

STATEMENT ON THE OCCASION OF THE AWARD GRANTED TO ME BY THE COUNCIL OF BARS AND LAW SOCIETIES OF EUROPE – BRUSSELS, 28 NOVEMBER 2014

It is a great honor for me to be able to address this distinguished assembly.

In my words, I ask all of you, ladies and gentlemen, to hear the voice of Manuel Matos, a lawyer and a human rights defender murdered in 2009 for fighting against corruption and injustice in the north-eastern region, the poorest of Brazil;

the voice of judge Patrícia Acioli, executed at the behest of a military police colonel, for having the courage to prosecute senior police officers for crimes they committed;

the voice of Benedito Roberto Barbosa (known as Dito), a lawyer who was criminalized for defending the access to fair-housing for low-income families;

the voice of Marinalva Santana, persecuted for the right to exist as a homosexual;

the voice of Luiz Couto, federal deputy, sworn to be killed for denouncing police involvement with organized crime and death squads in the Northeastern region;

the voice of more than 700 human rights defenders threatened with death in Brazil, according to data from the Magazine "Congresso em Foco";

together with these voices, those of all the lawyers who work for the promotion of human rights, often endangering their own lives.

It is with this collective voice that I address the President, Dr. Aldo Bugarelli, and all the members of the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE), to say thanks for the confidence shown to me through the recognition that I am receiving.

On this occasion I would also like to thank Dr. Christiane Féral-Schuhl of the Paris Bar Association and Dr. Michel Benichou, member of the CCBE Presidency, for believing in me and nominating me for this award, thus strengthening my work as a defender of human rights.

I thank the President of the Bar Association of Brazil, Dr. Marcus Vinicius Coelho, for supporting my activities.

Thanks to all of you here present, in particular my family, colleagues and representatives of partner organizations.

As a social activist, lawyer and human rights defender, this award gives me a sense of belonging and of professional identity, making me much stronger in combating injustices and fighting for the rights of the marginalized.

The other day a colleague of mine in the program for defenders at risk, at the University of York, asked me when I started working as a human rights advocate.

I answered that it was when, as a teenager, coming from one of the thousands of families in a situation of social exclusion, living in one of the poorest and most

violent sections on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo, Brazil, I began to ask some questions:

Why are we in need at home when the lady of the house where my mother works throws food away?

Why do the police treat us with arrogance and violence, invade homes, torture and kill people, when they should protect them?

Why do my parents earn so little when they work so hard?

Why so much inequality?

These and many other questions caused me to take on the commitment to fight for a world where life – including that of poor people – is more important than profit, power and material things.

Ladies and gentlemen, I come from a country that in the eyes of the world and to our own Brazilian eyes, has seen important achievements over the past decades.

After centuries of slavery-based regimes and long periods of dictatorship, Brazilian people achieved a democratic political system. The women won, in addition to the right to vote, the right to be protagonists in politics, following the example of our recently reelected President, Dilma Rousseff.

The United Nations acknowledged that endemic hunger has been overcome in Brazil. Extreme poverty, too, has been significantly reduced. Many more people today have access to basic social services.

However, we still can't overcome major structural problems.

Brazil is among the top ten of the world's economic powers and also among the most unequal countries.

Today, it is a country that has developed some of the best laws in its legal system, but is unable to ensure access to justice for the poorest.

With a territory of continental extension, Brazil failed to carry out a land reform. Brazil is the country where more people are killed in land-related conflicts in all of Latin America. This year alone 29 murders were recorded.

Known to have a friendly and cheerful people, Brazil also has more than 50,000 homicides per year, where the victims are mostly young, black and poor residents of the peripheries of large cities.

Social inequality has real faces, addresses and smells.

It has the face of the poor, slum dwellers and peasants, women, indigenous people, people of African descent, in the places where the State is not present.

It has the smell of the sweat of unemployed, underemployed and exploited workers. The smell of the young blood poured out daily on the streets of our cordial Brazil.

I don't mean to be negative. Much less, denigrate my country.

But there is a question that won't shut up inside of me.

What makes a country with remarkable economic development, with good laws and democratic institutions also have such a high level of social inequality, a yearly rate of 54,000 murders and more than 700 human rights defenders and social leaders threatened with death?

If, on one hand, the persistence of economic and political elites in dominating the public sector contributes highly to the above picture, on the other hand, the model of economic policy adopted by my country as well as other developing countries, replicates the dominant model and reverses the order of values, putting life at the service of profit and consumption, increasing social inequality and going in the opposite direction of a fair and sustainable economy.

In this system, the State, as the guardian of the common good and promoter of fundamental rights, is weakened and made increasingly a hostage to powerful economic groups.

For ethical reason and the responsibility that we have to this generation and the future one, I believe that the time has come for us, people who work with the law, to tell our customers when their interests are indefensible: for example, agribusiness, the war and arms industry, the "mega-projects", when they impose, even to democratic States, rules that run counter to the rights of the poor, the workers and traditional communities.

Over my years of dedication to the defense and promotion of human rights, I have felt on my own skin the fury of violators and the weakness of the State.

I was a victim of sexual violence for defending girls exploited in prostitution;

I suffered slander, defamation and attacks against me and my family;

I have been criminalized for defending the most basic rights of families living in the slums,

for denouncing the crimes of torture and summary execution of teenagers, by State agents.

In the end, after suffering death threats and repeated raids in my workplace, while I held the post of ombudsman in control of police activities in the State of Paraíba – being the first woman and advocate of human rights in this post – I was forced to leave the region because the State could not guarantee my safety, in addition to not investigating the crimes of which I was a victim and the crimes that we reported.

Among the human rights defenders threatened with death in Brazil, there are many lawyers.

The interruption, even temporary, of our activities as human rights activists, has the negative impact of slowing down the causes to which we are committed, like the right to the land, to security, to housing, and many others.

As lawyers and jurists, we have some important challenges ahead of us. I want to highlight three that I consider most relevant.

The first is to combat impunity that has a crucial role in the maintenance of social inequality.

The second is to link the defense of democracy to the struggle for full economic, social and cultural rights.

The third is to democratize the knowledge of law with a view to empowering people in the struggle for the promotion and defense of their rights.

In conclusion, I thank you for granting me this award. I dedicate it to all my colleagues throughout the world who are persecuted for defending human rights.

Dear colleagues, let's fight together for the right to defend human rights.

Let's carry out our legal work from the perspective of human rights.

Let's always make human beings the center, and human life the priority, in our work.

*Valdênia A. Paulino Lanfranchi*

*Lawyer and human rights activist / Brazil*

*Brussels, November 28, 2014.*