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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 Intersections International Initiative, Inc., a 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

-Sexual and gender minorities, climate change and housing insecurity-

Individuals living on the margins of society due to perceived violation of social norms, who are experiencing discrimination, isolation and economic exclusion, are vulnerable to housing insecurity and homelessness. As is stated in the Human Rights Council's Resolution 31/9, homelessness predominately afflicts people who are already "marginalized and most vulnerable...and...homelessness and tenure insecurity per se might result in discrimination, criminalization and further exclusion."

Climate change continues to drive an increase in extreme weather events worldwide, with 150,000 climate-related premature deaths occurring per year. The issue of protecting economically disadvantaged populations from climate disasters is addressed in paragraph 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals: "By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations."

The Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity appointed by the Human Rights Council has concluded that insufficient data is available worldwide on the quality of life of sexual and gender minorities, including gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, transgender and intersex people. Ethically conducted international and national data collection is necessary to inform policy decisions that will meet the needs of these communities, including addressing economic inequality.

Available statistics show that sexual and gender minorities facing multiple marginalization, such as ethnic and racial minorities and transgender people, are more likely to face economic hardship. In one country, same-sex couples of African descent were three times more likely to be living in poverty than white same-sex couples, and transgender people were twice as likely to be unemployed. Homelessness is a corollary to this economic hardship. In the same country, 40% of homeless youth were found to self-identify as sexual or gender minorities, a far larger proportion than the general population. Ethical data collection at scale could reveal similar crises of homelessness for these populations around the world.

When a natural disaster strikes, those who are already economically marginalized suffer most. In a survey of 200 countries, the poorest 20 per cent of the population was nearly twice as likely to live in homes that were fragile and vulnerable to damage from weather-related events.

Water-related disasters are especially detrimental to housing stock on small islands. In the past several years, the Caribbean region has experienced successive devastating hurricane seasons – notably Hurricanes Maria and Irma in 2017 and Hurricane Dorian in 2019. One Caribbean nation incurred damage to 98 per cent of its housing stock after Hurricane Maria. In some cases, the costs of storm damage have exceeded annual gross domestic product for affected nations.

Poverty and housing deficits create conditions for housing insecurity and homelessness. Sexual and gender minorities in the Caribbean region, already living with the costs of social ostracization due to the affront they pose to cultural and religious norms, become vulnerable to both in the aftermath of climate disasters. During these crisis recovery periods, these populations may experience a lack of economic, logistical and emotional support due to rejection by their families or disruption of other important social ties such as faith communities. Alternatively, they

may be forced to suppress their identities in order to receive care and services from shelters or religious organizations or else risk violence and discrimination.

-Grassroots stories-

Grassroots efforts to meet the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in the Caribbean region have been active in hurricane recovery efforts. In Puerto Rico, United States, Waves Ahead is a mental health counseling centre and community organization that focuses primarily on serving aging and elderly populations in these communities. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017, which resulted in nearly 3,000 officially counted fatalities and damage to over 1.06 million households in Puerto Rico, the majority of self-identified sexual and gender minorities who applied were denied recovery aid from the government. Waves Ahead has stepped in to organize rebuilding efforts for community members whose homes were damaged in the storm, bring in donated goods and volunteer labor and provide critical services to meet mental health needs. Older people who are isolated from their communities due to sexual or gender minority status and suffering economically are particularly at risk of depression and suicide, making this work all the more crucial.

More recently, Hurricane Dorian struck the Bahamas in September of 2019, becoming one of the strongest Atlantic tropical storms in recorded history. With the majority of the impact on Grand Bahama Island the Abaco Islands, grassroots organizers from the Bahamas Organization of LGBTI Affairs and other actors in the Nassau capital region have rallied to provide support an influx of sexual and gender minority refugees coming from these devastated areas. The storm has put a strain on existing ad hoc arrangements, often facilitated by grassroots organizing, that provided gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people with housing in the homes of community members who are accepting and affirming of their identities. With 13,000 homes destroyed in the storm, many of these homeowner partners are now seeking shelter themselves along with the community members they have housed. Bahamians are additionally seeking the support of their religious communities, with churches providing both shelter and other recovery resources. Sexual and gender minorities must often alter their presentation or suppress their identities in order to be accepted into these religious spaces to receive shelter and services. Those who do not risk violence and mistreatment. Sensitization of church leadership towards this issue is another problem that the Bahamas Organization of LGBTI Affairs has tackled, providing education workshops and trainings.

-Conclusion-

Pursuant to the priority theme for this session, “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness,” it is critical to include sexual and gender minorities within the populations most vulnerable to homelessness. As the frequency and scope of climate disasters continues to increase worldwide, the compounded impact these events have on people who are already isolated from their communities due to social ostracization cannot be overlooked.

While better data collection is needed to understand how sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with housing insecurity both regionally and worldwide, to ignore these populations and their specific needs when addressing homelessness would be to erase part of the picture.

Recommendations:

We call on the Commission for Social Development to urge Member States:

(a) To uphold Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as inclusive of sexual and gender minorities.

(b) To recognize that intersecting and compounding social marginalizations, such as sexual and gender minority status, race, age and economic status, affect the extent to which individuals are vulnerable to housing insecurity.

(c) To include consideration of sexual and gender minorities in planning for climate disaster resilience and identifying communities most likely to be vulnerable to housing insecurity and homelessness in the aftermath of disasters.

(d) To promote cooperation between governments and advocacy organizations supporting sexual and gender minorities in nations and regions that are vulnerable to climate disasters.

(e) To support job training and economic empowerment opportunities to these populations, particularly in the aftermath of climate disasters.
