Introduction

The world is urbanizing at an alarming rate – and with alarming results. Urban landscapes are now coarse depictions of gross inequality. Our urban centers have become polarized: two cities existing side by side, separated by status and rights. My experience of this was most felt and visible in India, where I have worked. Urbanization is a tale where few profit immensely while many others struggle to survive – the result of policies and state inaction that has elevated some people at the expense of others. One manifestation of this inequality is homelessness, and it presents itself in different forms. The form most prevalent and visible are people living out in the open. An extreme example of this is the street homelessness situation I recently observed in São Paulo, Brazil. Conversely, yet equally as prevalent, are less visible forms of homelessness. This situation is found in the Global South in particular, and manifests itself in precarious, overcrowded, or inadequate housing conditions that do not have basic services and security of tenure.

Homelessness

Homelessness is both a global and local challenge, one which requires global and local solutions. Based on national reports, it is estimated that no less than 150 million people are homeless.[1] This means that approximately 2 percent of the world's population are living on the streets, in temporary dwellings, refugee camps, or in transitory conditions.[2] The United Nations Settlement Program (UN-Habitat) estimates that about 1.6 billion people – more than 20 percent of the world's population – live in inadequate housing, and suggests that more than 100 million have no housing at all.[3] It is believed that by 2050 that number will reach 3 billion.[4] The number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness is growing throughout the world, and it occurs in all nations. It is a global crisis.

Establishing an international definition of homelessness, or multiple definitions, is a goal of advocates for ending homelessness. They have supported the description that the United Nations Expert Group formulated in Nairobi in 2019:

"Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lack habitable space with security of tenure, rights, and the ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. Homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights."[5]

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society are determined to find solutions to homelessness. We believe that homelessness is solvable. The NGO Working Group to End Homeless (NGO WGEH) advocated for many years to find solutions at an international level. A huge achievement for us as a group happened when the gavel fell on the 58th session of the UN Commission for Social Development, in which the text of the first historic United Nations resolution on homelessness was agreed upon. This UN resolution recognizes that people are often pushed into homelessness by a range of diverse structural, personal, social, political, and economic drivers. It emphasized the importance of developing family-oriented policies, while explaining the connection between the breakdown of the family and homelessness. It also called for a response from all sectors within governments and societies. This was the first resolution, adopted by any UN body since it was founded in 1945, to specifically address homelessness.[6]

On December 16, 2021, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on inclusive policies and programs to address homelessness and recognized that homelessness is an affront to human dignity. The resolution urges Member States to eliminate all forms of discrimination against those experiencing homelessness, and to decriminalize homelessness. It strengthens efforts to raise the visibility of homelessness and its global impacts. It is a monumental step in the right direction, as it highlighted homelessness among all 193 Member States, and encouraged cohesive action towards addressing it.[7]

Family Homelessness Internationally

For women and children, homelessness is often invisible. The dangers they face on the streets motivate families to exhaust all other options available within their cultural context.[8] Family homelessness has sociocultural, economic, and political causes that governments, civil society and the private sector can address. The following family homelessness research findings can be generalized internationally, across our four case studies.

Urbanization is increasing, often rapidly, causing detrimental effects for people, the planet, and infrastructure.[9] Family breakdown is both a cause and effect of family homelessness. As an effect, families are split up in shelters, and poor children are subject to state and other interventions. Death can also be a consequence of unsafe and/or unsanitary living conditions, as well as declining environmental and population health. There is also segregation of the poor and homeless occurring both *de facto* and *de jure* (in fact and by law). Additionally, people migrating from rural to urban areas in developing countries often move directly into slums and/or housing that is inadequate because they lack alternative opportunities. We saw this firsthand in Mukuru in Kenya, where communities are separated from many of the benefits of development and infrastructure which benefits cities.[10]

Lack of definitions and data collection contribute to the invisibility of family homelessness, specifically that of women and children. On a national level, governmental research design, execution, and modification of censuses can increase the visibility of this issue. One example of this was the recent 2021 Australian census which required homeless children to state their most recent address as well as past addresses.[11] Such results significantly skewed by the fact children experiencing long term street homelessness were unable to complete such questions.[12]

