



The Grenfell Tower Disaster and Human Rights Accountability – An International Perspective

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On March 6, the Human Rights Law Centre and Just Fair organized an event to commemorate the fire at the Grenfell Tower in which 71 people lost their lives, many others their homes and which affected thousands of other residents in the local area. Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, along with Grenfell residents and others affected by the fire, including Samia Badani, Co-chair of the Residents Advisory Panel (Notting Dale), and Aziza Boudafcha, Chair of the Grenfell Walk Residents Association, presented their perspectives on the Grenfell disaster at the heart of the government at the Palace of Westminster. The event was hosted by Jane Campbell, Baroness Campbell of Surbiton, DBE and chair by the University of Nottingham's Professor Aoife Nolan.

The event began with a minute of silence in honor of those affected by the fire. However, a note of silence permeated the entire encounter for additional reasons. On the one hand, the victims of the fire shared an unspeakable tragedy: the loss of family, friends, and neighbors. They also lost their home, the space that, beyond bricks and walls, provides everybody with a basic sense of orientation in daily life. On the other, all those affected by the fire agreed that authorities have persistently ignored their voices. This is true not only before the tragedy, where the possibility of its occurrence was already identified, but also after it took place, where authorities are still not engaging with those affected in order to ensure a satisfactory response in terms of providing them with a stable housing solution and other key services that would enable them to go through their mourning.

Survivors of the fire are therefore embodying the experience of what it means to live in social housing in the UK: being ignored by authorities, facing daily risks in terms of safety and other health conditions, social housing beneficiaries lead a completely unpredictable life in which they ignore where they will stand next day.

But the event also allowed to give voice to those who have been silenced and to encourage them to continue strengthening their associations in the task of demanding from the authorities the adoption of measures that guarantee that such events are not going to repeat themselves and provide those affected by the fire with an adequate housing solution. It is in this type of scenarios where a human rights approach is most required.

In this regard, Farha reasserted that international human rights law, particularly the right to adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living (Art. 11(1) ICESCR), provides a set of standards to evaluate when individuals are living in conditions of dignity in the short, medium and long term. She made clear that adherence to these standards, including the development of human rights-based strategies to housing, would serve to enable that those affected by the fire can participate with more strength and confidence in the decision making that directly affects them.

By the same token, the UN Special Rapporteur explained that the right to participation must be taken more seriously in situations like the Grenfell disaster. Far from simply being a tick-box exercise in which survivors are simply consulted, the right to participation requires that they be given back the voice to define what kind of decisions will be made. Farah emphasized that the fact of living in social housing does not render right-holders into objects of charity. Quite the opposite in fact -what a human rights perspective entails is the understanding and treatment of individuals as right-holders entitled to demand treatment from the authorities that acknowledges them as autonomous beings.