

2012 North-South Prize of the Council of Europe

**Speech by Asma Jahangir
Lisbon, 21st May 2013**

Mr President of the Republic of Portugal

Madam Speaker of the Parliament

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

And now I say my little sister from the North,

Usually in the South we are told there is the big brother in the North but now I have a little sister, Monika Hauser in the North and I am very happy to share this award with her because women activists or human rights activists have a bonding that immediately comes to life when we meet each other. I didn't know Monika but the minute I met her I knew that we shared the same values.

First of all I would like to thank the North-South Centre for this award which they have graciously given me and I thankfully acknowledge this honour on behalf of all the activists of Pakistan whether they are in the Bar Association, Women Activists or Human Rights Activists. It is a reminder that we still have a long way to go in attaining respect for Human Rights and indeed Women's rights. This award also places greater responsibility on us to prove ourselves worthy of this honour and the affection that you have given both of us today so I do thank you very humbly, I hope that I prove myself worthy of this award.

I would like to also express here my support for the Istanbul Convention on violence against women of the Council of Europe and when I return to Pakistan it will be one of my first ventures that I will take from here hoping that Pakistan will also one day become a signatory and ratify this convention.

I just want to give you a flavour from where I come from. I know that there are problems in this world, we all read about them, but it is difficult to understand why a person is working for Human Rights and I'm asked this question again and again and sometimes I wonder why not? How is it that you cannot work for Human Rights in a society like ours? Violations and their nature would compel anyone to address human rights issues. In our situation we have to confront both comical and distressful environments.

For example, we are given logic or so called logic, in the sense that I was looking at the television, only two weeks ago, and there were two right wing commentators: one a religious scholar and the other an anchor of a television, discussing how women should leave their house and the anchor asked the religious scholar, "Are they allowed to wash their face at least?" And the religious scholar really looked hard at him and said, "Let me think, yes, but only one wash with the soap." And then he said, "Well, don't you think they can even brush their teeth?" He said, "Yes, only so much so that they don't attract attention to themselves."

Then I thought to myself, here we are in 2013 listening to these clowns talking about women in the fashion that they are. I have heard examples, not only through religious scholars but also court judgments in which ridiculous perceptions on gender are advanced. For example in a case where I was also a lawyer, of a girl who got married against the will of her parents and eventually after one and a half years the judges decided, two out of three, that well, she's 22, maybe she can get married without the consent of her parents. But one of the judges who actually went with us, gave us an example of how we should treat women in our society and the judgment said that "women are like Queen Elizabeth, they don't go out shopping -*this is the exact wording of that judgement*- it is for the parents to go and shop for them, they will go and get the shoes for them, bring it back and see whether it fits them well or not and once it fits them well the parent will tell them: this is the shoes for you my daughter," and that is what is the significance of what is a good woman.

I remember that even in school, during many lessons, the description of a good woman was the one who gets beaten up and doesn't say anything, the one who keeps quiet, the one who talks to the Lord for more mercy but does not raise her voice or hand.

I encounter these examples not only in my country but in many societies. This logic is in many countries and if people like Monika and myself have common values, they also have common logics, because I saw the Commission reports in Pakistan, in Bangladesh and Egypt and I saw that they all say the same thing.

For example, when the scholars in Egypt and Bangladesh or in Pakistan were justifying polygamy they justified it on the premise that supposing your wife had a stroke, so what would you do? You would get married a second time, wouldn't you not?

I asked one of the religious scholars in my country, that when young girls come to me and ask me what is the logic of polygamy, what should I tell them? My dear little girls, you may get a stroke and therefore your husband must be allowed polygamy. So, in a way it is comical but also a reality. On the other hand we have brave women. We have women who have courage, women who will look you in the eye and will say things that you can never imagine.

I work with women who have been victims of violence and if you come to my office by two o'clock its full of women. One day a female client visited me. I've conducted many divorce suits but since this woman had six children, really one after the other, and she wanted a divorce therefore I asked her if she was sure? How would she look after her with six children after being divorced? Think about it again I urged her she said to me, "All of those women sitting outside, one with her nose clipped off, the other one with bruises, she has not survived within her marriage. Have you known of any women who has had to starve to death because she got divorced?" She said, "I have known many women who have starved to death or been killed of violence during marriage, so get on with your work and don't give me a lecture about what I should do and not do."

This is the amazing strength of women. It inspires one and so one wonders how can one not get involved in the protection of women's rights? Yes, there are difficult times that I have had. Clients who have been torn by loyalties. Cases of women that want to marry someone but their families are not allowing it so they are torn.

I have had victims of violence who are hesitant to file cases against their partners and I can understand and therefore as an activist I always feel that we have to leave the decision to the individual herself and it is her decision eventually that we must respect.

Unfortunately there are practices in our country where women are married off to the Holy Quran just simply because their inheritance is usurped up by the rest of the family members. The woman is married to the Quran but she actually never gets married or is not allowed to get married again. There are honour killings and, as some of you may have seen, that women who get killed because of so called 'honour' have separate graveyards and their mothers go there at night hiding from everyone else to mourn their daughters. I have never seen anything so tragic and pathetic than this.

I have had clients who have been raped and have been accused of extra-marital sex. They have spent years in jail and I've seen little girls of thirteen year old who have been raped and have subsequently been imprisoned as a consequence of that. But those laws have now been changed in Pakistan. It has happened only because of the women in Pakistan and because of the women activists in Pakistan. Their untiring movement, brought changes to such laws despite the very traditional society in which we live.

I have seen women for example in prisons in death penalty and as a lawyer we get these paper books to study the cases I got one paper book and I thought, but I've read it before. Then you see a pattern and the pattern is that a husband dies mysteriously, the family sits over it, after a few days the family files case against the wife so that they can take the property and the children themselves. Women are too poor to get legal aid, even to get proper legal assistance. They therefore suffer longer in jails.

I believe that the question of legal aid is very important to me because people must have a right, particularly vulnerable people, to legal aid.

I promised Monika that I would give her my time, I want to finish by saying that these are problems but there are root causes to all these problems. We must find the solutions and these solutions can be found if we set the political overall systems right.

We have unfortunately throughout the world, and Mr President, I know that you are an exception, a dearth of leadership. We have less commitment, we have more materialism and we have been unable to deal with some of the vital questions that challenge this world: the role of the non-state actor, the role of big companies with money, the relationship between south and north and indeed the question of disparity of wealth that we see not only here but also in our part of the world and that entails feminization of poverty. It also it brings in the question of impunity and the culture of impunity that stays large with all of us, no matter which part of the world we are in.

We need to look at the larger issues like challenging impunity, putting together a system which would counter violence, deepening democracy, because even where there are democratic societies, they haven't deepened. What I see on the ground, is that people are saying that they have a right to good governance, it's not just a question of wishing for good governance. They are asking for a right to good governance and that is what our leadership all over the world must recognize.

Thank you again very much.

I will take this as a debt for more work and I hope that I can contribute until the last breath in my body.