Privatization and financialization of housing are occurring globally, spurred by neoliberalism.[13] Relatedly, emergency accommodation overshadows other approaches to housing, in both budget and use. Governments should reevaluate neoliberal policies, while ensuring social protection floors are enacted

with immediacy. Internationally, civil society plays a large role in addressing family homelessness, through grassroots actions and interventions, and through national diplomatic engagement.[14]

UNANIMA International Research on Family Homelessness

Family homelessness manifests in diverse forms throughout the world. It is often considered an embarrassing or taboo subject, and so governments tend to underestimate the problem. For many years I have been calling for a paradigm shift in how we perceive the issue of homelessness: it is time for a revolution on this most important and serious issue, as homelessness continues to be a growing social problem affecting families around the world.

However, experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity/inadequacy are not the whole of an individual's or family's reality. We must view family homelessness as one human rights issue among many and seek to understand the histories and contexts from which family homelessness has stemmed. Globally, women, children, and girls are vulnerable to adverse personal and familial circumstances in addition to the structural/systemic causes of family homelessness, as well as the accompanying issues of displacement and trauma.[15]

Within the foundations of international human rights law, the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) Article 16.3 clearly states that,

"The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state." [16]

In the proceeding law, which explicitly extends rights to children, the preamble of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) reflects and expands on the above:

"Convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community."[17]

In support of these laws, UNANIMA International and our partners have committed to extensive research and ongoing advocacy on the issue of homelessness, specifically the niche and often overlooked issue of family homelessness and that of women and children. Working with the ethos "nothing about us without us," the aforementioned research and advocacy continues to place emphasis on bringing the voices of those with lived experience into the global conversation.

Research Methodology

In both volumes I and II of the "Hidden Faces of Homelessness, International Research on Families," we focused on five diverse geographic regions and conducted case studies within them. The pilot regions and countries included: Africa (Kenya), Asia (India & Philippines), Europe (Ireland, Greece), and North America (USA).

The research included both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was comprised of statistics from governments and civil society, which needed to be looked at in light of the absence of a definition, the subsequent discrepancies, and peripheral nature of the data. As our research sought to address the emergent phenomenon from a human rights perspective, we concluded that conducting qualitative research would be best suited to documenting the human experience of families. This qualitative data was contributed by those with a lived experience, private sector and governmental observations, personal stories, and good practice examples.

Research Rationale

Our particular interest lay in providing a voice to women, children and girls experiencing homelessness – presenting not only their experience, but also their needs and contributions going forward, as reflective of their culture and society. A mixture of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies was used to achieve a holistic overview of the topic and to ensure outcomes that were not limited to economic, geographic, and social contexts. Our contribution to family homelessness was bolstered by unique analyses, which combined social justice, gender, and human rights lenses.

Definition on Family Homelessness

UNANIMA International used the following working definition of Family Homelessness:

"Families who do not have consistent residency or support needed to maintain a residency of their own who live episodically, temporarily or chronically in temporary housing, including shelters and locations not intended for human habitat or settlement."

However, since May 2019, the Expert Group definition has contextualized our definition, making its applicability to many slum dwellers even more evident. Applying an international lens to this issue, family homelessness is present in different societies, manifesting in various ways within them. Family homelessness takes many forms. It can look like, but is not limited to:

- Staying with friends and family
- Living in slums or other inadequate and insecure dwellings
- Living in shelters and transitional housing
- Families living on the street

Displacement of peoples and family homelessness is driven by many issues, including:

- Personal and Family Circumstances
- Urbanization and Financialization of Housing
- Domestic Abuse
- Violence Against Women
- Addiction
- Inequalities
- Conflicts
- Natural disaster
- Trauma

Could Families be the Key to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?

The family is the fundamental social unit of all modern societies. They are the base from which we learn to communicate, empathize, compromise, and adapt within vital societal structures.[18] The importance of the family is reflected in many national public policies, which play an important role in national efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given the realities and understanding of how families contribute to social progress, it follows that they are key to finding the most effective route to achieving the SDGs. Despite this, global disaggregated data on families is lacking.

