UNITED NATIONS EXPERT GROUP MEETING

ON

AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS FOR ALLTO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS.

TOPIC

Policies to Reduce Homelessness among Women and Female-headed Households

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INTRODUCTION.

This paper will attempt to build on the objectives of this expert group meeting, which includes, a review of major drivers of homelessness, identifying the existing gaps and priority areas for interventions, as well as making specific policy recommendations on effective housing and social protection policies to address homelessness in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Homelessness as already been defined, means people who do not have a place to call home. The word "homelessness" also includes people who sleep in warming centers, homeless shelters, or in abandoned buildings, parking garages, or other places not meant for humans to live in.

As already been said in other presentations, there are different reasons why people become homeless in the first place, so also are the challenges and effects of homelessness on individuals and societies.

Similarly, there have been some discussions on some of the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequalities and social exclusion of women, other vulnerable groups like the elderly, people with disabilities and others who live in the margins of society in the context of the 2030 Agenda.

Therefore this paper, in line with the stated objectives will attempt to highlight the following issues from the civil society perspective:

1. The drivers of homelessness among women and female headed households and the challenges faced by them.
2. How we can ensure that women and female headed households have access to affordable housing.
3. Policies and measures to reduce homelessness among women and female-headed Households

BACKGROUND.

The Sustainable Development Goals is about leaving no one behind, and reaching the furtherest first. Incidentally the group that has been left behind is the homeless persons. There is no agreed language on homelessness in any official United Nations document or resolutions that can inspire global and national policy. A few documents talk about adequate housing for all and housing as a human right.

For instance, article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 states that: **"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment ….."**

Generally speaking, homeless persons are criminalized. People tend to make moral accusations on them. They are sometimes seen as criminals, prostitutes and do not have access to social services, no fixed address and are invincible so to speak. They are the most abandoned group in the society. How can the Sustainable Development Goals be achieved without them? We do not know how many they are, and no concrete policy on how to address them.

While homelessness is a global issue, the bulk of homeless persons may be found in sub- Saharan Africa and Asia, given the level of poverty, unemployment, inequalities and challenges to social inclusion existing in these regions. One major concern is that a good proportion of these homeless persons are women and female headed households.

Women become homeless because they do not have a home, and not because they are lazy or useless or not responsible. The systems and institutions have failed them hence they are homeless. Many live in shelters, shanty settlements and slums. There are many treaties and conventions our governments have signed on to. A good example is the International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979; which was adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 34/180 on the 18th of December 1979, entered into force on the 3rd of September 1981, and ratified by about 163 countries.

Article 14 (2)(h) of CEDAW states that**: "State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and in particular, shall ensure to such women ..(h) enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transportation and communication**.

Similarly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes housing as a human right. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have said that human right to adequate housing consists of seven elements which include security of tenure, affordability and habitability among other elements. Homeless persons do not have access to housing or shelter that meets any of these criteria.

Again, the SDGs, indicator 11.1 states that "**By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade the slums.** This means that homeless persons are entitled to a safe and affordable housing, including women of course.

Therefore in proposing policies and measures to reduce homelessness among women and female headed households, we need to review the following:

1. Drivers of homelessness among women and female headed households

1.1. Women as Slum dwellers. These are women living in inadequate and overcrowded places. About 1.2 billion people are said to live in slums. As a result of urbanization, women form a sizable proportion of those who migrate from rural areas to urban areas in search of a better life. No sooner than later, do the women realize that the patriarchal culture prevailing in the rural areas exists in the urban areas, making conditions and services hostile to them.

Due to lack or limited educational qualifications, many women are not able to secure high paying jobs in urban areas. They are then confronted with drudgery, poverty and lack of adequate housing. They end up in slums and shanty settlements from where they are often evicted without notice by town or municipal planners and administrators. The women become homeless, even though they bear the burden of raising their children. They do not have security of tenure, they are open

to hunger, no hygienic toilet facilities, vulnerable to crime and violence and no good source of income.

1.2. Women as Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). A case in point is that of Syria, Venezuela, Nigeria, DRC, and so on. About 70 million persons are displaced due to war, conflict and extremism. In these cases women live in open tents and camps, without adequate facilities. Some women often leave the tents and camps for the streets, due to the unbearable conditions, such as lack of sleeping spaces, hunger and neglects meted to them and their children by some of the authorities and others. Some women have been raped and sexually abused my soldiers and men who were supposed to protect and help them. An example of such case in point was the story, which was reported by Daily Sun newspaper ob the 18th of July 2010 that Liberian women were searching for soldiers, who fathered over 250,000 children during the Liberian crisis. The soldiers served in the ECOWAS monitoring group peace keeping force during Liberia's war. Many of the women became homeless due to the war.

1.3. Women and Forced evictions. The problem of homelessness is a problem of forced evictions, lack of housing and ownership of land. In most of the world's poorest areas, more than half of the households are headed by women. Traditionally, in many African communities, women lack access to land and property ownership, credit facilities and finance for affordable housing. Of particular mention are the women who separated or divorced from their husbands. They are often sent out with only few clothes, as the husbands tend to keep the house and other properties. Similarly, widows particularly those without male children are evicted by their in- laws who dispossessed them of their homes and lands. Other evictions are those carried out by government authorities which also result to homelessness among many women. Homelessness and landlessness increases women's vulnerability to physical violence. Many of these women lack knowledge of human and legal rights.

