

5 questions with... Maria Arena

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Opinion

Refugees, materialism and conflict minerals.



Maria Arena | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

1. Who has most inspired you in your career and how?

I don't have a political 'mentor'. Most of the people I have worked with have inspired me. They have each had their strengths and their weaknesses, but they were all committed. I have held important political positions at national level, including minister for refugees and asylum seekers in 2009. In this role, I was lucky to have a young advisor by my side with whom I defended the dignified reception of refugees and legalising the status of undocumented migrants. It was a tough fight, but it was the right and fair thing to do. Now, this 'young advisor' is head of Médecins du Monde Belgium and continues to fight for the dignity of migrants. I must say he was very inspiring, and continues to be.

2. What was the biggest change you had that has had the biggest positive impact?

Hard to say, but I would return to legalising the status of undocumented migrants in 2009. In Belgium, like in other countries, the issue of people not having been granted the right to remain on the territory was, and still is, a huge problem. Some people stay in a country for more than 10 years with no possibility of returning to their country of origin, and they do not 'exist' in the country in which they live, the country in which their children go to school. Legalising their status means giving them the chance to live like you and I without fear of being deported following an arrest. It means allowing them to build a future for themselves and their children. I was able to do this for hundreds of people. Another example that comes to mind is the conflict minerals legislation we passed in the European Parliament, which should change the lives of thousands of people currently being exploited by unscrupulous businesses and politicians.

3. What would you save from your house if it was on fire?

I am not materialistic in the slightest so I wouldn't save anything in particular.

4. What do you do in your spare time to relax and unwind?

I spend time with my family friends, cooking, strolling, talking about anything and everything. I also enjoy going to the cinema and museum exhibits.

5. What book has most inspired you?

Without a doubt, 'In the name of identity' by Amin Maalouf. It made me realise that my cultural background - I am the daughter of Sicilian immigrants who started out as farmers and became miners - was not a handicap, but an asset.

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