SDG 11: "Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable"[19]

Cities and settlements are often considered societal hubs: a place for ideas, commerce, culture, science, productivity, social development, and much more. In the past, and more likely into the future, cities and settlements have played a major role in economic and social advancement globally. With the number of people living in cities expected to rise to over 5 billion,[20] meeting the targets outlined in SDG 11 is of the utmost importance if the 2030 Agenda is to be achieved. Without this goal's achievement, people living in cities, especially families, are likely to face a range of challenges and cross cutting issues that impede on the achievement of the other 16 goals in the 2030 Agenda.

SDG 11 is closely linked to the issue of family homelessness. Target 11.1 specifically states: "By 2030, ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums."[21] It is the most direct link to homelessness in the SDGs. Target 11.1 along with other UN documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically reference the right to housing as a major challenge to achieving SDG 11. For this reason, it is integral that family homelessness is addressed for SDG 11 – and the rest of the 2030 Agenda – to be achieved.

Target 11.1 challenges governments worldwide to promote policies, investments, and practical action both to prevent the structural conditions that bring about homelessness, and to house families deprived of residential security. Target 11.3 is also relevant to the reality of family homelessness. It calls upon governments and various non-state actors to achieve the following: "By 2030, to enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and human settlements planning and management."[22]

Planning envisioned by Member States should encompass the participation of all stakeholders, including homeless families.

Children and Homelessness

Homelessness can have a significant impact on children, their education, health, sense of safety, and their overall development. Researchers have found that children are highly resilient but do experience the following when faced with homelessness and/or displacement:

- Higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems
- Are likely to experience separation from their families
- Are more likely to drop out of school

Housing is the solution for families. And, in my experience, housing with support comprising of psychosocial support, financial support, childcare, early childhood services, and mental health support have proven to be successful.

Exploring International Solutions – Good Practices

- **Housing First:** Housing First is an essential intervention in supporting someone to break the cycle of homelessness.[23] Housing First is a simple, yet profound idea of providing a home as quickly as possible to a person who needs it, along with the supports they need to recover from trauma.

- **USA - Pathways Housing First Institute:** The Pathway Housing First (PHF) program is an effective, well-documented and evidence-based program for ending homelessness and was founded on the principle that housing is a basic human right. This program offers immediate access to housing for families as a right – not something earned or a reward for good behavior. A key component of this program is "Consumer Choice and Self Determination." In other words, people should have

choice as to what kind of housing they receive and where they are located. Empirical evidence from multiple randomized control research trials documented the effectiveness of the PHF program. When operated effectively, the program achieved housing stability rates of about 80%, compared to about 40% when using other, stricter models.[24]

- **Kenya – Mukuru Promotion Center Kenya:** Mukuru Promotion Center (MPC) is unique in the quality and range of services it provides within the Mukuru slum. The organization's responsiveness to the needs of the slum community and involvement of stakeholders is essential to providing effective services. They have created the first formal healthcare services within the slum, including a medical clinic with an HIV/AIDS testing center, and a hospital which is complemented by a community-based health care program. The educational facilities include four primary schools, a secondary school, and a rehabilitation center. The Mukuru Promotion Center has transferred leadership of several Mukuru initiatives, including the Reuben Center and the Mukuru Slums Development project, to others in the community willing and able to run them.[25] Their vision displays the relevancy of stakeholders to their organization and sustained leadership within the community.

- **India – Housing and Land Rights Network:** The Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) based in New Delhi, India contributes to advocacy for the homelessness and the housing insecure in India. It works for the promotion and human rights to adequate housing and land, which involves securing safe housing for families and individuals. HLRN emphasizes the Housing First model. The organization's involvement in networks and coalitions is one of their strategic principles. HLRN was a founding member of a network called "the Urban Rights Forum" in English, which has increased the political influence of those wishing to end homelessness since 2008. Shivani Chaudhry, Executive Director of HLRN puts forth that this is a model that can be replicated. Such a network could assist states in coordinating a response – which is what was done through his network's presence in Delhi.[26]

Collaborate to Eliminate

No single government, group or organization is fully accountable for ending family homelessness in a community. Each local authority and community stakeholder holds its own small piece of the solution. But who has their eye on how the pieces fit together? This is one of the most significant issues globally where organizations operate parallel or in isolation from one another. When I worked in Dublin in the 1990s as a practitioner, we advocated for different organizations – both statutory and voluntary – to work together to eliminate family homelessness. What was clear to all of us was that the old system didn't work. We needed a *paradigm shift* for all of us working together for the common good.

