



Press Release

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Keynote speech by President of Malta Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca at the Women in Parliament Global Forum, in Jordan

Excellencies
Honourable Members of Parliament
Dear friends

It is my pleasure to join you here today, to address you at this plenary session of the Women in Parliament Global Forum in Jordan.

I shall speak about the realities of migration as experienced by women.

I shall also speak regarding the urgent need for us women to put all our efforts towards building a global culture of peace.

We are the mothers of our communities, our nations, and our regions. We must be peace builders, peacemakers and peacekeepers, and transform our countries into peace loving societies.

I believe we can transform the world.

The urgent need for peace must shape our thoughts and direct our actions.

It is only in this way that we can act seriously and credibly, to achieve sustainable peace and meaningful wellbeing in the lives of all.

The complex causes of migration often stem from a diversity of conflicts: from inequalities, from poverty, from discrimination, from the effects of egocentrism and from long drawn-out disputes.

Even if the topic of migration is unpopular in many of our countries, we must be brave.

We must speak the truth.

We must face this reality courageously as women leaders, striving to make a positive, effective, and deep-rooted change.

It is only by rising to meet our responsibilities towards the most vulnerable that we shall discover how each one of us, in our roles as decision makers and active citizens, must unite to change this unfolding humanitarian situation for the better.

As President of a nation in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, and as a woman of that region, my identity connects across diverse cultures and peoples.

I have always believed that it is a source of strength and continual reflection in my life.

In the same way, we each bring something of ourselves and our identity to the issue of migration.

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It is this inclusive sense of who we are, and our collective potential, that must inform our discussions.

I hope that my reflections will not only remind us of the situation currently developing, but also offer a space for further dialogue.

The movement of refugees is a global challenge that no nation is equipped to deal with alone.

People will always be on the move for whatever reason.

Migration has been our history; it is our present and will be our future.

This is why I believe that the international community cannot be passive, or continue to manage this challenge by a crisis approach.

We must create and develop strategies to proactively respond to this phenomenon.

Refugees and migrants must themselves be part of our conversations, if we are to hope for a sustainable strategy that can deal with all the facets of this reality.

The Mediterranean remains the main access path for migrants coming from various areas of the African continent. In the words of Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, at the Valletta Summit on Migration last year, he stated that: "The Mediterranean is the most dangerous route."

It is sad to recognise that this route is also responsible for the largest number of reported fatalities.

If people are fleeing in this way, because of whatever adversity instigates their journey, we are duty bound to find ways of addressing their struggles. Impeding the illegal work of smugglers and traffickers is crucial if we are to become active agents in saving lives.

This should be part of a larger process that must include safer border crossing, and person-centred legislation to protect and safeguard the rights of the vulnerable.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports that over 182,000 people have already crossed the Mediterranean this year. Of these arrivals, 82% come from the world's top ten refugee countries of origin. Many lives have been lost, with over 1,261 people reported dead or missing so far in 2016. According to the International Organisation for Migration, some 3,000 people died crossing the Mediterranean Sea last year.

In light of these horrible facts, we must work together, in our capacity as women leaders, to propose new strategies and define new policies.

We must bring the uniqueness of our position as women leaders, to respond to those who argue that borders and fences are the only way to deal with the growing numbers of vulnerable people.

I believe that during our deliberations we must ask, and find answers, to the following questions:

How can we, as women, motivate changes in policy that prioritise the resiliency and empowerment of the vulnerable?

How can we cause a transformation in people's mentality, towards a global culture of peace?

How can we harness the incredible potential of women, as agents of change within their communities, societies, and nations?

We are becoming so accustomed to news reports of the dead and dying, that we seem to be rendered immune to suffering.

This surely cannot go on.

We must direct our discussions and our efforts to discover what can be done to improve protection, to alleviate discrimination, and to replace paradigms of exploitation with a global culture of human dignity and peace.

The role of the media in achieving such a change is crucial, as is the mobilisation of all contributors within civil society. The transformation of our cultures is only possible if we work together, aiming for authentic equality and equity.

Let us also consider the situation of work for those who migrate, whether seeking asylum or not, and the many disadvantages faced by women as compared to men.

According to a report released by the International Labour Organisation on Decent Work and Migration, women tend to be concentrated in a more limited number of occupations. They lack the proper information on processes of migration, and procedures for employment opportunities that would empower them.

The risks faced by women may also be made worse, due to particular psycho-social needs. Other risks include: the impact of family relationships, financial difficulties, and employment related problems, that are specific to the realities experienced by women in migration. These are only compounded by the growing threat of violent conflict that has escalated in so many regions of our world.

If we believe in a global culture of peace, then we must begin with a transformation of our own societies.

If we were to ask our children to choose between peace and conflict, I am convinced that they would choose peace.

We must stand together to end cycles of inequality, of gender violence, and abuses of power. These do not only take place in conflict zones. They are also present within our families and our communities.

We must begin with our own attitudes towards gender and power. All of society must work together, across national borders, or the lines drawn by our cultural and faith traditions. We need to encourage governments to unite with civil society in tackling the needs of women, and more particularly, the needs of vulnerable women such as refugees.

We must also recognise the danger of discrimination, which has led many receiving countries to view refugee women as inferiors, or potential threats to stability. This poisonous mentality is gaining ground within many of our communities and nations, and it must be challenged at every opportunity.

