

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY H.E. MARIE LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA, PRESIDENT OF MALTA
AT THE WOMEN'S FORUM: GENDER IN MIGRATION,**

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Federica Mogherini, Vice-President of the Commission

Honourable Ministers

Distinguished guests

Dear friends

Before I begin my contribution, let me welcome you all to Malta. I hope you shall have some time to enjoy the cultural and historical richness of our islands.

Let me also congratulate the ACP-EU and the Women's Forum, for facilitating this important event. It is my pleasure to address this Women's Forum, focusing on Gender in Migration.

Today's focus, on the challenges faced by migrant and refugee women, comes at a particular time.

I am proud of the fact that Malta's ongoing Presidency of the Council of the European Union has made it clear, that addressing the phenomenon of migration is of critical concern to Europe.

However, we must go deeper, in our discussions about migration, to focus on the real experiences of migrants and refugees themselves, and the particular impact that migration has, on diverse communities and groups.

Therefore, we must highlight gender issues as an essential component, in our discussions, our strategies, and our action plans to achieve a dignified and effective response to migration.

Definitely, we cannot stop with legislation, which creates a “one-size fits all” approach.

As we all know, legislation is not enough to create a real change.

We must create effective and inclusive policies, to safeguard the wellbeing of each and every person, and in particular, the specific challenges being faced by female refugees and asylum seekers.

Europe, and Europeans, take pride in our legacy of fundamental human rights. It is therefore our responsibility to ensure that we are safeguarding the best interests of those who find themselves caught up in migration, and are trapped in situations of vulnerability.

We still have to do much more, to ensure that migrants are not excluded or made to suffer injustices, because of failures and grey areas in our policies and systems.

We must respect the universality of human rights, through effective strategies that uphold the dignity of all.

We cannot stand by, while women disproportionately bear the brunt of failures in our status quo, due to the precarity and abuse which migrant women, in particular, are facing.

We must act in favour of equity and equality, by putting into practice our European commitment to solidarity and universal human rights.

We must stand up to be counted, and push for action, in favour of the benefits that are possible, when a spirit of solidarity is stronger than the threats of exclusion and discrimination.

National governments, alongside European institutions and civil society, have an important role to play, to achieve this shift, in favour of a practical and rights-based action plan, to ensure inclusion and solidarity.

I urge our authorities to use the power they have, to inform public perceptions and understanding of migration, in ways which reflect the true contribution that migrants can, and do, bring to our societies.

The international community must also take action on its commitment, to the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals.

I believe that Agenda 2030 contains the necessary framework and benchmarks which we must achieve, as one world, to ensure a sustainable future for humanity, in terms of economic, social, political, and ecological development.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to commend the “New European Consensus on Development”, which was agreed upon, earlier this month.

The joint developed strategy was signed into being by the Prime Minister of Malta, on behalf of the Council and Member States, the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Parliament, and other key stakeholders.

This consensus aligns European aspirations to make proactive efforts towards development, with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

The “New European Consensus on Development” should highlight our shared focus, to achieve real and deep-rooted change as one united Europe, rather than engaging in fragmented or sporadic responses.

As we all know, the phenomenon of migration is ultimately caused by unresolved issues of poverty, of precarity, and of conflict. Therefore, addressing these challenges must continue to be a major focus of all our development strategies.

For this reason, efforts to promote the inclusion of migrant women are especially vital, because migrant women face elevated risks of poverty, abuse, and discrimination.

Discrimination takes place not only on the basis of their gender, but also due to ethnicity, race, or cultural backgrounds. It is with this goal, of finding inclusive responses to the situations faced by migrants and refugees, that the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has facilitated a Refugee-Led NGO Platform here in Malta.

Through this platform, my Foundation has engaged with diverse migrant groups, of different ages and backgrounds, on issues of education, employment, and advocacy.

The platform has ensured that the voices and experiences of migrants, including women in particular, are honoured and shared, and serve to encourage positive change.

