
*Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at a conference
entitled 'Advocating for Human Rights'*

15th December 2017

Dr Ruth Farrugia, Coordinator of the Human Rights Programme at the University of Malta and Director-General of the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society;

Your Excellency, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands;

National Commissioners;

Distinguished speakers;

Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to address this conference on the importance of human rights and human rights advocacy.

This is an annual event for the Human Rights Programme within the Faculty of Laws, at the University of Malta. I am pleased to note that this year, the Programme has teamed up with my Foundation, which is the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.

Today's event is being organised at a very timely moment, which marks the beginning of a year-long series of activities, to celebrate next year's 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This event presents us with a timely opportunity to consider the importance of human rights, in our communities and our Maltese society. Moreover, it is timely due to the fact that a national discussion is taking place, on the rule of law, freedom of expression, and the need for Constitutional reform.

I believe that the universality of human rights is the golden thread, which unites us together as one nation, and should unite us as one world, and one humanity.

Human rights are intrinsic, inalienable, and indivisible.

However, the challenges to uphold human rights, in today's world, are numerous. Standing up for universal rights and fundamental freedoms must be our ongoing commitment, at an individual, a communal, and a societal level.

We must be especially vigilant to address the challenges of ignorance, inequalities, and injustice that threaten human rights, with courage and determination.

Let us also remember the fundamental obligation, which falls upon our authorities, to ensure the effective protection of all individuals. States have a responsibility to ensure that human rights are effectively enshrined and enjoyed, by every human being and at every level of society.

In this regard, I am proud to say that Malta has made great strides forward, to acknowledge, promote, and adopt the effective legislation, which has made accessible the civil rights of diverse groups, including the LGBTIQ community and people living with disabilities.

However, I believe that there is more that still needs to be done, to enforce these rights in their entirety, and extend them to all the people who call our islands their home.

This is why the topic under discussion at today's conference is very relevant and important.

Advocacy entails standing up for human rights issues, and making the courageous step to call for action, to address and improve the challenges that threaten human rights.

Advocating for human rights is not only for lawyers and professionals working for an organisation. It is also, and most importantly, for all citizens, who primarily should be educated and informed, to become inspired by the values of human rights.

Each and every one of us can be, and should be, an advocate and an activist.

I am pleased to see a number of our national Commissioners present here today, whose responsibility is to be champions for the rights of all, especially those who are experiencing a violation of their rights.

Although we have made great strides ahead, to give access to justice in a number of areas, as I have already mentioned, we still lack full accessibility and the enforcement of human rights in a number of contexts.

One of these contexts, which worries me, is children's rights. In many of my conversations with children, around Malta and Gozo, the importance of children's access to their rights is always one of their topics of concern.

Through the work of my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, we have taken up the education of children about their rights and, most importantly, how to practically access their rights.

Earlier this week, I was glad to meet with a number of children from schools all over Malta and Gozo, who had engaged in an activity that promoted a child's right to be heard, and also, to identify what leads them to feel unheard by society.

For this reason, I believe that the recently announced Children's Policy is a good step in the right direction. However, as I stated in my Republic Day address, our legislators need to take up the commitment to legislate a comprehensive Children's Act, so as to ensure that our children have access to justice.

It is only when the full weight of the law comes into conformity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that we can feel secure in the full protection and empowerment of our children and young people.

Let me also speak about the important need for us to prioritise gender equality. Women's rights are, fundamentally, human rights.

We must remain focused on strengthening women's presence in public life, and across all areas of decision-making, while also addressing areas of inequality, such as the gender pay gap, which are standing in the way of the attainment of full gender equality and equity.

Effective protection from all types of abuse, such as domestic and sexual violence, and creating deep-rooted solidarity with precarious and marginalised women, is also needed, to ensure that women's rights are not violated.

Moreover, all of our efforts should be supported by rights-based education, from an early age and at all levels of our education system.

In this way, we shall be in a better position to challenge the patriarchy and abuse of power, which impedes the full realisation of human rights for people of all genders.

At their core, human rights are built upon a foundation of solidarity. This value must be at the heart of all our endeavours, to counteract a rising sense of individualism and egoism, which is threatening our society and our rights.

We must reflect critically about what is happening around us, to ensure that solidarity, social justice, and human rights are not violated or diminished, but remain, fundamentally and intrinsically, part of our lives.

For this reason, I would like to urge civil society to continue calling for the necessary political will, and the understanding that human rights are not the monopoly of anybody, but must be owned by all of humanity.

I am eager that more people will stand up, to advocate for the respect and dignity due to every human being, in the awareness that our individual rights are actually diminished through injustices and discrimination.

We must show solidarity with all members of society, especially the most vulnerable. For example, we must stand in solidarity with migrants, whose work is often devalued and abused, and who sometimes live in a chronic state of precarity.

Unfortunately, the phenomenon of migration still lacks its proper visibility. There are a number of migrants, including families and children, whose fundamental rights are being abused, for example, due to statelessness.

On the other hand, I must express my satisfaction at the news of the launch of the integration policy, by government authorities. I hope that this policy will champion a strategy of socio-economic and political inclusion, by creating spaces for continuous and meaningful dialogue, among the different cultural and faith communities of our islands.

We must create safe spaces of inclusion and respect, where the rights of each and every one of us are effectively explored, promoted, and safeguarded.

I also want to express my appreciation to those employers who employ migrants, and who treat them with the dignity that everyone deserves. I would like to thank them, for setting an example, by effectively implementing universal human rights.

Furthermore, we must show solidarity with those who are living in poverty or at risk of poverty. To my great satisfaction, indicators show that progress, in Malta, has been made in this respect.

However, these same indicators show that a lot still has to be done, to set our minds at rest that everyone can live in dignity.

We must show solidarity with people who, in spite of being gainfully employed, are still at risk of poverty. The agreement on the minimum wage in Malta was an important step that needs to be acknowledged and praised, but we must admit that we have not completely won the fight against poverty.

So long as people are living at risk of poverty, precarity, or social exclusion, there can be no effective access to human rights, and the full enjoyment of human dignity.

Our support and inclusion of persons coping with mental health issues, our actions to include migrants, people with disability, and all minority groups, into the mainstream should bear witness to our respect for fundamental human rights, and our advocacy for the promotion and protection of these rights.

On concluding, let me say that I believe that now is the time, for a review on the legislation that regulates the function of our various national Commissioners.

I believe that they must be further empowered to be more effective, and to do more, in order to ensure the safeguarding of the human rights for the respective groups and communities within their remit.

Our national Commissioners cannot rely on individual advocacy efforts, alone. They need to be more independent of the executive authorities, and stand in their full integrity. They must have the power not only to recommend, but also to enforce.

There must be more scope for watchdogs and guardians within our institutional structures, to ensure that nobody remains voiceless or is left behind, when their human rights are violated.

I call upon our government authorities to make this upcoming 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights an opportunity to empower the national Commissioners in our country.

This would be the most appropriate way to celebrate this milestone, by taking our democracy and our commitment to human rights to the next level.

In this way, we will be showing a complete commitment to ensure that universal human rights, and fundamental freedoms, are being promoted and protected, for the benefit of all the inhabitants of our Maltese islands.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of today's conference.