

*A Celebration of Courage: The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) Human Rights Awards*

Remarks delivered by Yasemin Öz, Felipa de Souza Honoree

May 13, 2013

Hello dear friends,

I am honored to receive IGLHRC's very special award in the name of Felipa de Souza. I am also honored to join you and celebrate this award with you. I am quite aware of the amazing work IGLHRC is doing all around the world. First of all, I would like to thank IGLHRC not only for this award but for everything they do to promote LGBT rights.

Yet, I don't think that I deserve this award more than any other LGBT activist. But I do believe that LGBT activism is something that should be awarded since it is a hard way to go due to discrimination and violence. So I will take this award on behalf of every LGBT activist all over the world who gives me strength, courage and hope. I hope this award breaks once again the invisibility of lesbians in Turkey.

This award is also something important for me on the other hand. My sexual orientation seemed to me like a curse before I met the LGBT movement. I would like to share with you how this "curse" turned to an award.

I was 6 years old when I first noticed I was "different". When I was 11, I was quite sure about my "differency" and was afraid of it. I was thinking that it was something about being a child and when I grew up it would disappear. Years passed, I have grown up but my "differency" didn't disappear. I was in panic in those years. It was impossible for me to accept my sexual orientation. There was nobody to talk with, nothing to read. I didn't know even a word to define myself. I was just waiting for my feelings for women to end one day and wake up as a heterosexual! Well, it didn't happen.

Those years, although I was behaving like a "normal" lesbian, many people treated me like there was something wrong with me. So I believed that there was something wrong with me. I tried many ways to get rid of my sexual orientation, even forced myself to date boys. But nothing changed in me; my life became worse and worse. The only thing I could do was read more and more to understand myself. I read religious, mystic and psychological books to find an answer but none was enough for me.

One day I heard about the Kaos GL magazine and group which were publishing the first LGBT magazine in Turkey. I was quite shocked. It was 1995, I could never imagine a group of people revealing they were gay and writing about it. They were so much braver than I could ever imagine. So the first time I went to the Kaos GL meeting with confusion about my sexual orientation in my mind.

In the meeting I met a small group of people; many of them were gay men. They were quite sure about their sexual orientation and they didn't have any problem with it! At the next Kaos GL meeting, I was also quite sure about my sexual orientation. It was the first time that I could understand and accept my sexual orientation.

Kaos GL was a small group mainly consisting of students. They were publishing the first LGBT magazine in Turkey and having political discussions on LGBT policy every week. The magazine was being published as photocopy since there was no money and other choice. I began to write in the magazine for the first time as a lesbian, but I was not brave enough to use my real name so I wrote using another name.

Those years we also didn't have any center to make organizations and meetings. We had no official status, no funding. Until 2001, Kaos GL just survived with its members and their membership fees. In 2001, Kaos GL opened its first center. That year was the first time we demonstrated in public as a group of twenty people and asked for equal rights. In 2005 Kaos GL became the first registered LGBT organization in Turkey.

Now, we have a cultural center where we hold several events and discussions. We give psychological and legal advice to LGBT people as well as to LGBT refugees. The Kaos GL website has become a media channel for LGBT news. We have our own reporters all around Turkey who went through Kaos GL's trainings on journalism. Kaos GL magazine is more colorful and distributed national wide. We have managed several projects, including one project with the state. We have published several books for LGBT people. Every year we submit annual reports on violation of LGBT people's human rights. For 8 years we have organized international meetings and build international networks. We believe that the LGBT movement is only strong with international solidarity.

So let me stop here because no words can summarize these 18 years.

At the beginning, Kaos GL had no credit in the society, even the democratic groups were not willing to struggle against homophobia and transphobia. Today parliamentarians like Binnaz Toprak are defending LGBT rights in the parliament. More than 10.000 people marched in Istanbul in last year's gay pride.

In 1995 I wasn't even dreaming of 10.000 people marching or parliamentarians talking on LGBT rights. Well, it didn't happen in one day. But it happened. LGBT movement reached to such a point beyond our dreams. We saw that a few believing people can change the world.

It is because we never lost our beliefs. From the start, we were quite aware that the struggle against homophobia and transphobia could not be separated from the struggle against sexism, nationalism, capitalism and militarism. If we let one person be discriminated against, we will allow ourselves to be surrounded by the chains of discrimination. Homophobia and transphobia will not disappear where there is hate, inequality, injustice, discrimination and violence. So we became not only LGBT activists but became ecologists, anti-nationalists, peace activists, feminists and anti-capitalists as well. We believe that we should break the walls and remove the borders among people to build a really peaceful world.

After 18 years, today I am here as a lesbian not hiding herself. Now I think that my sexual orientation is the best gift that the God ever gave to me. If I wasn't a lesbian, I wouldn't have taken such a deep journey into my soul and I wouldn't have found myself. I also wouldn't understand what the world really is and wouldn't have gotten to touch so many precious souls. So I am thankful for my sexual orientation.

While ending my speech, I would like to dedicate this award to victims of homophobia and transphobia, to IGLHRC, to Kaos GL, to my family, to my best friends Erdem Çalışır and

Zehra Tosun who changed my life forever and especially to Pınar Selek who received a life sentence because she never gave up her beliefs.

We shall never give up believing in our selves and lose hope. I am quite sure that one day LGBT struggle will end with victory. Cheers to all LGBT activists.