



Swiss Freethinker Award 2017

Ceremony held on 5th November 2017 at the Volkshaus Zürich as final act of the humanist and science festival *Denkfest*.



Leila Alikarami and Naz Oke holding the award statues

Speech by **Leila Alikarami** on behalf of **Masih Alinejad** and **My Stealthy Freedom**



I am honored to be here today to receive this award on behalf of my dear friend, Masih Alinejad and My Stealthy Freedom. And I want to thank you for your good decision.

When Denkfest first contacted Masih about the award, her first thought was that this was a prank. In her line of work, she gets trolled by hackers and purveyors of fake news. But after she did some research, she realized that this was real. And the more we learnt about your program, the more we felt good about it.

Actually, it is ironic that a few days ago was the 500 anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 theses which profoundly changed Europe. I don't have to tell YOU about Luther but I believe in years to come, My Stealthy Freedom campaign against compulsory hijab and for women's rights will be seen as changing the status of women in Iran and the Middle East. As My Stealthy Freedom campaign believes, saying YES is easy. We can all go with the majority and no harm will come to us. But it is only when we say NO that we exercise true freedom, that is when we become our true selves. It is only when Iranian women say NO, not just to government but also to dogma and cultural norms that treats them as second-class citizens then they can achieve true equality.

Let me tell you about Masih Alinejad and the My Stealthy Freedom campaign because I'm not sure how familiar you are. Masih is not a professor of theology, that's for sure. She was born in a small village in the north of Iran in a conservative family who were poor farmers. When she was 18, she along with a number of high school friends were arrested for producing a newsletter. In prison, she discovers she is pregnant and gets a suspended sentence. At 19, she is married with a baby son.

And at 25, she is divorced and lost custody of her child. Somehow, Masih becomes a journalist and the Parliamentary reporter. She wrote a series of exposes about Parliamentary corruption and was expelled from attending the parliamentary hearings. At this point, I became friend with Masih while I was defending her in court.

After that she became a famous and controversial political columnist prior leaving Iran before the 2009 rigged elections. In exile, she covered human rights abuses of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in May 2014, she launched her campaign against compulsory hijab. It started with Masih posting a photograph of herself without hijab on her facebook page and asking women to share their photographs online. Women flooded the Facebook and the movement started spontaneously, tapping into a groundswell of opposition against compulsory hijab. Unlike many of its Arab neighbours, Iranian women had a right to choose how they dressed before the Islamic Republic.

At its core, My stealthy freedom, is a very simple campaign -- women send their photographs without the hijab to the Facebook page. At first, the photos came from the privacy of their own homes, from isolated locations and from there women are sending photographs of themselves from public places. Now in its 4th year, My Stealthy Freedom is the biggest online women's movement in Iran and the most active women's campaign in Iran. This summer, Masih introduced a new campaign under My Stealthy Freedom, called "White Wednesdays" asking women to wear a white symbol in public to show their protest against compulsory hijab. Yes, it is a punishable crime but women of Iran think that

freedom is not free. Masih Alinejad was attacked by Iranian government many times, they called her prostitute and Iranian state TV even went further, they claimed that Masih was raped by three men in London. It was a big lie in order to keep her silent.

As an attorney and lawyer who practiced in Iran, my priority has always been that of assisting women in finding creative avenues, particularly where the government and existing legislation failed to protect them. Nevertheless, my experience shows that law and culture can work hand in hand to advance women's rights. The importance of my Stealthy Freedom Campaign and Masih's work is to promote the culture of gender equality and to raise public awareness about discriminatory laws and practices against Iranian women.

Although compulsory hijab is the most visible form of discrimination against women, it has not been challenged strongly by women's rights activists. We have always said that we have more important issues than the hijab to deal with.

There are many discriminatory laws in Iran. I give you some examples: the age of criminal responsibility for girls is 9 while a boy cannot be prosecuted for a crime until he is 15. In fact, in Iran, a 9 year old girl is actually regarded as an adult woman. Men are holding arbitrary power over women. How? A woman needs her husband's permission to get a passport. A husband can prevent his wife from traveling.

Under Iranian law the nationality of a woman is not automatically transferred to her children. However, the same does not apply to a man. Consequently, there are approximately 20 thousand children in Iran who lack a birth certificate simply because their fathers are not Iranian citizens, although their mothers are Iranian nationals.

On looking back now, I realize that objecting to compulsory hijab was also important for us. But because of the pressure imposed on us from the government, we were not willing to tackle the hijab. Therefore, our strategy to fight under an Islamic legal system prevented us from talking about compulsory hijab. Instead we focused on other discriminatory laws. This, however, does not mean that we were happy with compulsory hijab.

My Stealthy Freedom has adopted a different strategy. By giving priority to hijab encourages women to voice their objection to compulsory hijab and challenge the government as well as society to recognise women's control over their own body. Therefore, My Stealthy Freedom initial focus is on the most obvious symbol of oppression. If we cannot control how to cover our heads, how can we control what goes inside our heads.

This is very important. How can a woman be free when she is forced to appear in public in a way that is not a true representation of her? Last week I talked with a young woman from Tehran who has to go to work wearing a black chador, although she does not believe in hijab. She told me that "this is like torture and I do not like myself in that chador and I do not feel comfortable. I cannot concentrate on my work".

Under the Islamic Republic, women have to submerge their true identity into a false one. My Stealthy Freedom is about women reclaiming their identity.

Compulsory hijab in Iran has restricted Iranian women from many activities and jobs. Women cannot be singers; several sports are banned for women.

