Remarks delivered by Judge Parwin Balagh on October 17, 2024 as the keynote address to an audience of lawyers, judges and law students at Colloquium Sudbury

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Today, as I stand here in the heart of a country that has welcomed me and countless other refugees with open arms, I am filled with hope. Canada is a land of opportunity, where dreams can be realized, and where people from all walks of life can build a future. As an Afghan woman, this moment holds profound meaning for me. My story is the story of women who rise above war and insecurity, striving for justice and equality.

I was born in Afghanistan, a country of breathtaking landscapes and majestic mountains, a place that once inspired my childhood. Afghanistan was once filled with life, joy, and hope. I have fond memories of playing in the streets and celebrating our cultural traditions with my family. Sadly, war and insecurity changed everything. It altered the lives of millions, including my own family. From that moment, the burden of conflict became a part of our lives, and our path was filled with countless challenges and struggles.

From a young age, I saw the pain and hardship my people endured. As a girl growing up in a traditional society, I became deeply aware of the obstacles women faced. When I went to school, many girls my age were deprived of education due to cultural and security barriers. Going to school meant not just facing academic challenges but also navigating the constant fear of violence. Yet, these challenges were just part of the long and difficult journey Afghan women face as they pursue their dreams.

Imagine for a moment, if you will, young girls stepping out of their home every morning, their hearts and minds filled with hopes for a better future, while facing daily dangers—bombings, threats, and societal pressures. Yet, despite these overwhelming obstacles, these girls carried on with determination. That my friends is the very definition of courage. For us, school wasn't just a place to learn; it was a place to fight inequality and try to build a better future for everyone. Through hard work and perseverance, I pursued higher education and eventually became a judge in Afghanistan. Becoming a female judge in Afghanistan is a story of resistance, commitment, and hope. It's a story of countless courageous women standing up against discrimination and injustice, fighting for their rights and the rights of others. I am proud to be one of those women, but the road to success was arduous.

As a judge, I was entrusted with handling some of the most important corruption cases in the country. Corruption is still one of the greatest challenges facing Afghanistan today, trapping citizens in a never-ending cycle of poverty and injustice. By ruling on and passing decisions on cases, I aimed to restore justice and rebuild people's trust in the legal system. I also advocated for legal reforms, believing that updating our laws was crucial for making real progress toward justice. My proposals aimed to improve the legal framework in areas most in need of reform. However, each day brought new challenges. In recent years, civil security in Afghanistan has deteriorated drastically. My colleagues and I faced constant threats.

Being a judge, and especially a female judge, became one of the most dangerous professions in the country. I lost friends and colleagues who were killed for their dedication to justice. Some were victims of bombings, and I witnessed their tragic loss firsthand. These experiences left deep scars but also fueled my determination to keep fighting for justice and equality.

One of the hardest moments in my life was losing a close colleague in an explosion. Seeing her body in pieces has left me emotionally devastated forever. This is just one example of the suffering we endured as female judges in Afghanistan. These painful memories became a source of strength for me to hold on to my values and continue fighting for human rights, even in the darkest times.

Leaving Afghanistan was not an easy decision. It was incredibly difficult to leave behind my home, my family, and the efforts I had built over the years. But here in Canada, I have found a new beginning, and I see endless opportunities to contribute to this society.

Canada offers so much for people like me and other refugees. Here, I can share my experiences, defend human rights, and contribute to building a brighter future for all. I'm incredibly proud to share that my daughter, Sarah, is now a lawyer at one of the largest law firms in this city. Her achievements, like those of many Afghan women, reflect the resilience and potential of women when given the chance to succeed.

I would also like to take a moment to express my deep gratitude to the friends and colleagues who have supported me on this journey. I'm especially thankful to the Canadian judges who have guided me along the way—particularly Justice Hennessy who has been a constant source of support for me and my family since we arrived in Canada. Her kindness, guidance, and encouragement have made all the difference, helping us feel at home and ready for the future. Also, Justice Lynch, who played a key role in helping me come to Canada. I am forever grateful to both of them.

My goal is to build a bridge between two cultures, two lands, and two very different worlds. I will use my experience as a judge in Afghanistan to contribute to the Canadian legal community and further the cause of justice and equality.

I hope to be a voice not just for Afghan women but for all who seek justice. My story is one of resilience and hope. It shows that with faith, determination, and perseverance, anything is possible, no matter how difficult the journey.

In closing, I want to sincerely thank all of you—my friends and colleagues—for helping me take this new step in my journey. With your support, I look forward to making a meaningful contribution to Canadian society and working together for a brighter future for all of us.

Thank you again my friends for listening to my words of courage, equality, and hope.