
Opening Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at the International Foster Care Organisation Conference

2nd November 2018

Hon. Minister Chandrani,

Ms Donna Scott, Vice-President, IFCO,

Mr Alfred Gixti, CEO, Foundation of Social Welfare Services,

Ms Jana Hainsworth, Secretary-General, Eurochild,

Professor Kevin Brown, University of Nottingham,

Mr Paul Gatt, National Foster Care Association of Malta,

Dr Ruth Farrugia, Director-General of the PFWS,

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

Let me begin by once again welcoming you all to the Maltese Islands. I must say that this international conference is a celebration of the joint effort and goodwill of many individuals and organisations.

I must especially commend the hard work of the the International Foster Care Organisation and the efforts of my Foundation the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, for facilitating this event, while working in collaboration with the National Foster Care Association of Malta, the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, Eurochild, and other partners.

This international conference is a true celebration of a successful and wide collaboration.

This is a collaboration that has succeeded in bringing together diverse stakeholders from forty one countries, to participate in this much-anticipated event.

Most importantly, I feel truly honoured that this year's international conference is being held in Malta because this is a conference with a difference.

It is a conference which is unique in scope and vision.

We have endeavoured to ensure that the goals of this conference are led by the many children and young people, worldwide, who are in foster care and out-of-home care.

So it is so moving for me, to see so many children and young people in attendance.

Let me also take a moment, to commend the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, for sponsoring 30 children for this event.

I must also take the opportunity to welcome the important findings of the researchers from Eurochild, working on the Childonomics report, which will also be presented to this conference.

I am confident that our national authorities will be enthusiastic and committed, to implement the recommendations that the report is proposing.

I am convinced that this conference is another opportunity for all of us to further commit ourselves, to do our utmost, to ensure that each and every child in out-of-home care receives the very best support, which our societies can, and are duty-bound, to provide.

The attendance of foster carers, residential care workers, and other professionals at this conference is evidence of the dedication, felt by all of us, to ensure that respect and dignity are the basic values on which the necessary support is given to children in out-of-home care.

The interest shown, and the eventual attendance of so many professionals at this conference, is a statement in itself.

It is a reminder to all of us in positions of influence, that policy decisions and casework choices can, and do, have life-altering effects on individual children and their families.

We must remember that each decision which is taken, regarding the wellbeing of our children, has direct impact on the overall wellbeing of our communities, and our societies too.

For this reason, we must also remember that children's rights are, fundamentally, human rights.

When the rights and freedoms of the most vulnerable members of our communities are safeguarded and protected, we will be working to secure the effective and much-needed positive changes, which will transpire into progress for all of our communities and societies.

Our presence here today should make us activists for the much-needed, connected vision of wellbeing, for our children and our communities.

The importance of a connected vision of wellbeing is clearly reflected in the theme of this conference: “Setting Sail from a Safe Port”.

Our children and young people can only set sail from a truly safe port if they are given the opportunity to build enriching and permanent relationships, in the context of stable placements.

A research study, conducted by my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society regarding relationships, clearly shows that deep-rooted and resilient relationships are the cornerstone of success, for all human wellbeing.

For this reason, we cannot compromise on the opportunities, afforded to children in out-of-home care. Security and stability are fundamental pre-requisites for all of our children, whoever and wherever they might be.

We cannot compromise on making the necessary investment, which our societies must make, to provide the best caregivers, placements, and institutions, to safeguard their wellbeing.

We cannot be afraid to make tough decisions when it comes to legislation, policy, and implementation, thereby ensuring that our children really do come first, at every step of the process.

If our children and young people are denied the opportunity to set sail from a safe port, their chances of successfully navigating their way through life will be negatively impacted.

I regret to say that, unfortunately, we are, as yet, far from being in a position to confidently state that all our children are really being safeguarded, at every stage of their journey through care.

We are also far from being able to say that children, especially those children who are at the heart of this conference, are truly enjoying the same rights and opportunities as all other children in our society.

However, I am not pessimistic and hence, I am confident that the necessary goodwill is present, to put things in the proper order.

The attendance of such a large number of foster carers and residential care workers here, at this conference, is truly encouraging and inspiring.

Your presence is an indication of our united commitment to change the status quo, and replace it with a better, more nurturing, and more child-focused vision of care.

Our children are individuals with a voice, and their voices must be heard.

Their age is no excuse for their rights to be compromised or downgraded. It is our responsibility and our duty, as adults, to find ways of facilitating their voices and highlighting their experiences.

Our children must be our advocates for change.

It is in this way that we can introduce new processes of change, which will have far-reaching effects for the provision of care in our communities and societies.

My experience, from when I was Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity, as well as my years of experience in close contact with children and families in Malta and beyond, has taught me that listening to the voices of children is essential and imperative.

Children have the ability to tell their stories, in the most clear of ways. Children need to be heard. It is their ultimate right.

Let me encourage you to be champions of children's rights, guardians of their best interests, and advocates for their holistic wellbeing.

We cannot stand idle, when so many children and young people are getting lost in the labyrinths of institutional structures and formal systems.

We must be vociferous, by pushing policies and initiatives that support high quality out-of-home care. We must continue believing in our ability to effect change, and

to create the necessary shifts in mentality which we can make happen, when we are determined catalysts for the transformation of our societies.

The decisions we make, in our professional capacities, will have a crucial role in ensuring the protection of our children.

This is a great responsibility, but it is also a powerful privilege. I urge you to embrace it and act upon it, for the ultimate benefit of our children, our communities, and our societies.

All children are entitled to the very best possible care. We must therefore act on our legal, ethical, and social obligations, to meet the diverse, complex, and human needs of each and every child.

I believe that we have an obligation to effectively evaluate the State's success as a parent, and to address any shortcomings, in a timely and efficient manner.

This is also why I am so pleased that IFCO chose Malta, for this international conference. IFCO motivates and militates for such results, to ensure the holistic wellbeing of the child during care, and also when leaving care.

Let us therefore challenge ourselves, by analysing and asking what more we can do, to ensure that the wellbeing of the child is truly a top priority, and, if our findings show that it is not, then we must ask; How can we get our systems and structures on the proper track?

Let me conclude by thanking all care givers, for the choices you have made to offer yourselves as a safe port, for the children in your care.

I thank you for being role models of safe and respectful relationships.

Likewise, let me extend my thanks to the professionals attending this conference. As social workers, psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, lawyers and other professionals, who are involved in taking decisions and formulating care plans, I urge you to always keep in mind that children are individuals with rights.

Let us continue working together, to create a world where the dignity of every child is at the heart of our societies.

Let us create a world which is worthy of the trust, the respect, and the love that each and every child is able to give.

Let me encourage you, once again, to be effective activists of children's rights, and a source of strength and empowerment for all children in out-of-home care.

I wish us all a fruitful and successful conference, and I thank you for your attention.