One member of the platform is the Migrant Women Association of Malta, which launched a report, earlier this year, that focuses on the economic struggles being faced by migrant women in this country.

According to this report, entitled “Stepping Up: An Investigation of Female Asylum Seekers and Employment in Europe”, employment is one of the main sources of concern to female migrants.

Women coming from Libya, Syria, Somalia, and Eritrea were surveyed, and of these women, 74.7% received refugee status.

Of the women included in the report, 85.7% were unemployed, with the majority of women stating that they were unemployed unwillingly.

46.7% of participants said that they had been searching for a job, for over a year.

It is important to note that 93.3% of the participants had all attended primary level education. Furthermore, over half of these women completed secondary level education, and almost 1 in 5 obtained a university level degree.

An overwhelming 78.6% of participants said that they believed discrimination is the main obstacle to employment.

The report states, and I quote, “*discrimination is not only high in the total sample, but also for each and every nation group surveyed.*” End quote.

It is alarming to consider the implications of exclusion, on the basis of discrimination, which is faced by these women.

Such discrimination makes equitable participation in our economies impossible.

Not only do migrant and refugee women, and their families, suffer because of these unacceptably high levels of prejudice. Our communities and societies, across Europe, are suffering, due to a lack of more inclusive and open economies.

My Foundation also assisted in the launch of a publication, produced by the Jesuit Refugee Services of Malta.

The book recounts the experiences of six Somali women who were seeking asylum in Malta, and who felt empowered to share their concerns and aspirations.

One Somali refugee said, and I quote, *“In my country my rights were violated. My life was not mine but dictated by 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.” End quote.

Last year, I was also invited to launch the autobiography of a young Somali transgender woman.

This woman had fled her country, due to discrimination, and the threats of violence she faced, as a result of her gender identity.

Her book describes the difficult journey she made, across the Libyan desert. She recounts her harrowing experiences, and I quote:

“Little did I know that the gates of hell were now wide open... We parted ways with the smugglers from the desert, who handed us over to Libyan smugglers, who now would help us to get to the Libyan capital of Tripoli. They were more ruthless than their counterparts. This became evident when they showed us a torture chamber where people who refused to pay them would be served their punishment.” End quote.

I am pleased that, in Malta, she was able to begin publicly celebrating the fullness of her identity, as a woman, for whom migration meant the difference between life and death.

Such narratives are of essential value, especially when we remember recent comments made by the director of UNHCR's bureau for Europe, who said, and I quote;

“Many women and girls travelling on their own are entirely exposed, deprived of their family or community to protect them. Even those travelling with family are often vulnerable to abuse.” End quote.

The narratives of such women remind us that their experiences, and their lives, have something profound to teach us.

Furthermore, I believe that these narratives have an essential contribution to make, to our legislation, to our policies, and to our practices in the area of migration.

I urge all stakeholders to act upon the experiences of migrant women, in order to formulate and implement more effective and timely strategies, that respond to the needs of migrating women.

I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to encourage European authorities, the business communities of our nations, civil society activists, and refugee or migrant community members themselves, to keep listening to, and sharing, such voices.

We must ensure that the empowerment of migrant women, through structured processes of dialogue, is high on our national and European agendas.

When women are empowered, so are entire families, communities, and societies.

When we recognise the benefits made possible by the participation of migrant women, in the social and economic sectors, then we must do

our duty, to continue developing strategies for respectful and dignified inclusion.

Let me quote the executive director of the UN Population Fund, who said, *“The health and rights of victims of wars and persecution, especially women and adolescent girls, should not be treated like an afterthought in humanitarian response.”* End quote.

Our solidarity with migrant women and girls, especially those who are escaping precarity and persecution, must be a clear example of the commitment we all feel, to create a lasting culture of solidarity and peace.

We must strive, together, to build sustainable peace and holistic wellbeing, within our communities, within our nations, and across our European Union.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations.