



**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON FAMILY HOMELESSNESS,  
DISPLACEMENT AND TRAUMA THROUGH COVID-19 CRISIS**

“We must work together to ensure inclusivity, to ensure resiliency, and to ensure that measures to combat pandemic do not perpetuate already existing global inequalities.”<sup>1</sup>

(UN Habitat New York, March 31st, 2020)

Our analysis of Family Homelessness, Displacement and Trauma through COVID-19 aims to heed the above call to action. UNANIMA International’s advocacy focus at the United Nations is Women, Children and Girls, and Migrants, who are often left behind in news and discussions, which is proving unfortunately true with the COVID-19 pandemic. These groups disproportionately comprise the homeless populations of our world, though are often hidden statistically and not included because of limited definitions and understanding of homelessness. The threat of the virus is not purely physical; it is also mental, emotional, spiritual, work-related and people-related<sup>2</sup>, and therefore must be evaluated holistically. Addressal of the coronavirus crisis must consider the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, too, in order to truly “leave no one behind” in our world.

## **Trauma**

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 directly resulting from the experience of global pandemic within conditions of homelessness or housing insecurity. Internationally, service providers are anecdotally reporting increases in anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, and PTSD symptoms among the visible and invisible homeless populations.



Isolation, in a physical sense, separates people in need from the support they might normally receive, both more generally, and specifically for trauma. Support phone calls or telemedicine represent a change in routine and depth of connection, which can be triggering, and otherwise contain barriers depending on socio-economic status and other factors. People in need, but without established relationships with organizations and service workers, are even more vulnerable both physically and mentally in the midst of this crisis.

### **Technology and Limitations in Service Provision**

In terms of service provision, telehealth can be difficult to provide to all of an organization's current clients, let alone to extend to others in need who may not have been connected to services prior to the pandemic. Clients may not have access to wifi or a safe place, or safe room in their house to be able to have therapy sessions or convey their needs. They also may be unable to engage due to immediate needs of their family unit, including child supervision; or they may be in panic-mode, making engagement difficult and limited.

Accessing support and maintaining awareness of the situation in these times is intimately tied to technology. For people experiencing street homelessness or who otherwise rely on public spaces or social services for information and access to the internet are uniquely challenged during “stay-at-home” orders. Technology deficits are apparent beyond the visible homeless population, and extend to the invisible homeless: individuals and family units that are doubled-up and/or in inadequate housing, who are often low-income. For children specifically, having no technology, limited, or even shared technology leads to a disruption in education and potentially interpersonal conflict.

There are many people in extreme poverty with no technological access. The wide range of impacts technology has on livelihood in different contexts, and its use (and potential use) in



solutions to and prevention of homelessness and housing insecurity needs further research. These topics are opportune for the upcoming 59th United Nations Commission for Social Development priority theme: *Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all.*<sup>3</sup>

### **Doubled-up**

Being “doubled-up” is physically unsafe when too close proximity to other people makes it difficult to meet hygienic needs which spreads disease faster. Additionally, spaces within which people are doubled up may be physically unsafe due to the structure and design of the shelter. 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.

Being “doubled-up” 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.

### **Slums**

Slum dwellers live in conditions that make them vulnerable to the spread of the virus itself: they have less access to water and sanitation, and the access they have is often shared or communal (or even in the form of business-operated services). Housing conditions are generally small and close together, and doubling-up is a common occurrence. A fear that is being increasingly voiced in the United Nations civil society space and by UNANIMA International’s members is the difficulty there will be in preventing the spread of the disease if and when it reaches certain



political environments, such as slums (though not limited to them), where there will purportedly be a lack of supported care and treatment.

Slum communities differ around the world in their relationship to governance and infrastructural design; these two elements are most relevant to how COVID-19 can threaten a community. The seriousness of the risk is communicated in BBC India Correspondent Soutik Biswas's commentary on Asia's 'biggest slum,' Dharavi in India, "an outbreak of coronavirus in a place where social distancing is an oxymoron could easily turn into a grave public health emergency and overwhelm the city's stretched public health system."<sup>4</sup>

### **Gendered Effect/Risks**

Testimony: Bridget Banning | Trauma Therapist, USA

*Even with my most resourced clients, and as sort of a blanket statement for adult women, is that [with the COVID-19 pandemic there is an] increase and intensification of the mental load...one of my clients, not only is she still working, but at home her kids are primarily her responsibility too. She's caring for the household, she'd cook every meal because everything is closed, she's cleaning everything because we're being told [to], she's doing the laundry, she's still working somehow, and she's managing her own trauma. I think that in and of itself is a double standard.*

Note: Ms. Banning gave input to the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness on March 27th, 2020.



