

Women's Forum - Rome, "Universal Values: Peace and Security",

26 June 2017

[Salutations]

Dear friends,

Let me begin by thanking the Women's Forum for the Economy and Society, for organising this event. I am honoured to participate in today's deliberations, alongside such a distinguished panel of contributors.

At this critical juncture in the history of the European Union and our world, I believe that we must, first and foremost, reaffirm our commitment to keep a person-centred approach, which is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, at the heart of all our actions.

We must place equity and equality at the centre of our national and global agendas.

I am convinced that there can only be sustainable peace and meaningful security, when we address all inequalities, including the equitable participation and equal inclusion of women, across all spheres of life.

In order to achieve our objective of peace, we must revitalise our global legacy of universal human rights, which is the clearest way to promote inclusive societies.

In the inspiring words of Nelson Mandela;

“To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.” End quote.

We cannot be silent, when the humanity of countless women goes un-respected and unprotected.

Women’s rights are human rights. Furthermore, human rights are innately connected to issues of peace, yet the rights of too many women and girls around the world are still being violated.

This does not only happen during and after armed conflict, but also as part of the status quo within our societies.

We cannot talk about peace and security, so long as such injustices and oppressions are allowed to operate within the economic, social, and political sectors of our nations.

Above all, it is essential that we continue to make an inclusive, rights-based approach our top priority, within our nations and across our world, to effectively address these concerns.

Moreover, if we truly wish to achieve meaningful peace and security, then I believe that we cannot only act out of national or regional interest.

We must take an international approach. We must understand that the progress of our countries needs to be mirrored by a holistic and global transformation.

For this reason, we must be led, in all our endeavours, by the mandate of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, and its Sustainable Development Goals.

Agenda 2030 is a roadmap that brings with it a system of values, which promote respect for human dignity; the pursuit of equity; effective access to democratic participation; and equitable opportunities for prosperity, for all humanity.

In particular, we must address the complex vulnerabilities of poverty and exclusion, which are serious threats to peace and security within our nations. Women are especially threatened by the feminisation of poverty, because women represent a disproportionately large number of the world's poor.

Addressing global inequity and injustice is our first, and most urgent, concern. For this reason, the United Nations' Agenda 2030 places the eradication of poverty as its first Sustainable Development Goal.

This has clear implications for women, when we acknowledge that the United Nations Development Fund for Women has identified the feminisation of poverty as an issue of global concern.

The UN Development Fund for Women calls for us to focus on, and I quote;

“The burden of poverty borne by women, especially in developing countries, is different from that of men [and] a multi-dimensional approach is critical, to assess issues of gender and poverty.” End quote.

Furthermore, I believe that, as an international community, we must focus more energy on target 5.5, which commits our nations to achieve women’s full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making roles.

We must take effective action, to address indicators from the World Economic Forum which tell us that only 38% of nations have had a female head of government or state, for at least one year, in the past fifty years.

For this reason, Sustainable Development Goal 8, especially target 8.5, highlights the importance of decent work.

Undoubtably, the participation of women is essential, to meet the social, economic, political, and ecological challenges that are taking place around the globe.

Last year's report from the World Economic Forum tells us that it could take up to 170 years to bridge the disparity, in pay and employment opportunities, faced by women worldwide.

Such reports and indicators are an urgent call to action, for the international community, to do more, to achieve gender parity in the world of work.

We cannot allow discriminatory economic, social, and cultural barriers, which are still faced by women across the globe, to continue undermining women's lives.

In today's climate of uncertainty, when so many challenges are facing us on a constant basis, we cannot afford to be unsure of our objectives to achieve gender equity and equality.

We cannot be complacent, when indicators from the World Health Organisation tell us that 1 in 3 women, around the world, are at grave risk of physical or sexual violence.

We cannot be complacent, when data from the World Bank tells us that women around the world are consistently paid less than men,

earning on average only 60 to 75 per cent of men's wages, and are therefore at increased risk of precarity.

We cannot be complacent, when the European Commission itself reports that women and girls are at particular risk of trafficking and modern day slavery.

Our authorities must take action on behalf of the most vulnerable members of our society, including the women, children, and entire families who are dying while seeking refuge, fleeing violence, in search of a better life.

It is women and girls, escaping from persecution in their home countries, who are at the most elevated risk of physical, sexual, and psychological violence.

Increasing numbers of women, being pushed into precarity, results in the continued, and intergenerational, suffering of entire families and communities. Such a state of affairs pushes people to their limits, creating an atmosphere of desperation, where risks of radicalisation and alienation are elevated.

Therefore, I believe that our authorities, policy makers, and civil society activists must act, together, to ensure that such situations are addressed in a timely manner.

