



Statement on COVID-19 and Family Homelessness

UNANIMA International is a Coalition of 22 Communities of Women Religious and a new group of 'Friends', serving in 85 countries with 25,000 members.¹ For over 18 years our focus has been on Women, Children/Girls, Migrants and Refugees. These groups disproportionately comprise the homeless populations of our world, though are often hidden statistically and otherwise overlooked. It is our mandate to ensure these groups are able to achieve a better quality of life through having their voices heard at the international level. This was exemplified most recently at the United Nations (UN) 58th Commission for Social Development where UNANIMA International presented research and advocated for the issue of Family Homelessness to be given the necessary concern and attention by Member States, Civil Society, and all political actors alike.²

Our statement in response to the COVID-19 crisis comes after reflection on the lack of attention to Family Homelessness within the pandemic's global media coverage and international politics. As the situation worsens, it is wise and ethical to consider a sector of society still marginalized; people experiencing homelessness in all its forms are vulnerable. Combined with often poor nutrition and other health issues largely linked to economic standing and issues of access, they are at great risk of contracting the virus. This risk has been escalating as inequalities between and within nations are increasing in accordance with disjointed governmental responses.

We have, as a society, a duty to care for all people. Adequate housing is a human right,³ and according to United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, "Housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus."⁴ The provision of adequate housing, and accompanying actions for prevention and in response to family homelessness, are essential to the realization of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and other social, economic and cultural rights and international laws.⁵ Nations in particular should consider their commitment to protections for children outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶

At the Expert Group Meeting on Homelessness in Nairobi, Kenya experts including Jean Quinn, DW, Executive Director of UNANIMA International, identified three domains that must be satisfied to eliminate homelessness: social, physical and security.⁷ "Home" is a place where each of these domains are obtained and guarded. Consideration of the natural environment is essential to discussions of security generally, but when we speak about home in the context of COVID-19, above all, it must be a place where individuals and families can remain safe from the pandemic. However, homes also must allow for the achievement of families' holistic wellbeing. Remaining at home should not pose physical or psychological risk, nor should it cause hunger or violence.

We must also recognize that there are psychosocial resource deficits within a pandemic, as well as tangible ones. For example, emotional capacity to deal with the problem and resulting

situations may be diminished as a result of past traumas, the compounded effect the pandemic creates, or the trauma resulting from the experience of global pandemic within conditions of homelessness or housing insecurity. Therefore, we need trauma-informed responses and services.

Recent commentary from United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres has brought attention to women and girls vulnerable to domestic abuse and violence during times of quarantine.⁸ The United Nations also reported, “displaced and stateless women and girls face heightened risk of violence amid coronavirus pandemic.”⁹ Unfortunately, it is an international and generalizable truth that there is a risk to many women within this period of COVID-19. However, some of these individuals and families have not been framed as living in conditions of homelessness, as they should be. There is a huge and gendered economic factor reinforcing these risks. Many, though not all, of these occurrences take place when people are “doubled-up” which can be psychologically or emotionally unsafe, when someone is remaining in or forced into unhealthy relationships. The relationships themselves may be strained or deteriorating as a result of the physical conditions. Additional problems include an inability to isolate and vulnerability to rejection from the household.

Being “doubled-up” is physically unsafe when too close proximity to other people spreads disease faster. Additionally, spaces within which people are doubled up may be physically unsafe due to the structure of the shelter or the greater area of residence. Slum conditions make residents more vulnerable to the spread of the virus. They have less access to water and sanitation,¹⁰ and the access they have is often communal (or in the form of business-operated services). Housing conditions are generally small and close together, and doubling-up is a common occurrence. In the context of a pandemic, these conditions mean that medical intervention in the space would be difficult or dangerous, and that isolation may be impossible. Slum communities differ around the world in their relationship to governance and infrastructural design—two elements most relevant to how COVID-19 can threaten a community.

UNANIMA International recognizes unsafe or forced living conditions as signs of invisible homelessness as clarified in our recent research publications.¹¹ A fear that is being increasingly voiced by UNANIMA International’s members, and in the United Nations’ civil society space, is the difficulty there will be in preventing the spread of the disease if and when it reaches certain environments, such as slums, where there will purportedly be a lack of supported care and treatment. Additionally, the risk to Indigenous communities already faced with non-community led development and struggles to sustain control over their land and homes must be acknowledged and addressed by governments in proximity to these groups.¹²

Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, stated “this is a tragedy which is already affecting many families. Many are losing their loved ones....Anyone dying is a daughter or a son of somebody.”¹³ Evidently the virus is not the only risk to homeless and housing insecure families around the world. From major European cities to Indigenous territories, to slums of South Asia, people are going hungry during the coronavirus pandemic. Families and individuals are suffering from the enforcement of the lockdowns and being criminalized and issued with policy fines for being outside despite their financial necessity

to do so. Families living in temporary accommodation (including children) are not able to access basic necessities and the tools they need to take part in virtual education.¹⁴

We ask: what moral or just nation can allow its citizens to live without their basic needs, safety or dignity? Reporting from our members' and others' good practices, we assert the need to provide access to information, to sanitation, particularly hand washing, and health monitoring services as a good start. This pandemic has shone a light on the ways in which, as a society, we forget about people among us who have nothing.

Recommendations

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, we must recognize and act towards meeting the needs of all levels and categories of the homeless, especially homeless and housing insecure families.

UNANIMA International puts forth the following recommendations:

- ❖ We call for Member States to follow the recommendations outlaid in the United Nations 58th Commission for Social Development's priority theme draft resolution.
- ❖ We refer to and reiterate all of UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing Leilani Farha's response, including suggestions for moratoriums on evictions, and consideration that the provision of adequate housing, "may require the implementation of extraordinary measures as appropriate in a state of emergency including using vacant and abandoned units and available short-term rentals."
- ❖ We assert all homeless services globally must adopt holistic, trauma-informed care.
- ❖ We reiterate UN Secretary-General António Guterres' call for governments to make addressing domestic violence a key part of the pandemic response.
- ❖ We call for specific consideration of homeless families as part of response plans relating to COVID-19, as well as all humanitarian response plans.
- ❖ We recommend immediate government-initiated increases in opportunities to further women's education that fit employment needs and demands.
- ❖ We call for ensuring technology access to homeless and low-income children and families for educational, informational and support purposes.
- ❖ We assert the need for socio-emotional techniques to be used in children's education, to avoid and reduce trauma from the COVID-19 crisis.
- ❖ We reiterate the suggestions of Indigenous activists for halting development projects on and near Indigenous land to reduce the risk of the virus' spread in their communities, and for continued cross-sectoral efforts to combat climate change.
- ❖ We reiterate the importance of a multisectoral, coordinated approach to address the needs of homeless families during this time of crisis; we call for governments of all levels to obtain and maintain meaningful partnerships with civil society and organizations who are already addressing the needs of families and individuals affected by the crisis and who are systematically left behind.

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