

## Speech of the Head of the Rafto Prize Committee

Dear Rafto laureate, ladies and gentlemen — dear friends!

It is a great honor for me to introduce this year's Rafto price laureate, Rouba Mhaissen, the founder and director of SAWA for Development Aid, for her courageous and important work to improve the lives of people living as refugees in Lebanon in ways that protect their dignity and right to self-determination.

\*\*\*\*\*

70 years ago- in 1949- the Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt – herself a refugee and victim of the atrocities of the Holocaust - pointed to a great ambiguity in the UN declaration of human rights: The right to have rights belongs to every humankind by our virtue of existence- but how are these rights to be guaranteed?

Hannah Arendt argued that The Right to Have Rights – meant that in addition to being a person- you needed to be a citizen of a community that could guarantee those rights. And, as the nation-state is the only juridical authority that can effectively ensure human rights, the right to have rights loses its meaning for those who, as a result of expatriation and emigration, no longer belongs to any nation-state. This means that whoever ceases to count as a citizen of a particular state loses not only her civil rights but also—paradoxically—her universal and inalienable human rights.

\*\*\*\*\*

Globally, this is the situation for 70 million people. This group of people- people who for periods of their lives live as refugees- do not belong to a trustworthy community- they are simply not part of a “WE, the people”. They are not citizens of a community that will guarantee their rights. Think for a moment what this means:

- You have no right of a birth certificate when your child is born- your child belongs no where

- Your child has no right to school, you have no right to health care
- You do not have a right to a job, a house,
- You live in a limbo where you risk exploitation and are forced to take risks.
- Everything hinges on this document- the passport- the passport to rights

For those of us lucky enough to contain this document- we can travel freely and enjoy our rights- and our sense of "WE" is tied to the community of people with the same document.

\*\*\*\*\*

Rouba Mhaissen belongs in two communities- Lebanon and Syria - two communities broken by two different wars- and where large groups of people reside outside the "We", "The community of rights". She got involved. At the young age of 22 she started her advocacy for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Insisting on providing people living as refugees with rights to have rights she underlines the importance of treating refugees and other migrants with dignity and as people with the right to form their own lives and destinies.

At a great personal risk and working an environment where political activism among and for refugees is met with suspicion, Mhaissen defends human rights for refugees in three distinct ways:

First, SAWA runs a small but important NGO aiming to improve the living conditions of Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon, with particular focus on women and children.

Second, Mhaissen has led SAWA's research work, documenting the Syrian refugees' experiences and livelihoods in Lebanon, and in particular, the experiences of those returning to Syria. SAWA continues to criticize the premature and relentless returns and for ignoring the voice of those returned.

Third, Mhaissen is an eloquent and fearless speaker, advocating the human rights of refugees internationally and campaigning to build solidarity with citizens in other democratic countries.

Today- more than ever- we need human right defenders that insist on expanding the WE of human right to include refugees at local,

national and international levels.

\*\*\*\*\*

Currently, we lack a functioning international system of responsibility sharing for people living as refugees. The freedom of movement of refugees is severely constrained by non-arrival measures in the higher-income countries and the vast majority of the world's refugees find themselves in neighbouring lower-income countries where local integration seems economically or politically impossible.

Durable solutions- either resettlement, voluntary return, or local integration- all seem infeasible. The ongoing refugee crisis in Lebanon is exacerbated by lack of international support.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Rafto Prize 2019 is an acknowledgment of Mhaissen and SAWA's grassroot level work to promote the human rights of people living as refugees and their right to be included in discussions regarding their own future.

The Rafto Prize 2019 is a call to join human right defenders like Rouba Mhaissen by working toward a larger we: a system that protect human rights for all, irrespective of their legal status.

It is a call to each and every one of us individually, to national governments, particularly in affluent countries, to international agencies and non-governmental organizations to jointly take responsibility to work toward an international system of shared responsibility for refugees and other migrants.

Rouba Mhaissen please accept our recognition for your important, timely and inspiring work: I call on you to come to the podium and receive the 2019 Thorolf Rafto Prize for Human Rights.