Testimony: Danielle Leah | Social Worker, Western Australia

*I work in healthcare - maternity social work (which will continue, needs to continue!) and [COVID-19 is] changing the way we do everything... and that way changes daily, which is certainly anxiety provoking. I feel for the most vulnerable in our society, who are going to struggle not only physically - but emotionally and financially. My clients for example, will no doubt experience higher rates of family and domestic violence, anxiety, struggles to cope when the kids stay home, and lack of support services resulting in increased child protection involvement.*

Note: This testimony was written by Ms. Leah on March 18, 2020 and is shared with permission.

### **Poverty and Labor**

Low-income groups are more likely to continue working in both formal and informal sectors during this crisis, meaning they are more at risk of contracting the virus. International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW Asia Pacific) states, "low-paid workers...[are] frequently unprotected, facing risks not only from novel coronavirus but also from the economic impact of getting ill."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they, among other organizations and advocates, have voiced the concern that government attempts to provide financial relief or support will not reach the most vulnerable - who are often people without identification for various reasons and/or working in the informal economy; these factors can be causes and/or effects of housing status.

Women's work is less likely to be considered "essential," and participation in unpaid labor constitutes economic risks for women within the pandemic situation and generally.



Quote | Preety Gadhoke, *PhD, MPH Associate Professor St. John's University*

“We need to offer free training programs and opportunities to further women’s education that fit employment needs and demands. These include the health care sector, where job demands have increased by 35% [in the United States of America], factory work, as well as distance opportunities. This can include federal-level leadership and state-based initiatives. This is a critical time to raise the level of knowledge and skill-building that empower women to work productively, to help support themselves and their families.”

Note: Dr. Gadhoke shared her inputs with UNANIMA International on March 27th, 2020

Resortment to sex work to secure income is another result of the virus’ economic impact in many contexts, which simultaneously increases risk for contraction of the virus (among other health concerns), and a further risk of homelessness; sex work may also be considered an indication of hidden homelessness, as when it is pursued as a last resort because of financial necessity, it can be linked to a lack of security of tenure.

### **Women’s reversion to Sex Work**

Internationally the trend of women’s reversion to sex work, from economic desperation, is being noticed, although more documentation of it is necessary. A predictable decrease in in-person demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects reflects further how access to technology may drastically change the opportunities someone has to adjust to the challenges of the crisis, despite the technological opportunity in this context having dark underlinings.

Testimony: Bridget Banning | Trauma Therapist, USA

*I know unfortunately, out of necessity there has been a return to sex work...and that is just a reality we have to face...the priority is making sure they have the resources to engage in sex*



*work as safely as possible. It has been a shift - in how we normally engage in case management with that population...we have a department specifically for our sex trafficking survivors...so now [other priorities are] making sure that they have shelter, are fed.*

Note: Ms. Banning gave input to the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness on March 27th, 2020.

### **Food**

For some, the need for food has become a greater concern preoccupying them than the virus itself. BBC World reported, “India's poorest 'fear hunger may kill us before coronavirus',”<sup>6</sup> in Europe, The Guardian reported families’ inability to get enough food while in temporary accommodations,<sup>7</sup> and service providers in the USA and elsewhere have noted their clients increased requests for nutritional support. This basic need may drive some of the economic activities and engagement in situations where contact with others is innate; the gendered impact of food scarcity is noteworthy, showing it as another symptom of women’s inequality.<sup>8</sup>

Quote | Paula Braitstein, Canadian Scholar Currently Residing in Kenya

“I think people understand how bad it can get. The problem is a lot of people don’t have a choice. They go out and try to make their daily bread however they can, or they effectively don’t eat that day - they and their children.”

