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### Commission for Social Development

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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the  
twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority**

**Theme: Affordable housing and social protection systems for all  
to address homelessness**

### **Statement submitted by Apne Aap Women World Wide (India) Trust, non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### Rise in Sex Trafficking as Homelessness Increases Among Women in India

Homelessness constitutes the worst violation of the human right to adequate housing, and homeless people, especially women, are among the most marginalized, ignored, and discriminated against in the country. Homeless women, particularly young women, suffer the worst kinds of violence and insecurity, and are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Instances of rape, molestation, and women spending sleepless nights guarding their young adolescent girls are a common feature among homeless women. Research by Housing and Land Rights Network ([www.hlrn.org.in](http://www.hlrn.org.in)) reveals that women may be rendered homeless due to multiple reasons. These include, inter alia, structural violence, such as escape from domestic violence, breakdown of social institutions such as marriage and family, distress migration, forced evictions without resettlement, and the lack of affordable housing. Living on the streets and experiencing homelessness on a daily basis exposes woman to the threats of gender-based violence at a very young age.

The Indian government considers the official Census of India definition of homelessness and defines ‘houseless people’ as, “persons who are not living in buildings or census houses.” A census house refers to ‘a structure with roof.’ Hence for measuring the extent of homelessness or determining eligibility programmes and services, the government considers those who ‘live in the open on roadside, pavements, in hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in the open in places of worships, mandaps (porch), railway platforms, etc.’, as houseless people. Census 2011 recorded 1.77 million homeless persons in India; about a million in urban areas and 835,000 in rural areas. It is estimated that homeless women account for about 10 per cent of the national urban homeless population.

Homeless girls and women are at high risk of being trafficked. Research by Apne Aap Women Worldwide ([www.apneaap.org](http://www.apneaap.org)) reveals that 56.4% of women trafficked reported that they did not own a house. This risk results largely because of the nature of their residence – out in the open, on the streets, and in insecure shelters, without any form of security and privacy. Furthermore, the absence of adequate sanitation facilities forces homeless women to often defecate and bathe in the open, which greatly increases their vulnerability to gender-based violence. Incidents of homeless women disappearing are common. However, in the absence of data and documentation, such cases are not brought to light. Furthermore, homeless persons have limited access to remedy, and even where women may disappear/are trafficked, cases are not registered and there is seldom any investigation or conviction of the perpetrators.

Over years of working on the issue of homelessness in India, including through extensive field-based research, Housing and Land Rights Network has come across multiple incidents of women who were brought to cities with the lure of employment or marriage but in reality, were to be sold/trafficked. Such women find themselves homeless when they try to escape from the perpetrators. In some cases, women fleeing from situations of domestic violence have been promised better lives in the city, only to find themselves at the risk of being trafficked. It is also not uncommon to find women who have escaped from the trafficking network living on the streets, in the absence of affordable housing options and state policy measures to address the issue. The relationship between homelessness and trafficking is thus, often, a cyclical one.

Homeless women also face constant harassment and the risk of being solicited and sexually abused by strangers, passers-by, other homeless men, and, often also by male police officials. Multiple incidents of brutal rape, molestation, and kidnapping of very young homeless girls have also been documented by Housing and Land Rights

Network in Delhi. Women inhabitants of homeless shelters in Delhi have drawn attention to shortcomings in the shelters set up by the government to address the structural issue of urban homelessness. These include, but are not limited to the absence of cleanliness, lack of privacy, the inappropriate location of shelters and, the absence of safety and security on the premises. The lack of access to regular, formal sources of employment, also results in homeless women being sexually abused and/or trafficked on the pretext of employment.

Forced evictions—which are a regular phenomenon in many Indian cities, towns, and villages—also violate the human right to security of the person and home, and increase vulnerability of evicted/displaced persons, in particular of women and children, to a range of violations, including sexual violence and abuse, and an increased threat of trafficking. In the absence of alternative housing or compensation, affected persons are often rendered homeless, which further increases their vulnerability to being trafficked. For families that are considered ‘eligible’ for resettlement after eviction, they are generally relocated to inadequate sites located on city peripheries and devoid of adequate housing, basic services, and access to healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities. Women and children are most severely impacted by such failed resettlement practices. Girls are forced to drop-out of school and women lose their livelihoods, as these sites are not connected by public transportation and lack security. In resettlement sites of Chennai, incidents of trafficking have been reported, while in Delhi and Chennai, early marriage of girls in resettlement sites has been reported, as parents are afraid of the safety of their daughters and thus prefer to marry them into other homes.

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