[**International summit on domestic/family violence
during the COVID-19 era**](https://allianceeventhub.org/program/)

**Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing**

**Mr. Balakrishnan Rajagopal**

**New York, 19 November 2020**

Dear representatives, colleagues and friends,

It is an honour for me to address the International summit on domestic and family violence as Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing. Together with other UN experts, let me join the the United Nations Secretary General’s call for “[peace at home](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052)” to put womern’s safety first when States respond to the pandemic.

Housing has emerged as a first line of defense against COVID-19, as Governments have called on their citizens to stay-at-home, work from home or teach their children at home, when schools are closed. At the peak of the Covid-19 emergency response, more than 3.9 billion people, or half of the world's population, were asked or ordered to stay at home by their governments.

As set out in my [report](http://www.undocs.org/A/75/148) to the General Assembly (A/75/148), more than 1.8 billion people do not have a decent home and live in informal settlements where physical distancing is difficult or impossible. Many millions, especially migrant workers, persons working in the informal sector or with low-paid jobs, a majority of whom are women or people of color, have lost their jobs or livelihoods, due to the pandemic-induced shut down and are forced to stay at home. Many of those millions have been evicted or are at risk of losing their home and becoming homeless due to the economic impact of the pandemic. And too many people have no home at all and live in street situations or in encampments, among them many internally displaced persons, migrants, refugees and victims of forced evictions and family violence.

Indeed, globally 243 million women and girls, between 15 and 49 years old, have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to available data, since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls, and particularly domestic violence, has intensified. Very few States have prioritized the tackling of domestic violence during Covid-19 emergency response planning, for example, through increased investment in safe shelters. There is a shortage of safe shelters due to capacity limitations and social distancing measures – compounded by the fact that women and girls confined at home with perpetrators of domestic violence often find it difficult to access shelters.

The right to adequate housing enshrined in international human rights law means not only to have just a roof above one’s head. Housing must not only be adequate, but also safe - safe for everyone, for women, children, migrants and refugees. Housing safety must be understood comprehensively: Housing should not only be structurally safe to prevent housing collapses or shield against health risks like COVID-19. Housing safety requires, in addition, safety against domestic, family and gender-based violence and any other criminality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The pandemic has laid bare that access to adequate and safe housing is not just a housing issue but indeed an issue of life or death. Our home should not only be a place to protect us and others from a virus, it must also be a place in which we are protected from abuse and harrassment.

The pandemic has unveiled many pre-existing cracks in our societies, including the lack of effective prevention and protection against domestic and family violence. Situational factors caused by the pandemic, such as being fenced in at a home with a violent family member, the increase of psychological stress through closing of schools, disconnection from friends and social networks, losing employment or fear of being unemployed or losing your home due to eviction or foreclosure, have increased unacceptable levels of domestic violence even further. At the same time many existing preventive, protective and support mechanisms for victims of domestic violence have either closed, or had to reduce their work or capacity, or rapidly change their working methods (see [A/75/144](http://www.undocs.org/A/75/144)).

The pandemic has highlighted this issue that was already well known before: As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has documented, there is a lack of adequate temporary emergency housing for victims of domestic violence, to which women, children, LGBT persons, migrants and refugees are more likely exposed and are therefore at risk of increased homelessness. In addition, in many countries there is a considerable lack of affordable long-term housing solutions for victims of domestic, family, and gender-based violence. Both short-term and long-term housing programmes, including those for the allocation of social housing, should therefore prioritize women and families escaping violence.

In some jurisdictions, certain requirements, such as proof of a local or valid residence permit, exclude migrants, displaced persons and refugees from accessing emergency housing in violation of the right to adequate housing. Furthermore, much of existing emergency housing for migrants, displaced persons and refugees, such as camps or collective accommodations does not provide sufficient privacy and protection to women and their children to shield them effectively against family and gender-based violence.

A matter of great concern for me is that regrettably forced evictions have continued, if not accelerated, during the pandemic. The victims of such evictions, including women, children, refugees, migrant workers and many other vulnerable groups, are now facing worsening conditions with heightened risk of being homeless or exposed to family or gender-based violence and the pandemic.

I have therefore called upon States to halt all evictions proceedings during the pandemic, including against non-national residents, and to end the sweeping of encampments or tents of migrants, refugees and homeless people.

While all evictions should be banned during the pandemic, law enforcement agencies must continue to protect victims of family and domestic violence, including through restraining orders. In cases of domestic violence, victims should not have to flee their homes. Instead, the perpetrators of such violence must be effectively prohibited from accessing the homes of their victims.[[3]](#footnote-3)

If someone must flee from family or gender-based violence, they should not become homeless or be forced to return to an unsafe home to be shared with a violent partner or family member.

Special measures must be taken to ensure access to safe housing for single females, underage migrants and refugees who are at elevated risk of becoming victims of domestic, family and gender-based violence or trafficking, both inside and outside refugee camps or settlements of displaced person.

Dear friends,

Going back to the way things were cannot be a viable option. Covid-19 has exposed the fragility of pre-existing protections for victims of family or gender-based violence and made it worse in many cases. It has shown the increased economic vulnerability of women and girls impacted by the pandemic shut down. It has revealed the pandemic of domestic violence which predates the Covid-19 pandemic. It has shown how badly prepared many countries are in finding adequate shelter and long-term housing options for victims of family violence.

In this crucial moment, we need to join forces and acknowledge that we all share responsibilities to ensure that everyone has access to safe and adequate housing. Only together, we can make sure that no one is left behind. The pandemic had opened a portal of opportunity to do better by shining a light on where we need more work. Let us together, walk through that portal.

Thank you.

1. See Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Violence against women and girls, the shadow pandemic, 6 April 2020, available at: [www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing, Guideline No.9 ([A/HRC/43/43](http://www.undocs.org/A/HRC/43/43), para 51.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Adequate Housing, Guideline No. 9 ([A/HRC/43/43](http://undocs.org/A/43/43), para. 53 c). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)