We must replace it with a counter-narrative that recognises and celebrates the positive contributions of these women to our societies. We must acknowledge their potential to be productive contributors in society.

I here quote Ness Asplund, who, according to a report by the Guardian, chose to make a difference. I quote “Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgement that something else is more important than fear”.

We must not be afraid. Together, we can make a difference.

We must nurture the special ability of these women to become agents for peaceful transformation within their own families, networks, and nations, for the ultimate benefit of all.

The participation of women and girls is essential. Women and girls are key drivers of the deep-rooted change in mentalities, institutions, and cultures that we so much need.

Without the empowerment of women, there can be no global culture of peace — this is only possible through a global social inclusion approach, universal education, sustainable economic and social development, democratic participation, and the upholding of fundamental human rights.

We also need to continue to strengthen existing international principles and instruments that uphold fundamental human rights. It is our duty to foster cultures that are rooted in basic principles of equality, non-discrimination, protection, and peace.

Most of our countries are committed to international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

According to the international principles within these conventions, destination countries are not only obliged to refrain from violating the rights of individuals, but also to take positive actions to ensure that individuals of all genders are able to enjoy their rights.

These principles are also reflected in our global commitment to the United Nations sustainable development goals.

With the aim of these goals in mind, my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has facilitated a Refugee-Led NGO Platform, to give greater visibility and create a space of empowerment for asylum seeker groups and communities in Malta.

Through this platform, we have been better able to target specific areas of concern within these communities, and bring them to the attention of the relevant authorities, and the public at large.

My Foundation also assisted in the launch, last year, of a publication produced by the Jesuit Refugee Services of Malta. The book recounts the experiences of six women who are seeking asylum in Malta. They shared their fears and dreams, calling for solidarity, for freedom, and for dignity.

One refugee said, and I quote, “In my country my rights were violated. I could not go to school. I could not choose who to marry. My life was not mine but dictated by someone else. In the desert, it was the same, and here too I find myself in the same situation, in detention, without any control over my life, at the dictates and mercy of someone else... If I am to be respected, first I need to be free, free from the bars surrounding me, free from being controlled by someone else, free to run my life.”

The resilience of these women is an encouragement for us to keep pushing against the agendas of those who would ignore the suffering of our fellow human beings.

Those who would turn their backs on this crisis, and fail to do all that is possible to ensure that innocent lives are not lost.

The suffering of refugee women is inevitably connected to the suffering of children. During my time as Minister, I worked to ensure that the detention of unaccompanied asylum seeking children was ended, and that families would no longer be fragmented. Malta now has a designated space to take in asylum seeking families, where families and children can receive emergency psychosocial support.

It is by witnessing the struggles of mothers, risking all to cross the Mediterranean in search of a better life for themselves, their families, and their children, that further strengthened my resolve.

It is this mutual solidarity that continues to inspire me in my efforts as a leader.

In order to nurture resilient communities, we must be resilient leaders. We must be adaptable to fast-changing situations, and provide practical responses to meet both our short-term and long-term objectives.

We must reflect the values of peace building, of respect, of sharing, and of authentic concern that we wish to see flourish in our societies, our nations and our regions.

We must recognise the essential importance of access to fundamental human rights in the lives of all citizens. These rights must be celebrated, protected, and enforced if we are serious about securing the wellbeing of present and future generations.

We must acknowledge that we are responsible for one another.

We must practice solidarity with the most vulnerable and the oppressed, and recognise the disproportionate inequalities faced by so many migrant women in their struggle to achieve a better life.

We must participate in the building of a global culture of peace. People, no matter their differences, must feel included in society, and ready to create communities that provide, as well as receive, support, learning, and care.

It is our duty to ensure that the individual dignity of the asylum seeker, of all persons, is at the heart of our discussions. It is from this firm foundation that we can then reach out to build sustainable peace within our communities, societies, and entire nations.

Last week, I attended the launch of an autobiography written by a Somali youngster who, at sixteen years of age, leaves his familiar, yet oppressive, surroundings in search of a culture that tolerates his sexuality and aspirations. It is a first-hand chronicle of what it means or a minor to cross half the African continent, including the vast Sahara desert; then, risking everything at sea and finally reaching Malta after the third attempt.

Central to the story the youngster wished to tell is the role of strong women; of mothers, sisters, and friends. It is the strength of these women that stopped the youngster from falling into despair.

It is the strength of these women that continues to inspire her journey, as it also inspires my own.

This is the story I wish to leave with you today.

It is a reminder of the need for gender issues to inform our thoughts on migration. Women must be able to fully participate in processes of social, political, and cultural transformation.

Women must be included at every level of society, and recognised for their special role as potential peace builders, peacemakers and peacekeepers. Our experiences must be honoured and our truth celebrated, in order to ensure lasting equality within our nations for all women, including the most vulnerable.

Let us commit ourselves to nurturing resilient individuals, families, and communities that are capable of securing the fundamental dignity and human rights of each person.

Thank you for your presence here today, for your solidarity in trying to achieve an authentic transformation of our world, and your commitment to building a global culture of peace and wellbeing.

We must stand up for human rights to prevail for all.
We must not be afraid.
We must be brave.
We must unite.

I wish you all a fruitful forum.