

Concept Note

UNANIMA International Symposium on Women and Children/ Girls Experiencing Homelessness/ Displacement

With only 10 years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda, accelerated action in addressing the inter-linkages between the three pillars of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental, is essential. To ensure sustainable development is a socially just transition, it must be a people-centred approach, grounded on the principle of Social Justice. The implementation of such a transition remains a balancing act for state and non-state actors alike, with a vast number of cross-cutting issues and exacerbated inequalities including homelessness, displacement, technology and COVID-19 continuing to plague the 2030 Agenda.

"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"

- Definition agreed upon by the thematic experts that convened in Nairobi Kenya, 2019¹

Defined by the Expert Group, this inclusive definition of homelessness sheds a light on the world's hidden homeless. With Women and Children/Girls comprising the largest portion of this demographic, they remain among the most vulnerable populations to not only homelessness, but to a myriad of unfavourable circumstances. Often exacerbated by their distinct lack of access to social protection, public services, technology and support, vulnerable Women and Children/Girls remain among the furthest left behind.

In its 75 years of existence, the United Nations had not addressed the issue of homelessness as a priority theme until the 58th Commission on Social Development (CSOCD58) held in February 2020. Producing a landmark Resolution on "*Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for all to Address Homelessness*," this was an achievement for Member States, the United Nations, and Civil Society alike. Now that the dialogue has begun, we must ensure it does not lose momentum, and that the voices of individuals and families experiencing homelessness continue to be heard.

Detailed across various publications including UNANIMA International's *Hidden Faces of Homelessness: International Research on Families and Family Homelessness through the Lens of the 2030 Agenda*, it has been firmly established that combating the issue of homelessness is integral to achieving the 2030 agenda.² Further to this it is deeply intertwined with both the direct and indirect consequences of the current global pandemic. As noted by former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, "Housing has become the front-line defence against the coronavirus." 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.

It will take us some time to know the full extent of the numbers of Homeless individuals and families that are emerging during and from the effects of this pandemic. It is also too early to know the full extent of the economic, social and psychological effects this crisis is having on individuals

¹United Nations Expert Group Meeting. "Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 22 - 24 May 2019. p. 25. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2019/10/summary-egm-final-9sep.pdf>

² See *Hidden Faces of Homelessness: International Research on Families and Family Homelessness Through the Lens of the United Nations 2030 Agenda*

and families. We must ensure that the issue of family homelessness is not left behind or worsened by the global situation during which the top priorities for governments is to stop the virus. As UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, has clearly stated: the 2030 Agenda is a natural organizing principle once the world can shift its focus to recovery. Just as the SDGs require multi-stakeholder and multisectoral engagement and work, so does Family Homelessness.

Family homelessness remains a highly gendered issue, and Women and Children/Girls continue to be left behind in qualitative and quantitative research and dialogues. As noted by Willy Missack, *Independent Climate Expert in Vanuatu and the Asia-Pacific*, “Gender inequality is an issue in different aspects of society, and when it comes to homelessness, women and young girls are very much vulnerable, even in the hidden situations. They may spend a lot of time trying to find ways to protect themselves from what is happening in the household, and to make sure that where they live their rights are respected and applied.” Furthermore, mounting evidence across Europe suggests that definitions that exclude hidden homelessness have led to systemic underestimation of the extent of female homelessness and consequently a neglect of gender issues, both in terms of policy and service design.³

While the experience of homelessness has distinct characteristics for all, irrespective of an individual’s economic, cultural, racial or geographic context, homelessness is often experienced by Women and Children/Girls in a way that is dissimilar to that of their single or male counterparts. With diverse structural and personal drivers, the multifaceted issues must be addressed through a human rights based approach ensuring that dignity and a voice of those with a lived experience are heard and listened to, and that they have access to long term, supported, and sustainable avenues out of their situation. As we know, housing is essential to ending homelessness, but housing alone is not sufficient. Housing is not just a physical structure of a roof and walls. Rather, it is secure tenure which satisfies the security, social and physical needs of its residents.

In conjunction with our speakers, this Symposium will offer the opportunity for the launch of Volume II of UNANIMA International’s publications: *Hidden Faces of Homelessness: International Research on Families, and Family Homelessness through the Lens of the 2030 Agenda*. They will include literature reviews, a range of expert inputs, testimonies of those working with families experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, as well as the ultimate experts: those with lived experience.

Staying true to our mantra at UNANIMA International: “don’t talk about us, without us,” this Symposium will provide a space to hear from Thematic Experts, Member States, and Service Providers, as well as Individuals with a Lived Experience, in an open dialogue setting. It will give those interested in the thematic area of Women and Children/ Girls experiencing homelessness the opportunity to discuss the drivers, good

practices from various state and non- state stakeholders, and family homelessness in an array of contexts, policy recommendations, and give a voice to these Women and Children/Girls. It is hoped that this dialogue will be used to prepare a strong ongoing advocacy plan for Women and Children/ Girls experiencing Homelessness/ Displacement in preparation for the 59th Commission for Social Development themed: “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all,” in early 2021 and beyond.

³ Mayock and Bretherton (2016)