1.4. Violence Against Women: Around the world, at least one out of every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Violence against women is a major obstacle to women attaining equality, development and peace. In order to escape the violence in their homes, some women become homeless. They run to safe spaces, such as shelters, women's centers or

transition homes, to find refuge, because their homes or communities are unsafe. In these spaces, homeless women and their children who have had violence perpetrated upon them find refuge and compassion. The Global Network of Women's Shelters was founded in 2008, to unite and strengthen these safe spaces and women's shelter globally to make a change and end violence against women.

This group of homeless women is often not accounted for when homeless people are discussed, yet there are many of them spread across the world living in temporary shelters run by civil society and faith based organizations. The critical work of women's shelters and shelter networks in helping homeless women and their children fleeing violence can be seen in the case of about 53,230 women and 34,794 children who sought refuge and were helped in such shelters in 46 countries on one day in 2014-2015. GNWS has such women shelters in Africa, America (North, Central and South America), Asia, Europe, Oceania, Middle East and North Africa.

2. What can we do to ensure that women and female headed households have access to affordable housing?

1. We need to carryout measurements on homelessness. The governments need the political will to start collecting data on homeless persons, who they are, how many are they, their specific needs and the main drivers of homelessness, particularly in women and female headed households. There may be country / regional specifics and peculiarities that may emerge from this exercise.

Civil Society Organizations can assist the governments to measure and collect data on homeless persons. We should also note that problems and challenges affect men and women differently. Therefore we need disaggregated data. We also need to speak up that the New Urban Agenda needs to tackle homelessness before green cities.

2. A number of conventions and protocols state that housing is a human right. We need to clarify the specific housing rights obligations by our governments. We should use existing housing rights provisions as a basis for more advocacy and applying pressure on governments to ensure that these rights are protected and enforced. In addition efforts should be made to create more awareness among communities, women groups and civil society organizations, on the conventions and provisions on housing rights, and invoking these provisions in legal courts in

support of housing rights for homeless persons especially for women and female headed households.

3. Countries should be encouraged to build affordable and adequate low- income housing units for women and female headed households. We should advocate for financing to be available for women to end homelessness. We realize that shelter is expensive, however it must be provided for all.

4. The United Nations and its relevant commissions and agencies should focus on homelessness among women in its priority theme. There should be a special task force or Working Committee at the United Nations level on homelessness, and among women in particular.

It is comforting to note that the priority theme for 58th session for the Commission for Social Development is Affordable Housing and Social protection Systems for all to address homelessness. This priority theme should be addressed with the mindset that Housing is a human right.

In addressing the Sustainable Development Goal 10: to reduce inequalities should be made to emphasize homelessness, inequalities and poverty, with women being the central focus. The United Nations should also take it upon itself to set up units or charge already existing ones, to help measure the number and categories of homeless persons in various regions. Implementation of Resolutions and policies reached on homelessness should be monitored and evaluated periodically. Offenders should be named and shamed.

3. Policies and measures to reduce homelessness among women and female headed households:

Every measure and policy should aim at preventing, assessing, measuring and systemically ending homelessness among women and female headed households.

3.1. **Social Housing:** The National Social Protection Policy of Nigeria, states that there should be "Decent and affordable housing for the homeless, the monetary poor, and families living in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions". This policy objective is to improve access to housing for extreme poor and people living in poor housing conditions. To prevent homelessness among women, countries and their governments must have social protection policies on the provision of adequate and

affordable housing for low-income persons. There must be the political will on the part of the government to implement and enforce this policy in order to provide adequate shelter for all.

Such deliberate measures if taken will ensure that women and female headed households have access to adequate and affordable housing which will definitely reduce homelessness.

3.2 Access to Land and Secure Tenure.

Promulgating or reforming pro- poor and women friendly land use act can reduce homelessness, as well as make inhabitants of slums and informal settlements to obtain security of tenure and regularize their status. There should be enforceable policies such that will give all women equal property rights, rights to inheritance, affordable housing and including the property rights of widows.

This is in line with SDGs 5.1: End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. Similarly, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences said in:

5.a: Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws

5. c: Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

In addition, the already existing policies and agreements against forced evictions should be enforced and make to work, as this will reduce homelessness.

3.3 Economic Empowerment Policies:

Sound economic empowerment policies to reduce poverty among women and increase their earning power should be pursued by the government. In addition, well-funded employment and community programs to help women to become independent should be encouraged. There should also be equal wages for men and women carrying out similar roles. Social protection policies and programmes

aimed at supporting female headed households to cater for their family and provide adequate housing should be implemented and enforced.

3.4. Participation and Representation of Women in Decision making.

There should be a policy towards reshaping legal and institutional frameworks and governance systems. In many countries, particularly in Africa, we have less than 35% of women participating in decision making and leadership positions, even when such provisions have been made in the constitution. When women are excluded or not well represented in processes that determine their welfare, such processes produce decisions and actions that do not favor women. A case in point is the incoming 9th Senate in Nigeria, where out of the 109 elected senators, only 7 are women. We are all aware of the importance of the work of the Senate in democracy and governance of any country, and yet women represent less than 7% of the incoming senate in Nigeria.

We need to strongly address these inequalities and other factors that are challenging the inclusion of women in governance and other aspects of our society. This is the time to end discrimination of women in decision making and leadership positions. This may call for updating outdated laws, properly implementing progressive laws and domestication of conventions and protocols already signed unto by governments. To reduce homeless among women and female headed households, we need such policies that will take all these issues and factors into consideration.

Finally, we need policies and partnerships on continuous data gathering / measurement of homeless persons, to ascertain, those exiting and those coming into homelessness, as well as identifying emerging issues which may affect already implementing programmes.

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