Note: Dr. Braitstein shared her inputs with UNANIMA International on March 31st, 2020.

The BBC article *Coronavirus 'could wipe out Brazil's indigenous people'* discusses hunger and food security within the Amazonian context.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous groups that are isolated or semi-isolated are suggested to be at heightened risk if they contract the virus.<sup>10</sup> Additionally,



attempts to maintain isolation in some parts of the world will result in or exacerbate issues of hunger and malnutrition; however, the desire for land and housing security can be motivations for these communal actions. Reportedly, Marivelton Baré, president of the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Rio Negro (Foirn), connected the lack of government assistance surrounding food security to a eventual inability to isolate: “if the choice is either being infected or going hungry, most will choose the first,” he warns. “Then the consequences will be dire.”<sup>11</sup> Some Indigenous activists and scholars have asserted that unsustainable development actions have contributed to food insecurity among and near their communities.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, this topic reveals the intersections of many topics of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, in particular SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 10 (Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries), and COVID-19. Extensive cultivation of non-native foods is one example of how unsustainable development and export-oriented production models will endanger lives, especially when sovereignty becomes a necessity for health.

Quote | Daiara Tukano, Indigenous activist from Brazil and independent communicator and coordinator of Radio Yandê

“We have desert of soybean...desert of cows...desert of sugar cane....we need food.”

Note: Ms. Tukano shared her inputs during Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network’s Webinar on April 16, 2020.

## **Indigenous Peoples**

Globally, Indigenous peoples are continuously vulnerable to the loss of their land, while simultaneously groups who have historically had their rights violated and land taken, face a vulnerability to conditions conducive of invisible homelessness. Indigenous peoples living in





cities globally tend to make up a disproportional percentage of the homeless and impoverished populations, as is true in Montreal, Canada.<sup>13</sup> This brings many of the aforementioned vulnerabilities to the virus related to homelessness and poverty, including those associated with being doubled-up, having difficulty accessing information and technology, etc.

Women's Earth and Climate Action's (WECAN) April 16th Webinar "Indigenous Women on the Frontlines: COVID-19 and Defending Communities and the Amazon" gave a platform for Indigenous leaders to give testimonies of the effect and projected effects of the pandemic in their prospective communities. Sônia Bone Guajajara, Indigenous leader from Brazil and Executive Coordinator for the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) with translation by Maria Paula, Founder of the NGO "A Drop in the Ocean," suggested that the official death tolls for Indigenous peoples are not including those from urban areas. She also stated, "we ask for the international community to help us."<sup>14</sup>

In the webinar broader concerns for Indigenous wellbeing were brought up, including climate change's manifestations. In a sense, the virus can be viewed as a compound issue for many Indigenous groups who are at the heart of the fight against climate change and struggle for sustained control over their lands.<sup>15</sup> They are facing ongoing deforestation (which anectodally has been said to be increasing) and non-community led development projects which also introduce risks for the virus' spread and are drivers of homelessness as well.<sup>16</sup>

NBC reported, "deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon soared by 55 percent in the first four months of the year compared to the same period last year, according to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research. Destruction in April was up by 64 percent from the same month a year ago."<sup>17</sup>

There were reports of illegal mining taking place as the world's attention is directed towards the virus, at least within Brazil, though the occurrence of this elsewhere was implied. An



aforementioned BBC article stated, “there are now fears that the battle against the coronavirus will further reduce its resources to protect the forest and those living in it.”<sup>18</sup>

Quote | Patricia Gualinga, Kichwa leader from Sarayaku, Ecuador and Spokeswoman for Mujeres Amazónicas Defensoras de la Selva (Amazon Women in Defense of the Jungle)

“Indigenous people are facing double or even triple crises...and on top of the COVID-19...we are also living the impacts of climate change...”

Note: Ms. Gualinga shared her inputs during WECAN’s Webinar on April 16, 2020, and Indigenous activist Helena Gualinga from Sarayaku, Ecuador served as translator.

### **Access to Justice and Security**

For populations that generizably already face barriers in accessing legal help, such as Indigenous groups within contexts of land grabbing, the courts’ shut downs and delays can be proving detrimental to the natural environment and/or peoples’ ability to access their land and homes.

