housing with support systems. Such policies and programmes enable women and children to break the poverty cycle and reduce inequalities.

2. We encourage States to actively collect disaggregated data on family homelessness. The lack of disaggregated data on this issue, which our organization seeks to address, is a problem that minimizes the effectiveness of any attempts to address the issue.

3. We encourage States to push for government policies that finance, promote, and invest in civil society and private-sector partnerships with organizations that are currently servicing the needs of homeless population.

4. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action specifies the need for increased investments in gender equality and women's rights; yet, globally, there is a decrease in publicly-owned and supported housing and land. The privatization and financialization of housing represents the loss of investment for women and girls in an area intimately tied to human livelihood.

Family homelessness is not irrevocable. We must not wallow in a harsh reality, nor become complacent with it. Rather, we must push for coordinated multilateral attention and efforts to resolve family homelessness through its drivers (both structural, and personal or family circumstances often reinforced systemically). This new focus is for the benefit of women and girls, and intimately tied to the call for action embodied by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It is intimately tied to the successful achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda, among others. Once again, and this bears repeating, a paradigm shift is needed: we must view and treat homelessness as what it is: a human and civil rights issue and a structural and systemic issue.
