



PHOTO BY ENRIC VIVES-RUBIO

Leilani Farha

UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing offers a worldly perspective after witnessing the abject poverty in the wealthiest nation in the world

BY ASHLEY ARCHIBALD
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Leilani Farha doesn't want to live in a world where people have to negotiate to use the bathroom.

She doesn't want to live in a world where residents in the United States, the richest country on the planet, live in encampments infested with rats. Farha doesn't want to live in a world where people are discriminated against to the point where simply standing still on a sidewalk can make them subject to citations or arrest.

And she certainly doesn't want to live in a world where people are not afforded basic dignities.

And so, Farha works to change it.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing fights so that people around the world can access housing that is culturally appropriate, secure from eviction and proximate to the things that are important — jobs, health care and education. She's independent of any state or superstate actor; though she works with the U.N., Farha does not work for them.

Special rapporteurs are independent experts appointed by the Human Rights Council to monitor specific rights. Farha is also the executive director of Canada Without Poverty, a charitable organization based in Ottawa, Canada. For the past 20 years, Farha has worked both internationally and domestically on the implementation of the right to adequate housing for the most

marginalized groups.

Her current project, a report on informal settlements, has taken her around the Global South seeking out slums and barrios. But it also brought her to California to meet people living in tent cities experiencing homelessness just blocks from a magnet for global wealth and finance.

The sights and stories of extreme poverty in the United States weighed heavily on Farha, who had this to say to the government that allows its residents' international human rights to be violated so egregiously.

"I'm sorry. If I were in government in America, I would be completely ashamed, completely ashamed of what I have in some way, shape or form contributed to," Farha said.

Ashley Archibald: *You were on the ground in San Francisco and Los Angeles. What did you see in those two cities, and how did that affect you?*

Leilani Farha: I have been profoundly affected by my visit to California. What I saw was very, very difficult to see, especially in the context of the wealth of that state and the wealth of the country. What did I see: people living in tents under bridges, by railway tracks, sandwiched behind highways, no sanitation, no toilets. Many without even a (portable toilet).

I was walking along a street in San

Francisco in an underpass, and I saw there was excrement on the sidewalk. I have a dog, so originally I was like, OK, there's a lot of dog poo around. And then I realized, looking at it slightly more closely, this is not animal excrement. And then it dawned on me. Of course, it was human excrement, because there were encampments in and around where I was walking and there were no toilets. What were people going to do?

There was one place in East Oakland, in fact an encampment that the city has agreed that the people can at least stay at that land, that was the one sandwiched between two kind of highways like these railway tracks. Every 30 seconds you had to stop your conversation as a train went by. As I was being interviewed by a journalist on the ground there, we watched this huge rat just sort of walk by us, and people had been saying that there are at least five rats a day that they were having to kill. There's no garbage collection at any of these communities, basically, and that's a vicious circle — oh, God, those homeless people are just like garbage, they're just like putting their garbage everywhere. Well, they don't have anywhere to put their garbage. So, right, it creates this vicious, stereotyping circle.

I heard very sad stories of people's belongings being completely trashed by law enforcement, or supposedly kept but all dumped into one dumpster and everyone's stuff co-mingling and getting wet. This is a

"When the private sector fails to meet those obligations, fails to provide adequate housing, fails to ensure people have access to adequate housing, the state is the one that's in violation of the right because the state has contracted out."

population for whom those few belongings that they had may look like junk and trash to someone else, but to that population they're their life's belongings. It's cruel. There was a cruelty.

I could go on and on. I read a statistic yesterday that one in six arrests in Los Angeles — 1 in 6 arrests — is of a homeless person. I mean, I'm sorry, why is that? Is that because homeless people are really committing all of these crimes, or is that because homeless people are perceived as criminals? Is it because so many of the bylaws and laws are focused on the act of people who are homeless?

A.A.: *Are there places you can think of where the state has successfully protected people's rights?*

L.F.: Worldwide, every state has homelessness. So, in that way, all states have not fulfilled the right to adequate housing for all of their people. Homelessness is considered an egregious violation of human rights, including the right to adequate housing. And there is actually an immediate obligation on states to end or eliminate homelessness.

In terms of states that are performing well, I mean, you know there are states that might be on the better side of things. Finland, for example, is a pretty leading example worldwide of a state that has taken seriously the issue of homelessness and is trying to address it. It was the only European state — I think in 2016 or 2017 — anyway, in a one-year period, the only state in Europe that has decreased homelessness. In every other state homelessness has increased. It shows they are doing something right.

A.A.: *Are there effective government regulations that can intervene in the U.S. housing market at this point?*

L.F.: Singapore taxes all foreign investment at something like 18 percent. New Zealand has prohibited foreign investment — you can do the analysis of whether that's a good thing or not.

China has regulations around taxing for

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