

The Intersectionality of Human Trafficking and Homelessness

Introduction

UNANIMA International is a nongovernmental organization focusing on women, children/girls, migrants, and refugees – people especially susceptible to homelessness since they are those most left behind. As part of our advocacy work, we have conducted extensive research on family homelessness. One of our publications is explicitly dedicated to the intersections of human trafficking and family homelessness.

UNANIMA International believes that homelessness and human trafficking are global threats necessitating a global response; it is essential to examine the intersection of homelessness and human trafficking to understand some of the core contributing factors to both. Our research and relationships at the grassroots demonstrate how trafficked people experience homelessness and housing insecurity, as well as how those experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of being trafficked.

Manifestations of Homelessness and Human Trafficking

Through field work, interviews, case studies, focus groups, and thematic/content analyses, UNANIMA International has identified four manifestations of exploitation that demonstrate the linkages between homelessness and trafficking.

1. Commodification of ‘People’ and ‘Place’

Clearly, there is not a “demand” for homelessness as there is for people who are trafficked, most often for the purpose of exploitation. But a prominent similarity between human trafficking and family homelessness is the commodification which facilitates each social injustice. For family homelessness, commodification of land and housing is a huge driver of evictions, land grabbing, families being forced to rent rather than own, and housing not being honored as the human right that it is.¹ For human trafficking, the human body is commodified, whether for sex or for other labor forms. However, it is important to understand that the commodification of the female body also causes conditions that drive women into homelessness.² Escape from trafficking situations can result in experiences of poverty, doubling up, or living in insecure housing, and because of this many survivors may end up trafficked once again.³

2. Limited Access to Affordable Housing

An escape from an abusive or inadequate housing situation (hidden homelessness) may drive situations that lead to trafficking, such as spending time in dangerous areas or moving to the street. The Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness states, “one of the most effective ways to reduce a young person’s risk of falling into human trafficking is to end their homelessness by providing a safe and stable place to stay and supports to help a youth thrive.”⁴ We have found this to be true globally in our conversations with service providers and those with lived experiences of homelessness. This assertion has also been supported academically - Dr. Angela Reed’s doctoral research identified affordable housing as a key way to break the cycle of human trafficking among the women she interviewed.⁵

3. Decent Work and Lacking Formal Employment Opportunities

The lack of secure work options paired with flawed or underdeveloped social protection systems causes families and individuals to be unable to afford adequate housing and avoid situations of trafficking. Children and youth whose families are experiencing poverty may be forced into labor at early ages, sold, promised as child brides or grooms, or run away to avoid any of these fates, still remaining vulnerable in these new situations.⁶ In an interview with UNANIMA International for our publication *Family Homelessness Through the Lens of the 2030 Agenda, Vol. II*, Amelia* expressed the challenges of her experience with homelessness.⁷ She mentioned the role that money as a means for security and housing necessitated her sex work (even as a minor) both in-person and virtually. To our knowledge, she is still homeless and living in a tent because, now that she no longer does sex work, she cannot afford housing with her current income.

In places where informal economies are prevalent, children often try to earn money, even during school hours, through labor. Anecdotes and observations of this situation within Malawi were shared with UNANIMA International in an interview with former board member Sister Pereka Nyirenda, RSC, who saw child labor increase specifically following an environmental disaster which affected the local economy.⁸

4. Trauma, Social Exclusion, and other Violations of Human Rights

There are multiple vulnerabilities within family homelessness and human trafficking, which can drive each other. It is well known that those most susceptible to human trafficking and homelessness include women and girls, migrants, persons with disabilities, Indigenous communities, and other minority groups. However, with these identities we see multiple layers of social exclusion, trauma, and violations of human rights, meaning that various identities and experiences can further exacerbate vulnerability.

For example, the IOM Stated, “migrants are most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in situations and places where the authority of the State and society is unable to protect them, either through lack of capacity, applicable laws or simple neglect”.⁹ Among people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity, including slum dwellers, youth are particularly at risk to human trafficking. Youth who experience homelessness (often LGBTQ+, people of color, and those experiencing mental health problems) are especially vulnerable, due to common reliance on survival sex.¹⁰ When children are living in informal settlements and general poverty, risks increase. Facing many adverse experiences in adolescence can also increase risks for homelessness and human trafficking, and this includes being in foster care. Research shows also that traffickers offer housing coercively, to get youth to do what they want, and they prey upon people who are not from stable families or home situations.¹¹

Challenges in Law and Practice

In Law

Fundamental human rights are enshrined in international law, including those related to homelessness and human trafficking. Legal challenges include enforcement, violations of human rights without consequence, and ratification. Human rights are “all or nothing,” in that the denial

or inaccessibility of one right may facilitate denial or inaccessibility of another. For example, not being able to access legal proceedings may keep someone from claiming their right to adequate housing or seeking justice after surviving an experience of trafficking. A violation of UDHR Article 4 and other conventions like CEDAW, UNDRIP, NUA, the Beijing Declaration, and the Copenhagen Declaration are all relevant to address and prevent homelessness and human trafficking. However, not all these documents are interpreted the same by Member States and many lack the enforcement and backing needed to protect people within the context of homelessness and human trafficking.

