

**Maternal Health: Refugees and Vulnerable Women,  
20 June 2017**

**[Salutations]  
Dear friends,**

**Thank you for the interest you have shown by attending this meeting.**

**It is truly my pleasure to address you all today about this important concern regarding the inadequate maternal health care for migrant and refugee women.**

**I hope we shall find opportunities during this meeting, to build upon the goodwill, and the proactive commitments, the participants and policy makers. These include the EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety and the Maltese Minister for Health as chair of the EU Council of Ministers for Health, during the meeting on maternal health for migrant and refugee women, which was held in Malta last March.**

**This important high-level meeting was hosted by the Women Political Leaders Global Forum, in partnership with MSD for Mothers.**

**Let me take this opportunity to commend Silvana Koch-Mehrin and her team from WPL, for her initiative and her deep sense of commitment towards such social concerns that are effecting the lives of so many women around the globe.**

**The Malta high-level meeting led to the formulation of a significant outcome document. This document reiterates my firm conviction, which I am sure is shared by all of us, that maternal health cannot simply be considered as only a women's issue.**

**I am sure we all agree that equitable and dignified maternal health is an issue of fundamental human rights.**

**As parliamentarians and policy makers, you are all in a position to make a real difference.**

**Therefore, I encourage you to take full advantage of this meeting, to explore how we can take our shared commitment to women's maternal health, to the next level.**

**I believe that now is the time for practical action, from a European perspective, to address the maternal health challenges being faced by vulnerable women. In this instance, I urge you to focus our efforts on women caught up in the complex challenges of migration.**

**I also believe that we all have an essential role to play, to safeguard the rights of others, especially those who are most at risk of exclusion, exploitation, and oppression.**

**I would like to encourage you to take action, to make tangible improvements in the lives of women who are pregnant, or raising newborn children, while experiencing the traumas of displacement and migration.**

**As Europeans, we are witnessing more and more people who are pushed into migration, to escape conditions of poverty, precarity, and conflict.**

**As we all know, people are fleeing situations of war, of environmental degradation, and of injustice, to find new opportunities, to save their lives for themselves and their families.**

**Within this context of migration, there is an urgent need for us to address the specific concerns of women.**

**This is all the more pressing, since, according to last year's indicators from the UN General Assembly, women represent almost half of the world's 244 million migrants, and half of the 19.6 million refugees worldwide.**

**In response to the challenges being faced by migrant and refugee women experiencing motherhood, the Malta high-level meeting focused on their specific needs, and their experiences, during the dangerous journeys they undertake in search of a better life.**

**As Europeans, we have a clear commitment, to safeguard and to protect refugee and migrant mothers.**

**This commitment emanates from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was endorsed by all EU Member States and which clearly commits us to provide effective pre-natal and post-natal healthcare for all mothers.**

**Moreover, as a European family of nations, we have also committed ourselves to implement the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals. I believe that Agenda 2030 provides us with a roadmap, for the future sustainable wellbeing of our world.**

**In particular, SDG Number 3, Target 1, explicitly states that we have a global responsibility, to reduce the world's maternal mortality ratio. This necessarily includes a focus on the need of effective strategies, for appropriate maternal healthcare.**

**In light of these commitments and pledges, it is therefore shocking to realise that, according to data from MSD for Mothers, 1 in 10 women in the European Union still have no access to maternal health care services, during the first months of pregnancy.**

**This situation is even worse, when we consider the challenges faced by vulnerable communities, such as migrant and refugee women.**

**From the deliberations of the Malta meeting, we are informed that migrant and refugee women face elevated risks of marginalisation and social exclusion, when it comes to accessing even basic maternal healthcare.**

**Therefore, in line with the recommendations from the Malta meeting, which have been disseminated to you today, we must ensure greater synergies between our national, regional and international efforts to end such risks of marginalisation and exclusion when dealing with maternal health.**

**The recommendations emanating from the Malta meeting brings to the fore the need for a harmonization of our efforts, across the EU's external and development policies, to effectively tackle the urgent maternal healthcare needs of migrant and refugee women.**

**Moreover, these same recommendations outline the need that maternal healthcare concerns must also inform our European Neighbourhood Policies, to ensure the most far-reaching and sustainable results.**

**Therefore, in Malta we have agreed that we need to prioritise safer transit routes, to prevent the threat of abuse, and to safeguard access to dignified healthcare, for women who have faced violence, and other traumas, during their journeys.**

**We all know that most of migrant and refugee women, have to deal with the loss of their families and communities, and some are also struggling to overcome the traumas of war, torture, or rape.**

**We also know that the physiological, psychological, and social experiences of migrant and refugee women during pregnancy can only be effectively addressed when they are dealt with, holistically.**

**For this reason, the Malta meeting recommended that EU policies should also include effective and relevant policy instruments to address high quality maternal health care in a holistic way, and which should be based on need and not status.**

**Definitely mental and emotional health must be part of a united EU approach, to address the maternal health care needs of all women, including migrants and refugees.**

**A briefing paper from the Race Equality Foundation, entitled “The Maternal Mental Health of Migrant Women”, states:**

***“Existing mental health services may not provide appropriate support to migrant women. Tools which help to diagnose maternal mental health illnesses are often tailored to meet the needs of Western populations and are dependent on women self-reporting their symptoms to practitioners.”***

**To take one example, postpartum depression manifests itself in a way that can vary from culture to culture, and nation to nation. The Race Equality Foundation’s report continues:**

***“The risk of being stigmatised prevents [many] women from disclosing their real feelings to practitioners. Attitudes towards women’s mental health in some migrant communities were derogatory; women often believed if their mental health problems became public knowledge they would be exposed and stigmatised by families and communities.”***

**This quote reveals to us that we cannot ignore the risk, that such women may slip through our systems, especially during pre- or**

**post-natal periods. At a time when migrant women require even more attention, care, and support, they cannot be ignored by our authorities and institutions.**

**In response to such concerns, the Malta meeting is recommending that we must encourage the creation of synergies between the migration and health policy agendas, on European Union level.**

**As Europeans, we must work together, to identify important intersections in the areas of migration and healthcare, to develop a holistic response to the challenges being faced by migrant and refugee women, on our soils.**

**It is essential that we use our clout, to mainstream our maternal health concerns, across all relevant legislation and policy.**

**Moreover, I believe that we must be catalysts in the creation of safe and respectful spaces, where migrant and refugee women are invited to participate in processes of consultation and dialogue.**

**Migrant and refugee women are best placed to influence the appropriate policies in this context.**

**It is essential for us to use the knowledge we gain, from migrant and refugee women, to stimulate the creation of a united European approach to maternal healthcare, which respects the physical, mental, and economic wellbeing of all women.**

**On concluding, I encourage you to analyse the recommendations of the Malta high-level meeting with a view to further discussion during our meeting today and also to share your ideas and suggestions of how best we can work together to influence the institutions of the European Union to embrace these recommendations and act upon them.**

**I appeal to you to work together to make motherhood safer for all women and their children. We must ensure the fundamental dignity of all women, all children and all families within our family of nations.**

**If we manage to do this, we will be sending a strong message across the globe, that the European Union is truly committed towards social inclusion and effective respect for universal human rights.**