

Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at the Cross Culture International Foundation Youth Conference, with the theme “Freedom is Not Negotiable: Preventative Awareness on Human Trafficking”, 16 March 2019

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

Let me begin by commending the team at the Cross Culture International Foundation for facilitating this youth conference, which is highlight the much-needed awareness about human trafficking.

Thanks to your efforts, and the support of the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, we are creating a necessary educational platform to empower our communities, and in particular our young people, to address the scourge of human trafficking.

I am informed that this conference has also created a space for survivors to share their experiences. I would like to thank them, and applaud them for their bravery.

I augur that the young people who will hear these narratives will be inspired, to endeavour to end human trafficking.

I believe that our students and educators must be empowered to understand what human trafficking is all about, to recognise the trauma that it creates, and to respond to the vulnerability, which is experienced by those who are being trafficked.

Let me begin by giving a brief historical context about the reality of slavery and human trafficking, which has existed for centuries.

All the ancient civilisations of the world, including Greece, Rome, and the Middle East, practiced some form of slavery. In some parts of the world, the slave trade was the first trade of any kind to be conducted over long distances, on a large scale.

The huge distances that slaves were made to travel made it more difficult for them to escape, and further isolated them from their homes and communities.

We cannot pretend that this scourge against humanity only existed in our distant history. It is still taking place today, in our country, and all over the world.

Abolishing human trafficking is a human rights imperative, of the first order.

This means that it is a universal fight, to effectively address the needs of people who are trapped in cycles of abuse, exploitation, and precarity.

Despite the fact that all human beings are born free and equal in human dignity, every day, thousands of people, particularly women and children, are being sold.

Every day, the bodies and the labour of thousands of people are being exploited and degraded.

Despite international labour standards and a UN Protocol to prevent human trafficking, there are millions of victims, especially children, who are trapped as workers in mines, plantations, sweatshops, and even brothels.

When a person is the victim of human trafficking, it is our shared humanity, itself, which is being commercialised.

When a person is used like a product, exploited, and then thrown away, all of us lose our dignity.

The UN-led Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, and other international initiatives, are making an effort to draw attention to these concerns.

However, there is so much more that we still need to do.

The international community and our country must take further action, to prevent any more victims from having their aspirations for the future turned into a reality of exploitation and precarity.

Our society must be aware that human trafficking is a growing problem, which impacts our children and communities.

A recent report published by the UK Centre for Social Justice, entitled “A Modern Response to Modern Slavery” and endorsed by the European Commission, states that a huge amount of trafficking in Europe is being driven by organised crime groups.

These groups are directly profiting from the relentless exploitation of vulnerable people, by taking advantage of extreme poverty.

Ending human trafficking, once and for all, will require a fight against organised crime, but also effective efforts to address the root causes of poverty, which make a person vulnerable to exploitation in the first place.

The United Nations’ Agenda 2030, and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, creates a clear framework, to work together in solidarity for the benefit of humanity, and to address these concerns.

SDG 1 explicitly refers to the eradication of poverty. All of our hopes for sustainable peace, inclusive prosperity, and holistic wellbeing depend upon the achievement of this goal.

Furthermore, SDG 8 specifically calls for economic equity and wellbeing. Furthermore Target 8.7, calls for an immediate end to human trafficking.

It is encouraging for us to recognise that the United Nations' General Assembly has placed the global responsibility to human trafficking to the level of international policy, and has given our governments a clear mandate to do so, and which they have all approved.

Finally, I would like to encourage all of us, especially our young people present here today, to pledge their support for the survivors of these horrible crimes.

In so doing, by sharing awareness and solidarity, you will be making a practical contribution, to safeguard the human dignity of each and every person in our country, and our world.

Thank you for your attention.