If we are truly committed to achieve peace and security for all, then we cannot ignore the discrimination and injustice that circulates throughout our communities, our societies, our nations.

We must do more to protect those who are at the most risk, to achieve peace and security.

My friends, we must acknowledge the need for structural change, within our economies, our societies, and our political institutions.

We must be courageous, and say that, while it is indeed important for individuals to take a stand, it is the institutionalised exploitation of women, which is the real enemy.

We need to implement practical legislation, policies, and initiatives, which transform the institutions, the practices, and the world-views that are threatening the wellbeing of all women.

I believe that it is our responsibility to call for increased accountability, and more accurate monitoring, of the ways in which our communities, societies, and nations are working towards on-the-ground improvements, in the lives of women and girls.

We must find ways of uniting the women of the world, against these threats. We must encourage them to share their experiences, and use every platform to promote women's participation in the work of peace and wellbeing.

Without the active inclusion and participation of all people, united around universal human rights, there can be no peace.

It is the tremendous potential of women's contributions, as activists of peace and as constructive critics of oppression, wherever it occurs, which I believe must become a primary focus for our endeavours.

In this way, our nations shall be putting their commitment to a rights-based approach into real and effective action.

Let us therefore find ways of bringing women together, especially those who have managed to achieve tangible changes within their communities.

This forum is an example of how important it is to create spaces for dialogue, discussion, and the sharing of good practice.

We must go on sharing our knowledge and experiences, with stakeholders from across social, economic, cultural, and political sectors.

Most importantly of all, I believe that we must increase a spirit of solidarity between women from the Global South and the Global North.

We must be ready to learn from one another, by understanding that peace and security in one part of the world can only be guaranteed when other regions are also safeguarded and empowered.

Such strategies for sharing and mutual learning are crucial, to address issues of prosperity. In the words of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and I quote;

“When more women work, economies grow. An increase in female labour force participation, or a reduction in the gap between women’s and men’s labour force participation, results in faster economic growth.” End quote.

Therefore, the contributions of women, to address the concerns being faced in some of the world’s most impoverished areas, are essential.

This is especially clear when, for example, we acknowledge the alarming reports which tell us that, year by year, more wealth is pouring out of the 48 countries which the World Bank classifies as “sub-Saharan Africa”, than is being channeled in for development.

According to the findings of the “Honest Accounts 2017” Report, compiled by a coalition of UK and African NGOs, and I quote;

“Research for this report calculates the movement of financial resources into and out of Africa, and some key costs imposed on Africa by the rest of the world [...] The countries of Africa are collectively net creditors to the rest of the world, to the tune of 41.3 billion dollars in 2015. Thus, much more wealth is leaving the world’s most impoverished continent than is entering it.” End quote.

Such situations of poverty and precarity are having a direct and negative impact on women, due to the continuing feminisation of poverty, and its specific regional contexts.

We are all affected, in different but equally harmful ways, by the precarity, exclusion, violence, and oppression faced women and girls, wherever and whenever it occurs.

Even if some of us currently enjoy greater access to our fundamental freedoms, the fact that so many women and girls are still at risk of exploitation and discrimination means that we cannot feel truly free.

We cannot be complacent.

Discrimination on the basis of gender is an act of violence, which is still taking place in too many of our societies.

Where this violence exists, there can be no peace or security.

Let us therefore also focus our energy, to promote the role of women in processes of peace-building within our nations. For peace-building initiatives to have sustainable and long-term benefits, I believe that the unique contributions of women must be included, at every step of the journey.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 has already taken steps to highlight this critical responsibility, to give space for the contributions of women. It says, and I quote;

“[We must] ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict”. End quote.

Although it has been over a decade since the passing of this Resolution, the scourge of gender-based discrimination and violence are still stalling its effective implementation.

The positive transformation of conflict, not only in places of war but within all communities and societies, can only occur when women are valued, respected, and empowered to be full contributors alongside men.

The work of peace requires that people of all genders, of all backgrounds, and of all nationalities work together, in a powerful spirit of solidarity.

On concluding, let me reiterate, I believe we must critically explore the ways that we are attempting to implement rights-based approaches within our nations.

We must discover why, and how, these efforts are not translating into more effective and timely benefits for all women.

We must encourage women's inclusion in structured processes of democratic participation and socio-economic leadership.

We must take proactive initiatives to create community-based strategies for peace, which value the participation of women and are of benefit to their families, and their communities.

Let us be united, in pursuit of peace and security.

Let us work together, to achieve tangible improvements in the social, economic, and political lives of women everywhere.

Let us make our global legacy, of universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, a guiding light for the world, safeguarding equity and dignity for each and every member of our human family.

Thank you for your attention.