In the more inter-personal and familial context, it is notable that in many nations’ courts continue to process stay-away and protective orders, though other legal matters may be suspended. These other legal matters may not be considered emergencies in the same ways, but many are related to the wellbeing and security of families, and their delay may be triggering for those with trauma or otherwise detrimental to livelihoods.

While the coronavirus in itself is a threat to bodily security, other threats to security of families exist in parallel to the pandemic.



Testimony: Michelle Macías | Global Goodwill Ambassador from Mexico

“If I stay home, I lose everything,” has been the account statement of millions of Mexicans who, if they were to quarantine, would have no income for themselves or their families... [it is] impossible for several vulnerable populations, turning the “leaving no one behind” into a “most of the population is left behind.” The lockdown has become a real luxury in Mexico and, at the same time, it has become part of the daily life of Mexicans in different parts of the country. [In] the disputed zones by the drug cartels and criminal organizations, the population is not only facing the economic recession, the lacking of sufficient resources to get by, or the constant fear of the pandemic, but also are affected by the extreme violent and terrorist acts of criminal organizations.

Note: Ms. Macias submitted a written statement to UNANIMA International on April 19th, 2020

### **Aging Populations**

In many nations a growing part of the homeless population includes older persons who are also particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Generally women comprise a larger part of this demographic.

Quote | Katharine Schulmann, *Research Officer at Sophia Housing and PhD Candidate at Trinity College Dublin*

“In Ireland [COVID-19 is] going to make it, at least in the short to mid-term, much harder for older people with care needs to stay in their own homes - because there will be a shortage of home care workers, and an increasing reliance on family care or informal care. Older people who are homeless, and I mean rather people living in really precarious situations--what's often called 'hidden homelessness'--their health is already more vulnerable in terms of their pre-existing



health conditions than the rest of the older population. There are a whole lot of intersecting disadvantages going on there.”

Note: Ms. Shulmann shared her input with UNANIMA International on April 16th, 2020.

## **Conclusion**

This global pandemic has been termed a “crisis” which has many implications. We put forth, how can we avoid “crisis” in the future, if and when difficult, global situations occur? Much of this will lie with protecting vulnerable groups and minimizing the cross-sectoral and multi-dimensional aspects of problems.

For example, COVID-19 would not have to be a “crisis” for the homeless population, should homeless services, programs, and policies prioritize housing-first, supported care, and social justice. We have an opportunity going forward to increase the political will towards ending homelessness, necessarily stemming from a paradigm shift that allows homelessness to be recognized as a systemic problem and a human rights and civil rights issue, not a fault of individuals.

Several topics discussed here require further research and extended discussion. Significantly, there are other points of discussion not included in this first report, most significantly the effects of the pandemic on migrant and refugee families, and the concern the pandemic poses for children’s rights - immediately and looking towards the future.<sup>19</sup> UNANIMA International will continue exploring the impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Homelessness, Displacement and Trauma in the short and long-terms.



## More from UNANIMA International

*Official Statement on Family Homelessness and COVID 19:*

View and/or listen to the statement on YouTube in [English](#) or [Spanish](#).

English

[https://mcusercontent.com/8bb6ca603b91a37b4012a341d/files/be6fee3a-893f-4638-9370-41dc86001e78/UNANIMA\\_International\\_Statement\\_on\\_COVID\\_19\\_and\\_Family\\_Homelessness\\_English\\_.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/8bb6ca603b91a37b4012a341d/files/be6fee3a-893f-4638-9370-41dc86001e78/UNANIMA_International_Statement_on_COVID_19_and_Family_Homelessness_English_.pdf)

French

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Bengla

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Russian

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For more information about UNANIMA International visit [unanima-international.org](http://unanima-international.org).

You can also access our recent publications:

*[Family Homelessness through the Lens of the United Nations 2030 Agenda](#),*

*[Hidden Faces of Homelessness: International Research on Families](#)*

and *[The Impact of Personal & Family Circumstances on Homelessness](#)*.

To make inputs on Family Homelessness in your region, nation, or community, contact [researchfellow@unanima-international.org](mailto:researchfellow@unanima-international.org)

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