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I attended my very first elections at the age of 7. I remember queueing with my mum and my siblings in a long line outside of my primary school building. When we got to the top table that was set in the gymnasium my mum was given a piece of paper that she took with her to a small wooden booth behind a curtain. I was with my mum all that time. Later she let me slide that piece of paper into a large white and red box that in the middle of the gymnasium. I didn't know what voting was, but I sensed it must have been a very important moment because everyone in the line was so composed and solemn. Only years later I realised that on that day my mum was voting in the first free democratic elections in Poland after the fall of the communist regime, and I was a part of that historical moment for democracy, too. I wouldn't say my mum is very political, we never talked about her political views or her election choices. However, my mum has her convictions and she made sure to voice her views because she believed that her vote mattered. When I asked my mum why she was an active voter she said that it was her duty as a citizen. She also said that she voted to ensure we have a dignified government that cared about people's dignity. My mum voted because she wanted to have a say in what people will be making decision about the daily life of our communities and our future. Seeing my mum's regular voting practice, I grew up with a perception that voting is a natural part of our lives.

I got my own voting rights when I turned 18. Six months later on an early Saturday morning I arrived at a voting station to cast my first vote ever. It was the Polish referendum deciding our membership in the European Union. I voted 'Yes' for one main reason: the freedom of movement. I grew up in a country with no freedom to move across borders, but migration was a part of our growing up process. Nearly every family had a person that emigrated, and emigration was the life plan for many of my friends. In my family it was my older sister who left Poland first, then my three brothers followed soon after. All of them were undocumented migrants in Western Europe, and all of them had to live clandestine lives experiencing labour exploitation while trying to survive. I myself never wanted to emigrate but life

sometimes puts us on a different path. When it was my time to emigrate, Poland was already a part of the European Union so my experience of migration was free from the fear and uncertainty of being undocumented. Little did I know that casting my very first vote I wasn't only voting for my family and friends right to move, I was also voting for myself. It was my vote that played a direct role in shaping my future free from labor exploitation and insecurity of residence status. Voting is our way of saying how our individual and collective future should look like.

When I moved to Ireland and became a migrant I had to rebuild and redefine who I was. As migrants we have to learn how to live our lives in a new reality. What we know as a norm and natural part of our lives may be no more. It takes time to develop a concept of self that is rooted in a sense of belonging to the new place we call home. When I became a migrant I lost many rights as a citizen, and I thought that one of those rights was the right to vote. It took a few years before I learned that, in Ireland, every person, regardless of their citizenship status, can vote and run in local elections. However, it took another few years before I cast my first vote in Ireland, because, as a migrant, I lacked the confidence to occupy democratic spaces. My mum taught me the importance of voting in Poland as a citizen. There was no one who would teach me the importance of voting in Ireland as a migrant.

There is a difference between knowing my rights and recognizing those rights as mine. It wasn't until I connect with an international network of migrant and refugee leaders that I found my voice, and gained confidence in using my vote. Only seeing and hearing migrant and refugee leaders talking about democracy made me realise that democracy without migrant participation cannot work. Now, I am dedicated to creating an environment in Ireland where migrants can not only learn about their voting rights and they can build up the confidence to use that right. One of the greatest privileges of my work and activism is to witness ordinary people with extraordinary experiences of marginalization discovering that they have the right to raise their voices and make decisions about our collective future. As migrants we may not have full citizenship rights but Ireland is home. This is a place where we live and work, this is

the place where we raise our families and a place where we will grow old. We are the parents and grandparents of future generations of Irish people and we should have a say in shaping the future for us all. Our individual votes have a direct role in shaping our collective future. Use your voice, use your vote.

A few years ago my mum also became a migrant and at first she, too, thought that as a migrant she couldn't vote. It was my privilege and joy to teach my mum about her voting rights as a migrant. It was also I who read to my mum election materials so she could make her voting decision. Last year my mum cast her first vote in her new home country because she still cares to have a dignified government that cares about people's dignity.