Concept Note

The Hidden Faces of Family Homelessness from the Perspective of Women and Children/Girls

"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, 2019

It is well documented that family homelessness is a growing social problem affecting women and children/girls around the world. Understood and manifesting in a diverse economic, social, cultural and even linguistic context globally, family homelessness is documented poorly at the global level. Women and children/girls experiencing homelessness remain among the most vulnerable populations, whose situation is often exacerbated by their distinct lack of access to social protection, public services and support. With no formal address, women, girls and their families experiencing homelessness often struggle to obtain even the most basic services, including education opportunities, health services and social protection in the form of financial support. This continues to add to the feeling of marginalisation experienced by these individuals during an already difficult situation.

Family homelessness is highly gendered. In Australia alone there was a 10 per cent increase in homelessness among women between 2011 and 2016.[1] Homelessness can be visible—where people live on the streets— or invisible— where individuals and families are living in shelters and/ or non-permanent settlements or situations. It is often the second category that women and children/girls fall into. Women tend to seek shelter from relatives, friends and acquaintances when they become homeless, only using homeless services when informal options have been exhausted.[2] It can be said that as part of "invisible" homelessness, these demographics are often ignored and "the furthest left behind". This is an issue of growing concern across the globe. 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]

The family is a fundamental social unit of all modern societies. They are the base from which we learn to communicate, empathize, compromise, and adapt within vital social structures. The importance of the family is reflected in many national public policies, these policies play an important role in national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and goals laid out in official United Nations documents. Given the realities and understanding of how families contribute to social progress they are key to finding the most effective route to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Combatting family homelessness specifically is integral in achieving the 2030 agenda and ensuring states stay in accordance with documents they have ratified and signed including but not limited to:
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- The Convention on the Right of the Child (1989)
- The Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements (1996)
- The New Urban Agenda (2016)

---

[1] Naidoo, I. (2019). *Increasingly, Australia's homeless are not old men*. [online] The Sydney Morning Herald. Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/the-average-homeless-person-in-australia-is-not-an-old-man-20180810-p4zwpw.html

[2] Gültekin L, Brush BL, Baiardi JM, Kirk K, VanMaldeghem K. Voices from the street: exploring the realities of family homelessness. *J Fam Nurs*. 2014;20(4):390–414. doi:10.1177/1074840714548943

[3] Mayock and Bretherton (2016)

Progress in achieving the eradication of homelessness underpins and can hinder the success of each of these.

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. As documented by Buckner, families (women and children/girls) experiencing homelessness share more characteristics with individuals experiencing extreme poverty than "single" individuals experiencing homelessness.[4] Throughout the homeless experience they face unique challenges, many of which cause the individual and /or their family to experience financial, social, emotional and even physical trauma. The ongoing trauma associated with family homelessness, especially for girls is carried through the life cycle of an individual.[5]

It is recognized that there are many drivers of homelessness and among them a vast number of interlinkages. Detailed by the thematic experts on homelessness during an Expert Group meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, the drivers of homelessness can be identified by two categories:

- Structural: Poverty, inequality, un- and under-employment, insecure and vulnerable jobs, ill-health or disabilities, discrimination and social exclusion, lack of affordable housing, the commoditization of housing, forced eviction, urbanization, rural-urban migration, displacement due to national disasters, extreme weathers, conflict

- Personal or family circumstances: mental illness, domestic violence, relationship break-ups, substance misuse

While affected by all the drivers mentioned, women and children/girls experiencing poverty are particularly susceptible to drivers such as:
- Increased Inequalities
- Domestic Violence and Family Breakdown
- Trafficking
- Mental Health
- Displacement and Conflict
- Lack of social protection systems
- Lack of affordable housing and access to it (specifically family sized housing)
- Lack of access to Personal documentation

Housing is essential to ending homelessness, but housing alone it is not sufficient. It is well established in international human rights law and its interpretation that housing is not just a physical structure of a roof and walls. Globally a number of nations have implemented a range of housing lead and social policies and programs to combat Homelessness. This side event will enable an open dialogue discussing the drivers, good practices from various state and non- state stakeholders, policy recommendations, and giving voice to women and children/ girls who have experienced Homelessness/ Displacement.

[4] Buckner. Homeless Children: Update on Research, Policy, Programs, and Opportunities. (2008)
[5] Cutuli, J, Sandra Ahumada, Janette Herbers, Theresa Lafavor, Ann Masten, and Charles Oberg. 2016. "Adversity And Children Experiencing Family Homelessness: Implications For Health". *Journal Of Children And Poverty* 23 (1): 41-55. doi:10.1080/10796126.2016.1198753.

UNANIMA
INTERNATIONAL
ONE SPIRIT, ONE MISSION, ONE HOPE

Company of the
Daughters of
Charity
of St. Vincent
DePaul.
NGO at the U.N.

Sacred Heart
at the UN

Sisters of
Notre Dame
de Namur

ND

Making known God's goodness

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd

Justice, Peace and Solidarity
International Office

MERCY
INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION

IBVM

20
YEARS

Sophia
providing homes · supporting people