
*Opening Speech at the “Lost in Migration” Missing Children Conference,
delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Brussels, 11 April 2018*

Your Majesty
Ms Maude Buquicchio
Dr Ruth Farrugia
Dr Federica Toscano
Distinguished guests
Dear friends.

As a proud and committed Patron of Missing Children Europe, it is my pleasure to share some remarks at the opening of today’s conference.

This conference will be focusing on the challenges being faced by children who are lost in migration.

Last year’s conference, which was held in Malta, gave us the opportunity to highlight and to build upon, this crucial issue.

I am, therefore, confident that over the next two days we shall continue to develop the outcomes of last year’s conference, and also appraise the progress made by the European Commission in this context.

This conference is also an ideal setting, to find new ways to address the concerns of children and families, many of whom are fleeing from situations of persecution, violence, and precarity.

Working together, in synergy between our authorities and civil society organisations, I am convinced that we can meaningfully address the great uncertainty, which is currently being faced by thousands of children who go missing as a result of migration.

In fact, according to indicators from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, by 1 December 2017, there were 15,540 unaccompanied children who had arrived in Italy.

In total, this marks a 4% increase compared to the same period in 2016, according to the 2017 report on international protection in Italy.

In Greece, as of 30 November, according to the National Centre for Social Solidarity, some 3,300 unaccompanied children were estimated to be in the country.

Furthermore, a total of 2,201 children were on waiting lists for appropriate shelter. These also includes 425 children in Reception Identification Centres, and a further 80 children in protective custody.

I believe that protective custody should not be considered adequate, dignified, and truly appropriate accommodation for children.

This data demonstrates a protection gap, which, unfortunately, I must note, has been growing over the past months.

This protection gap demands an immediate and effective response on behalf of our governments and authorities.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to appeal to our governments, authorities, and European institutions, to take immediate action to address this protection gap.

It is also important to note that Europol estimates that 27% of last year's migrant arrivals, who were fleeing situations of war, of environmental devastation, and extreme poverty, were children.

The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) has estimated that in 2015, there were globally no fewer than 100,000 unaccompanied migrant and refugee children. Furthermore, Europol has stated that, in the same year, at least 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees went missing, after arriving in Europe.

As we all know, this is merely the tip of the iceberg.

I hope this conference, with the participation of Europol and Unicef, will further updated us on the latest indicators.

We all know that unaccompanied children are more exposed to harm and exploitation, and they are often targets of sexual violence and contemporary forms of slavery.

According to the research conducted under the leadership of my friend Maude, UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, children are particularly affected by a rise in human trafficking across Europe.

In order to more effectively address the dangers and challenges faced by unaccompanied children and families, we must speak loudly, with one voice, to end, once and for all, the dehumanising situations created by policies of detention.

We all know that detention is especially traumatic for children, and creates added tensions for families who are already struggling with great psycho-social challenges.

Therefore, I believe that our authorities must shift their mentalities, to focus on offering shelter and protection, rather than detention.

We must create a spirit of solidarity and welcome, that responds, in the most humane ways possible, to the traumatic and often life-threatening journeys endured by children.

I believe that it would be ideal for us to emphasise the benefits of creating systems of guardianship, where migrating children are immediately provided with adequate protection and consistent care.

Rather than creating ghettos of exclusion, at the peripheries of our societies, we must encourage our authorities, and support civil society activists, to cultivate innovative pathways for inclusion within our communities.

Not only would the immediate appointment of suitable guardians reduce the risks of children going missing, it would also facilitate their inclusion within the surrounding community.

I believe that everyone, regardless of age or ethnicity, gender or cultural background, has the capacity to be a valuable contributor to the wellbeing and the prosperity of our societies.

This is what inclusion is all about.

This is what human rights exist for.

In the inspiring words of the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; “Diversity is a fact... inclusion is a choice.”

Diversity is a reality in our countries, and will only become more widespread as processes of globalisation bring our peoples into closer contact.

It is up to us, even as individual citizens, to ensure that our authorities are responding to such historical socio-economic changes.

We must demand that our politicians, policy-makers, and members of the media celebrate human diversity, so that it becomes a strength, a source of enrichment, and a pathway of positive peace.

When it comes to the specific ways in which our authorities respond to the needs of unaccompanied children and families, we must insist that they spread a message of universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

For this reason, let me repeat the findings of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, in its report on the impact of the proposal for a revised Eurodac Regulation on fundamental rights. The report clearly states that, and I quote;

“Children, suspected victims of torture, sexual or gender-based violence, victims of other serious crimes, as well as traumatised people should not be coerced into giving fingerprints, nor should other people usually considered to be vulnerable.”

Therefore, the proposed introduction of mandatory fingerprinting for migrants and refugees, especially children, must be treated as a topic of the utmost sensitivity and concern.

We must never allow a rhetoric of securitisation or fear-mongering to distract us from our basic commitment, to the intrinsic dignity of the human person, and our duty to uphold that dignity always, and in all ways.

We cannot stand idly by while even a single child is exposed to increased danger, as result of the fragmented responses of our current systems.

We cannot accept the status quo, which is failing to deliver the protection and the wellbeing of all children, in a much-needed spirit of equality, equity, and justice.

I also believe that we must do more, to listen to the firsthand experiences of unaccompanied children, and ensure that their narratives will inform our thoughts and actions, and lead to more meaningful legislation and policies.

I believe that now, even more than ever, is the time for us to show strong leadership, by boldly imagining a future where children can be safely prevented from being lost in migration.

Children most often go missing because of underlying protection problems, which include poor reception conditions, lack of information, and unwieldy procedures for family reunification.

Each of these issues must be addressed, by motivating the political will and prompting the social conscience of our peoples.

It is our responsibility, as people of goodwill, to demand, from our authorities and ourselves, a positive and constructive change.

I believe that we must commit ourselves to increase the relevant training for professionals at all levels, so that they can effectively identify and mitigate the risks faced by children who go missing.

This is especially important in the area of psycho-social care and protection, to address the mental health needs, and the holistic wellbeing, of all children.

We must focus on increased collaboration at both national, regional, and cross-border levels, implementing our good practices consistently and efficiently.

Above all, let us nurture greater participation at a grassroots level, encouraging the work of civil society alongside national and transnational authorities.

We have seen that the current lack of coordination has created inconsistency, making it more difficult for professionals to do their job while also producing a situation where children fall through the cracks and go missing.

We need a united European strategy that can produce sustainable and consistent results across nations, ensuring that each member state is working in a coordinated way to achieve our shared objective.

Let me reiterate that our objective must always be protecting the dignity and safeguarding the wellbeing of every child.

Our communities and societies must be open to the transformative power of sustainable peace; our institutions must be trusted by the people who need them the most, by promoting holistic wellbeing; and we must all be active champions of solidarity and respect.

Let us call for the change that is so deeply needed in our European Union, to ensure that each child receives the dignity that is their due.

Thank you for your attention.