
*Opening Address delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of
Malta, at the Humanity 2.0 Forum, Rome, 19 April 2018*

It is my pleasure to share some brief remarks, at the beginning of today's important Forum.

Let me first of all commend the facilitators of this conference, the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, within the Holy See, and the committed team who have made the Humanity 2.0 Forum possible.

My remarks shall focus on a topic that is especially close to my heart, namely, the theme of maternal healthcare and maternal mental healthcare, specifically the wellbeing of pregnant women and their unborn children.

With the knowledge that 26% of global healthcare is, in one way or another, connected with the Roman Catholic Church, I believe that there is ample scope for this extensive network of world-wide healthcare workers, to make an effective improvement in the quality of care, which is being received by pregnant women all over the world.

Maternal health cannot simply be considered as a women's issue... dignified maternal health is, at its core, an issue of fundamental human rights.

As influential persons in your various sectors, you are all in a position to make a real difference, and to spread this essential message.

Therefore, I encourage you to take full advantage of today's Forum, to explore how we can take our shared commitment, to women's access to quality maternal healthcare, to the next level.

I believe that now is the time for us to take practical action, to address the maternal health challenges being faced by all women, especially the most vulnerable.

I would also like to take this opportunity to urge you, to focus our efforts on women caught up in the complex challenges of migration, which make the provision of effective maternal healthcare so much more challenging.

As the Holy Father has himself stated, so many times, each and every one of us has a vital 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 use this Forum, not only as a space for profound discussion, but also for committed action.

As an international community, we cannot afford to waste any more time, to make the necessary tangible improvements in the lives of women who are pregnant, or raising newborn children, and who are also experiencing the traumas of displacement and migration.

Reports from the United Nations Economic and Social Council tell us that, 60 percent of preventable maternal deaths take place in humanitarian settings; and at least 1 in 5 refugees, or displaced women, are estimated to have experienced sexual violence.

As we all know, growing numbers of 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, especially pregnant 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.

As people of goodwill, we all have a clear duty, to safeguard and to protect refugee and migrant mothers.

This commitment emanates from both the UN Declaration of Fundamental Human Rights, and from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which clearly commits us to provide effective pre-natal and post-natal healthcare for all mothers and their children.

On the other hand, all of our governments have also committed themselves to implement the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

Agenda 2030 provides us with an ideal roadmap, for the future sustainability and holistic wellbeing of our peoples and 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 the light of these commitments and pledges, it is therefore worrying to realise that, even in some of the most affluent countries in the world, there is still so much to be done to protect pregnant women, by having access to quality maternal healthcare.

According to shocking data from MSD for Mothers, which is the corporate social responsibility initiative of Merck and Company, 1 in 10 women in the European Union still have no access to maternal healthcare services, during the first months of pregnancy.

There is a clear need to safeguard all aspects of an expectant mother's experience. This is especially necessary, because of the vast differences in approach and practice, which characterise the maternal health systems of our different countries. These differences are even present across the Member States of the European Union.

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

Migrant and refugee women face elevated risks of marginalisation and social exclusion, when it comes to accessing even basic maternal healthcare.

I believe that 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.

There must be an effort to create tangible harmonisation of all our endeavours, throughout the various outreach projects which are currently being done, to effectively tackle the urgent maternal healthcare needs of all women, especially women facing poverty and conflict.

Let me take a moment to expand my remarks, on the challenges faced by migrant and refugee women.

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, and/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.

Definitely, mental and emotional health must be part of a holistic approach, to address the maternal healthcare needs of all women, including migrants and refugees.

A document from the Race Equality Foundation, entitled “The Maternal Mental Health of Migrant Women”, states that:

“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 to underline that:

“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 are derogatory; women often believe that if their mental health problems became public knowledge, they would be exposed and stigmatised by their families and communities.”

These facts 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.

For example, the fact that detention is still a reality in too many of our countries is unacceptable. I am proud to say that one of my first acts as Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity was to end detention for children and families in Malta.

I urge the rest of the European Union, and indeed the world, to take similar action, in respect of the dignity of children, families, and pregnant women everywhere.

As people of goodwill, we must work together, to identify important intersections in the areas of migration and healthcare, to develop an integrated and inclusive response to the challenges being faced by migrant and refugee women, within our countries.

Let me also take the opportunity to urge our governments and our authorities, to mainstream maternal health concerns, across all relevant legislation and policy.

Moreover, I believe that our governments and authorities must create safe and respectful spaces, where migrant and refugee women are invited to participate in structured processes of consultation and dialogue.

Migrant and refugee women are best placed to influence the appropriate policies in the context of maternal healthcare.

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

Let me also take this opportunity, at the beginning of this Forum, to pose some questions, to stimulate further thoughts, for your deliberations:

What more can we do?

How can we ensure that paradigms of maternal healthcare become more inclusive?

How can we make such paradigms more accessible to the needs of migrant and refugee women, when they are still tailored for Western populations?

How can we work together, to prioritise the different social and cultural requirements presented by migrant and refugee women?

In what ways can we ensure that our nations are truly and effectively upholding the ideals of social justice and universal human rights?

Finally, how can we create more equitable societies, which are of benefit to all humanity?

On concluding, I hope you shall make this Forum an effective space to share your ideas and suggestions, of how best we can work together, to influence our national and global institutions, to work together to make motherhood safer for all women and their children.

Let me encourage the international community to always, and in all ways, uphold the fundamental dignity of our women, our children and our families.

If each and every one of us can manage to put our input, to achieve this goal, we will be sending a strong message across the globe, that our international community is truly committed towards the values of life, of wellbeing, and peace, through the effective implementation of universal human rights, in the best interests of all humanity.

Thank you for your attention.