My Stealthy Freedom brings Iranian women together to fight ideologies that oppress women's rights. More than 65% of university students in Iran are women. The Iranian Government has adopted a series of sex-segregated policies and regulations to prevent women from studying certain subjects or taking certain jobs. But I doubt that they have been successful in silencing Iranian women.

I was 1 year old when the revolution happened in my country. I witnessed 8 years of Iran-Iraq war. I was a law student at Tehran University when Iranian Student Protests of July

1999, known as Kuye Daneshgah Disaster (or the fatal attack on university dormitories) happened. I started my law practice during the government of the ex-reformist president Mohammad Khatami, which was known as the reform era, I defended women's rights activist in the revolutionary courts, during the ex-conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Presidency. Still I am hopeful that the record of human rights will be improved in Iran because we have brave women like Masih and human rights defenders that are willing to pay the price for freedom whatever it would be.

International recognition of the struggle of women in closed societies would help them to not give up hope.

We are free here to gather but believe me such gathering is considered a crime in some countries including my own beloved country Iran. Right now, as I am talking to you some women's rights defenders in Iran are spending their lives in prison because they refused to be silenced: whether in voicing their political and religious beliefs, raising their ethnic demands, or simply challenging gender-related restrictions that are imposed on them as women.

We cannot imagine the gravity of their pain. But what we can do for them is to give them voice, to support them by making their stories known, by sharing their pain and by contributing to their cause. I believe that there can be no human rights without humanity. And a nation cannot be free without empowered women.

Let me finish by saying that Masih will dedicate this award to Shahnaz Akmali. Her son Mostafa was killed during the protest against 2009 stolen presidential election. last week Shahnaz was sentenced to one year imprisonment and 2 years ban from social media for campaigning to find the truth about her son's murder.

Masih has vowed to publicize her case until she is released. Shahnaz is a symbol of Iranian brave mother protested against injustice. This is the true goal of my stealthy freedom for women to be loud, to be brave and to refused being silenced.

Speech by Naz Oke and Lucie Renée Bourges on behalf of Zehra Doğan

Due to visiting rules and internal communications in the high security prison in Diyarbakir prison where she is held since June, we were able to transmit this good news to Zehra last Friday only. She could not write a text to thank you but we can tell you she was very pleased to receive this prize. But since we do not want to talk in her stead, we shall read you a small compilation of excerpts from her recent letters:



Naz Oke and Swiss Freethinkers President Andreas Kyriacou

«Since the prison administration wouldn't give me my material, I had to find alternatives. And I realized that I had everything on hand. I use wrappers, garbage and food. I produce the colors from natural sources. For example, olives provide me with black, tomato paste gives me red... I crush parsley for green... turmeric provides yellow. There is tea, coffee... and honey for glue. For paper, we are allowed notebooks and writing paper. So I use newspapers, but also all kinds of wrappings. The cardboard from boxes of cookies, the aluminum foil on containers... For special effects, I also use the foil from packs of cigarettes.

I focus on the Middle East. I would like to further my knowledge of history, culture and regional mythology. I set aside 4 hours every day with one of my co-detainees to write a novel based on her life story. I draw and I paint whenever I can. And I've also started giving drawing classes to my friends here. In a way, I socialize art in my fashion. They love to draw. Soon, I'll be able to teach them how to make a paintbrush out of bird feathers found in the yard.

I wouldn't like you to imagine a sad-sack withdrawn Zehra, wasting her time. I write to tell you everything I do here, so that when you hear and pronounce the name Zehra, you picture a woman with a strong morale and hope, someone who is strong and upright.

Every morning we assemble for a reading session. With the reading of some 300 pages every day, discussions and in-depth study, I think we somehow declare the victory of 'will'. I think a vital truth exists in jail and that I must express it by my behavior and my modes of thought.

I used to fear that in the absolute darkness of the walls built around me, with no knowledge of my roots, I would settle into the situation, reconcile myself with the persecution to which I am subjected, that I would lock myself into the jail of my inner world.

If truth be told, it is easier to get rid of the jail in its concrete aspect than to extract one's self from the jail of one's own ego. For it is much easier to build up in your head the disgusting perception of this jail which then appears before your eyes with great clarity, in all its nakedness. You must carry out this internal battle 24 hours a day. And this struggle frees your thoughts. We are in a constant existential battle and we learn to stand tall, head straight, facing this will to annihilate us.

In this space where everything is constantly restricted, where even a pencil is hard to find, I will learn how to create existence out of a void.

For someone with no reason to live, yes, jail is hard, even very hard. But my reason for living is powerful. This is why these walls become more immaterial for me with every passing day.

No space in the world is totally free. Can you tell me that the space you are in right now is really free? I understand that in your struggles also there is no question of absolute freedom.

And I think that in the search for freedom, women must stand in the front ranks. We must fight with even greater strength against masculine domination that decides how we must live, how we must talk, dress, wear makeup, what size and weight we must be, how we must behave sexually, and even how we must die. But I'm convinced we will shatter those dark glasses they have forced onto us.

I send you all my love from a little prison filled with big-hearted women, in a town burnt and destroyed, far away from you.»

As a woman, dominated by patriarchy and oppressed by a regime that instrumentalizes Islam in politics, just as the former regime called itself secular while imposing it as a State religion, freedom of thought is dear to Zehra. And when the judge had the court condemn her, claiming that her drawing of the destroyed town of Nusaybin went beyond «allowable limits for criticism», I leave you to judge what freedom is left in Turkey.



**Prize recipients and board members of the Freethinkers Association of Switzerland:
Ruth Thomas, Andreas Kyriacou, Naz Oke, Lucie Renée Bourges, Nada Peratovic and Valentin Abgottspon**