In Practice

Ensuring access to safe, quality, affordable housing and the social services required to maintain stable housing offers the foundation necessary for people to escape trafficking. One of the primary challenges organizations face in supporting victims of homelessness and trafficking is that of trauma – survivors can become traumatically bonded to their pimps, believing they are loved. Pimps can exploit the lack of accommodation available to youth and offer them safe housing. If you are homeless on the street, you have a difficult decision to make: to stay on the street or go with a pimp who offers food and shelter. Aki'kwe, in submitted testimony, shared her story of this very scenario that she faced as an Indigenous woman in Canada trying to find housing after her incarceration ended. Due to the failure of multiple systems and her vulnerability, she had a difficult time reintegrating into her community and fell into the cycle of homelessness in an attempt to escape violence from a pimp that was exploiting her.¹²

According to a service provider in an interview with UNANIMA International, the most prominent reason why clients in her day shelter have become homeless is due to a lack of affordable housing, “there’s just not any affordable housing here [in Baltimore], SAFE, affordable housing. And there are a lot of people who go through landlords who do rooms for rent, but they’re not really the safest environments. There’s a lot of trafficking that goes on in those situations.”¹³

Notably, in many nations or jurisdictions, therapy and mental health services are commodified and offered under a business model. Challenges in healing trauma include: limited availability and access to appropriate mental health services; difficulty establishing a trusting relationship between survivors and care providers; and re-traumatization may occur through treatment measures when not trauma-informed or paired with relationship and trust building.¹⁴

We know from the experience of service providers the need not only for more culturally appropriate but also for more gender appropriate services. Finding these services is especially difficult in rural communities. There is also the issue of language barriers to accessing services. Moreover, a lack of coordination leads to confusion and duplication of efforts. It can be difficult to know who or where to turn to when organizations and departments operate in silos, this can also make internal and external communication more challenging.

Good Practices

In addressing the challenges and barriers to providing services to victims of homelessness and trafficking, many service providers have developed innovative strategies and good practices.

Moving forward, more data collection and research is needed to develop tailored and effective strategies and monitoring of interventions for a desired impact. Ending family homelessness and human trafficking is not enough without multi-stakeholder engagement and working towards solving the issues, initiating local assessments, creating political will, and fostering the implementation of preventative measures and responsive services.

UNANIMA International promotes trauma-informed care as a good practice, specifically for services provided to populations who have experienced homelessness. We have also found collaboration to be an important tool at local, national, and international levels. At local levels, institutional structures such as referral mechanisms, national rapporteurs, and coordinated structures facilitate concerted action on homelessness and trafficking.

Below is a partial listing of good practices and initiatives we featured in our publication *The Intersections of Family Homelessness and Human Trafficking*:

- **Arise Foundation** – Platform to share testimonies and lived experience of trafficking/modern slavery¹⁵
- **ECPAT International** – Network focused on ending exploitation of children¹⁶
- **A21** – Advocacy, education, and awareness building on human trafficking¹⁷
- **Community House Demaris** – Recovery and rehabilitation services for survivors at the grassroots¹⁸

Recommendations

Addressing and preventing family homelessness, human trafficking, and their intersections, is critically important to UNANIMA International; this requires strategic action from UN Member States and their respective governments, civil society, and other political actors. As such, we recommend the following:

- Consideration of the provision of adequate housing as a human trafficking related matter and has trauma informed public spaces and governmental services, as well as Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) to support survivors.
- Increased opportunities for voices of vulnerable people and people with lived experience of homelessness, housing insecurity and human trafficking to be heard in decision making and international diplomatic processes.
- Ending the privatization and commodification of housing.
- Development of policies prohibiting child marriage, forced marriage, and trafficking in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol).
- Implementation of gender sensitive policies on domestic and unpaid work in accordance with International Labor Organization (ILO) Recommendation 201 (2011).

- Applying a human rights-based approach (HRBA) through policy and plans of action, as well as analyses of human trafficking and homelessness.

Conclusion

While it is deeply important to understand the socioeconomic forces that shape the overlapping cycles of homelessness and human trafficking at the national and international levels, it is also imperative to examine these cycles locally and within the family unit. Recent studies support our focus on *Family Homelessness* – a project on modern slavery and homelessness conducted by Loyola University and the University of Pennsylvania found that nearly one in five homeless youth interviewed were victims of human trafficking.¹⁹ To protect youth from exploitation, they also found that safety and stability at home and within families were two of the most influential factors.²⁰ Preventing people from experiencing homelessness is an important step in ending human trafficking. Ensuring access to safe, quality, affordable housing with support provides the foundation necessary to escape trafficking. Oppressive systems of poverty are connected; it is vital that we understand how they interact. We cannot end these systems by isolating them, we must instead end them and their cycles all together.

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