- **Promoting Empowerment – Families Involved in Regenerating their own Communities and Neighborhoods:** Families in marginalized communities have dreams for a social environment liberated of inequities disfavoring them throughout their lives. These people are determined to understand and actualize their dreams and expectations for a better and empowered life. The empowerment process gives individuals and families the opportunity to contribute effectively to leading their well-being. Acquiring management and organization of their own lives through promotion of knowledge, education, and awareness gives individuals and communities the opportunity and capacity to take control of their own lives. This process also gives them personal, interpersonal, and political power so families and communities can undertake certain practices to progress their conditions. Given this, the following realities need to be changed:

1. Policies, institutional frameworks, and funding conditions are area-based interventions which are mostly determined at national level, giving cities little room to make their own choices.

2. The limitations of real involvement from the experienced "experts"/residents; usually governments have the decision-making powers regarding deprived communities and families on the essential decisions about urban renewal in their own neighborhoods.

It is becoming clearer to practitioners that top-down policies rarely achieve lasting results in terms of improving the lives of families/communities.[27] The answer lies in the involvement of families/communities in neighborhood renewal programs, and bottom-up approaches working in unison with top-down policies and support.

- **Ireland – Sophia Housing:** In Ireland, Sophia Housing takes the Housing First model a step further; they see the quality of a home and the environment it is placed in as a trauma intervention and a key element in breaking the cycle of homelessness, especially intergenerational homelessness.

Sophia has collaborated with religious congregations in Ireland to repurpose convents and school buildings as homes with support for families who have experienced homelessness. These buildings are valued centers within a community where generations have learned together, formed lifelong relationships together, and grown together. The urban buildings are valued landmarks and valued spaces. Refurbishing these buildings is both an environmentally responsible way to house people to ensure that valued urban spaces continue to be used for social justice and community building.[28] A good example of this is in the inner city of Dublin, Ireland where the site of a former Mercy Convent and school built in the 1800s has been adapted to house 78 adults and 30 children with on-site supports provided by a social care team, a childcare center, a café, and a Wisdom Center, which is a calm, reflective community space for therapeutic interventions and reflections. The housing stability within this community is 99%, meaning only 1% of those supported on site return to homelessness.[29]

Sophia's intervention acknowledges that an urban environment can be psychologically informed, and that the environment around us can have a positive or negative impact on the people who exist in it, especially those who have experienced homelessness.[30] People value themselves by how society values them. Sophia believes that if you live in a home that is built to a high standard, with open green spaces, you can see in the bricks and mortar, not just a safe space to recover from trauma but more importantly one's own value.

Trauma and homelessness are complex, and recovery from both is never simple, however, the Sophia model of providing quality homes with support utilizes the urban environment as a valued intervention in supporting the person and the community they live in.

Conclusion

Behind every homelessness story we see humanity in the face of inequality. Time and time again, UNANIMA International has witnessed the resilience and adaptability of the family unit spanning across different countries and contexts. While the personal circumstances that lead to homelessness can differ for each family,[31] many of the structural and systemic failures contributing to family homelessness are quite similar, especially in urban environments. By using a Housing First approach and providing families with good quality homes with supports, cities and their transformation can play a key role in empowering families and meeting the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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About UNANIMA International

UNANIMA International is a non-governmental organization (NGO) advocating on behalf of women and children (particularly those in poverty), migrants and refugees, homeless and displaced, and the environment. Our work takes place primarily at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, where we and other members of civil society aim to educate and influence policymakers at the global level. In solidarity, we work for systemic change to achieve a more just world.

Our Vision

A future where Women and Children who live in extreme poverty in our society will be empowered to achieve a better quality of life.

Check out all our publications on Family Homelessness at
https://unanima-international.org/

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WE CALL FOR: global action to address, reduce, and end Family Homelessness; and for a global paradigm shift where Family Homelessness is viewed as the human rights issue it is.