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# Making 'the Shift' on Global Homelessness

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Throughout the world we continue to witness people both individually and collectively who are committed to making deep social change. This is promising for a world so often caught up in traditional practices and ways of seeing things that exclude or isolate others. Society is always evolving and so too its people and practices. Social change involves gaining increased awareness and understanding about an issue or phenomenon; it often involves attitudinal changes and ideally brings about public policy that reflects a just and equitable reality.

We often see signs of deep social change in new language, in cultural practices, in art and in community participation. We have seen deep social change in relation to the way society understands mental health, addiction, the composition of family, human development and sexuality, to name a few. But we still have a long way to go...

Ms Leliani Farha, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing is leading a global campaign to shift knowledge and understandings about the phenomenon of homelessness. She recognises homelessness as a global phenomenon that continues to be misunderstood and misrepresented resulting in discrimination, marginalisation and stigmatisation to those rendered homeless.

*Homelessness is an extreme violation of the rights to adequate housing and non-discrimination and often also a violation of the rights to life, to security of person, to health, to protection of the home and family and to freedom from cruel and inhuman treatment. However it has not been addressed with the urgency and priority that ought to be accorded to so widespread and severe a violation of human rights.<sup>1</sup>*

As a UN Special Rapporteur, Ms Farah is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council whose mandate is to report on the status, throughout the world, of the rights to housing, taking into account information received from Governments, United Nations Organisations and bodies, other relevant international organisations and non-government organisations. As a Special Rapporteur she is part of the Special Procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Her position is honorary and therefore she is not considered United Nations staff nor paid for this particular work.

Disturbed by the fact that housing is largely viewed as a commodity and a method for investment and capital growth rather than a right that all should enjoy, Ms Farah seeks to change the dominant discourse.

*Rarely is the connection made between the commodification and financialization of housing and its egregious consequences for people across the world. The pervasiveness of the commodity paradigm has in some instances generated apathy: the idea of private homeownership as the key to economic security is unquestioned and homelessness, evictions, starkly inadequate housing conditions and other deprivations of the right to housing are considered social facts that*

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<sup>1</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing as a Component of the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, and on the Right to Non-Discrimination in This Context, 30 December, 2015 A/HRC/31/54 available at [https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/31/54](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/31/54)

*can be addressed through piecemeal social programs. Little consideration is given to the structural and systemic causes of what is truly, a global housing crisis.*<sup>2</sup>

Special Rapporteur Farah, in partnership with United Cities and Local Governments and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, has initiated a worldwide movement termed ‘The Shift’. The primary goals of ‘The Shift’ are: 1) To provide a Platform to Unite and Amplify Support for the Right to Housing 2) Change the Conversation; and 3) Encourage Government Engagement and Action.

Calling for a paradigm shift on housing, the movement calls for a change in the way we think and interact with housing and home.

- The Shift sees housing as a human right, not a commodity;
- The Shift affirms housing as a vehicle for equality, dignity and inclusive community, rather than for inequality and the concentration of wealth;
- The Shift rejects forced evictions and displacement especially where they occur without the exploration of alternatives, without consultation and without provision of adequate alternative housing as defined in international human rights law;
- The Shift understands homelessness as a systemic failure to effectively and fully implement the right to housing and rejects the criminalization of homelessness;
- The Shift affirms the social function of housing and land and supports the agency of individuals to hold governments accountable so that their right to housing can be realized.<sup>3</sup>

While Sisters of Mercy throughout the world have named homelessness as a critical concern, Mercy Global Action has made a commitment to being part of this paradigm shift through support of the work of the Special Rapporteur, through joining the movement “THE SHIFT”, through its membership of the UN NGO Working Group to End Homelessness, and in preparation for the United Nations Commission on Social Development whose priority theme is “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness”.

If you are interested in being part of this important movement here are some useful starting points:

- <http://www.unhousingrapp.org/the-shift>
- <http://www.unngoendhomelessness.com/>

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<sup>2</sup> #MAKETHESHIFT From Housing as a Commodity to Housing as Home and a Human Right, *Housing Rights Watch.org* Retrieved from <https://www.housingrightswatch.org/sites/default/files/The%20Shift%20-%20Concept%20Note%20FINAL%20Oct%2011%202017%5B2%5D.pdf> pg 2

<sup>3</sup> #MAKETHESHIFT From Housing as a Commodity to Housing as Home and a Human Right, *Housing Rights Watch.org* Retrieved from <https://www.housingrightswatch.org/sites/default/files/The%20Shift%20-%20Concept%20Note%20FINAL%20Oct%2011%202017%5B2%5D.pdf>