

Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the BIRTH Conference, supported by the European Agency for Collaboration in Science and Technology (COST), 5 November 2018

Prof Jean Calleja-Agius

Prof Rita Borg Xuereb

Prof Soo Downe

Dr France Donnay

Distinguished guests

Dear friends

It is my pleasure to deliver some opening remarks at this important conference.

After eight years of research, that has created an international network of collaboration and cooperation, this concluding meeting of the BIRTH Cost Action is truly a celebration of your sterling endeavours.

Therefore, let me welcome the international scholars and researchers who are joining us, from so many countries, here in Malta.

I must also take this opportunity to commend our very own Professor Rita Borg Xuereb and Professor Jean Calleja-Agius, for their hard work over the past years, to ensure that Malta makes a meaningful contribution to this initiative.

Improving and developing the equality of maternal healthcare for mothers and their babies is essential, in all of our countries and societies.

From the outset, I would like to state that I believe that the European Union must take more responsibility, to harmonise equity in maternal healthcare, across all of our European family of nations.

In this way, we will be reducing avoidable deaths and limiting the risks of ill health.

Let me also state that this year marks the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and our responsibility towards women and their children emanates from this supremely important instrument.

This responsibility is also enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which clearly commits us to provide effective prenatal and postnatal healthcare for all mothers and their children.

Furthermore, our universal commitment is also reflected in the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, to which all of our nations are signatories.

As all of us know, Agenda 2030 sets out the most effective road-map for the sustainable future of our peoples and our planet.

**Sustainable Development Goal Number 3, Target 1, explicitly states that we have a global responsibility, to reduce the world's maternal mortality ratio.**

**I am confident that this conference will be an opportunity for us to build upon the valuable work we have already achieved, as a community of nations, to achieve this goal.**

**Let me take this opportunity to draw your attention to the Maternal Healthcare in the EU Outcome Declaration, developed in Malta, last year.**

**This document was developed on the margins of the Meeting of EU Health Ministers during Malta's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as incorporating subsequent sessions held in New York, Iceland, and Lithuania.**

In February 2017, my Office, in collaboration with the Women Political Leaders Global Forum and MSD for Mothers, held a roundtable conference entitled 'Equal Access to Maternal Healthcare in the EU'.

The Outcome Declaration from this roundtable conference highlights some worrying indicators from our Union, and emphasised the need for our governments and healthcare services to take effective action.

These indicators show us that 8 out of every 100,000 women in the European Union die, annually, while giving birth.

According to data from the World Health Organisation, every year there are about 1,800 maternal deaths in the entire European region.

Furthermore, 54 per cent of pregnant women who have been seen at Doctors of the World clinics, in nine European countries, were

reported to be living in precarity or poverty, and lacked access to necessary maternal healthcare.

An even more worrying indicator is the fact that 1 in 10 women in the European Union does not have adequate access to maternal healthcare.

I am proud to say that my Office, working closely with MSD for Mothers and Women Political Leaders, have responded to this worrying reality, by carrying out an EU-wide study, entitled “Improving Maternal Healthcare for Vulnerable Women in EU28.”

The study, which was published this year, highlights the disparities between European Union countries when it comes to maternal healthcare, and the lack of culturally sensitive maternal healthcare both for vulnerable and non-vulnerable women.

Furthermore, these indicators show that there are still gaps in the scientific research, in this crucial area, and vulnerable groups are at particular risk of exclusion.

**A very important fact that needs to be highlighted is that women who are experiencing different forms of vulnerability and precarity are often less able to access essential maternal healthcare services.**

**Research is also showing that such women include teen and young adult mothers; women of Roma heritage; women living in poverty; and other women who form part of precarious or minority groups.**

**This situation is even more severe when we consider the challenges being faced by refugee, asylum-seeking, and migrant women in our countries.**

**Research indicates, clearly, that migrant and refugee women face elevated risks of marginalisation and social exclusion, when it comes to accessing even the most basic maternal healthcare.**

Furthermore, 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.”*

Taking one example from this report, postpartum depression manifests itself in a way that can vary from culture to culture, and nation to nation.

This is why I have continuously advocated for the visibility of maternal mental healthcare at a European and international level, which is, unfortunately, too often a neglected area.



I believe that all mothers and their babies, no matter who they are or where they live, should have the same access to protection and support.

I am convinced that you, as the experts in this sector, have the potential to be catalysts, for a positive transformation in the areas of maternal, newborn, and child healthcare.

This was also the focus of my contribution to the Humanity 2.0 Forum, facilitated by the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, within the Holy See.

As we know, 26 per cent of global healthcare is, in one way or another, connected with the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore an emphasis on effective maternal healthcare within these services is essential.

**My patronage of the Humanity 2.0 Foundation here in Malta is further supporting and giving visibility to these important issues.**

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

**This transformation will only be possible if all of our governments and authorities choose to invest effectively and efficiently in our women and girls, at every step of their lives.**

**It is my firm belief that birth cannot be taken out of the context of life, itself.**

**The journey of becoming a mother reflects the complex and intersectional realities that a woman faces, throughout her life. It reflects her socio-economic background, her family history, her relationships, and her cultural context.**

**We must ensure that a woman is seen in the light of her entire identity, holistically and with dignity.**

**For this reason, I believe that we must invest in our education system, to create a culture that is more capable of respecting the inherent dignity of women and their children.**

**As academics and professionals, who are working in this sector, you have an important role to play, to promote new cultural norms, which ensure safer and more dignified childbirth.**

**We must focus on collaborative efforts on a regional and international level, to raise awareness about the rights of vulnerable pregnant women, not just among the women and adolescent girls themselves, but also their families and communities.**

**It is so essential for the policies of our countries to include relevant instruments, which address high-quality maternal healthcare, and**

are tailored to meet the specific needs of an expectant mother and her unborn child.

Definitely, mental and emotional health must be part of this approach, to holistically address the maternal healthcare of all women.

On concluding, let me thank you for the work you have done, over the past eight years, to generate essential and much-needed research.

Let me encourage you to take this research, and use it to raise the political profile around this issue. You are in a perfect position to provide the politicians and policy-makers of our nations with the relevant resources, to improve the wellbeing of expectant mothers.

All of our countries have a clear responsibility, to safeguard and to protect every mother.

For this reason, let me recommend that this research is a first step, to create an EU-wide Observatory on holistic and equitable Maternal Healthcare.

I believe that mothers are the present holders of our future aspirations, for the sustainable and peaceful development of our world.

I look forward to exploring the final outcomes of this COST Action research study. I can assure you of my willingness to help with the dissemination of this important information at the highest levels of the European Union, with the hope that it will influence policy and create the much-needed positive transformation, in our maternal healthcare systems.

Thank you for your attention.