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My name is Michaela. Please, allow me to share a personal experience with you.

I come from Slovak Republic where I grew in a peaceful environment in a democratic society. I was raised in harmonious atmosphere as the only child of two loving parents. I was taken care of in a good way, shielded from pain and sadness. Always feeling safe in my life, never harmed, never to be harmed.

In 2004, I was with my family in Sri Lanka and left one day before the tsunami happened. We arrived from the airport, switched on TV and saw the awful images of the region under water. I was sitting with my parents on the sofa, them trying to tell me everything is fine. And me feeling that it is really not fine. The city where we lived was affected in a serious way and I could have been certain that the waiter who gave me gifts every morning and the funny aerobic trainer in the pool and the children I played with and the smiley vegetable seller next to the hotel. They are all gone. This was my first personal experience with catastrophe and death on a large scale.

The experience affected me deeply and became a turning point of my life. It opened my eyes and I became aware of the human tragedies, of inequalities, injustice, wars, pain. My glass ceiling of protection, my naive optimistic vision through rose-colored glasses, all this crumbled and I saw suffering everywhere I looked. I became cynical.

When deciding where to continue my studies, I chose Social Work. I would like to pause here to thank SYLFF Scholarship that enabled me to explore more in terms of the topic of migration. I have later embarked on studies of International Relations and after that I specialized in Psychology and Psychotherapy. Let's be frank however, none of these studies make you feel optimistic and hopeful about the world.

I chose to follow a bottom-up grassroots approach, being part of various non-profit associations, working with and for those who have a hard time fitting in the society, and vice-versa the society has a hard time allowing them to do so. I worked with roma populations, victims of abuse, people with disabilities, refugees. My work took me to the Balkans during

the so-called 'Migration Crisis', Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, Lebanon and I am currently residing in Afghanistan.

When you work with a non-governmental organization, you automatically become angry and critical towards structures. By default as a non-governmental body, you position yourself against government. You despise authorities when you see how much harm a poor leadership can bring.

I am the youngest in the SYLFF group. When I got chosen for this Leadership programme in Japan, I feared that now I will meet the 'Leaders' and they will be very high up, academic, unattainable. Directors, decision-makers, professors. I was slightly uncomfortable and I sensed the internal fight within me starting. I knew we will talk about poverty and hunger from the soft chairs in a picturesque Japanese nature eating amazing dishes while we do so. I was already prejudging that none of them probably have done field work and all are just removed from the real life that I see every day. I was hoping I will keep my cool and not project, not blame and not do a small revolution on this trip.

But what I found is that, yes, leaders are proud, they can fight. But they can fight because they believe in what they do. Proud but not proud as in not not accepting opinions but proud of our work and passionate about our sector Leaders are open to discussion, they want to work together as a team, they strive to learn more and be challenged. Leaders are not only knowledgeable and skilled but also warm, welcoming, open for suggestions.

If this is what being a leader is then I am very happy to be considered as one. Being a part of this extremely prestigious group of professionals makes me feel really humble and grateful. Only two weeks of networking, discussions and practical solutions and you see the results. My lost optimism returned and I frankly believe that this group of leaders can actually change things. Find global solutions. Motivate and provoke. With patience. Together. One at a time.

I am very thankful for this opportunity. My greatest gratitude to you, Mr Sasakawa, to Nippon Foundation, Tokyo Foundation for Policy and Research, Sylff secretariat led by Sanae san, Mari san, Keita san and all the staff. In order to continue being in humanitarian sector, I needed this connection, this safety net, this academic boost. And now I continue working because I know the leaders care.