

**Dear friends,**

**It is my pleasure, and an honour, to participate in this event, celebrating the ten year anniversary of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.**

**Let me begin by commending the decade of work, undertaken by FRA, which guides the objectives of our national and European Union institutions.**

**One must also note that FRA has managed to position itself as an essential agency, which is respected by international organisations, including the Council of Europe and the United Nations.**

**Thanks to FRA's endeavours, we are holding ourselves and our authorities accountable, to keep universal human rights and freedoms central, across European legislation and policies.**

**Therefore, this anniversary provides us with an ideal opportunity to assess these achievements.**

**This celebration is an opportunity, in itself, to appraise our successes, but also to explore the complex causes that are impeding full access to universal human rights and freedoms in contemporary Europe.**

**It is also an opportunity to reaffirm our steady commitment to work together, not only within our nations but also across our borders, so as to consider innovative strategies for the future.**

**We must endeavour, further, to nurture and strengthen our European commitment to a rights-based approach, which can give us the tools, to effectively tackle the ongoing challenges of today's world.**

**Universal human rights must be at the centre of all our efforts to improve the lives of our citizens.**

**I believe that the most powerful change happens when the political will is followed by effective legislation; when it is upheld by diligently implemented policies; and when it is sustained by an ongoing process of cultural transformation.**

**For example, we have seen tremendous improvements in LGBTIQ affirmative legislation and policies in my own country, Malta.**

**Indeed, Maltese legislation which protects the bodily integrity of intersex individuals is among the most progressive and comprehensive in the world.**

**Such examples of progress must, be paralleled by an equally strong cultural transformation, to impact people's daily lives.**

**Education has a crucial part to play in all this, and we must ensure that our education strategies are person-centred and truly inclusive.**

**Moreover, promoting structured and participative processes of democratic dialogue, which respond to the concerns of all the individuals and communities in our Union, must be emphasised.**

**Let me, therefore, take this opportunity to mention the work being done by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, to promote relationship-building and opportunities for dialogue and consultation, with the diverse groups that form part of Maltese society.**

**My Foundation has placed the participation of diverse communities at the very heart of its activities.**

**These include a refugee-led NGO platform, which empowers groups led by refugees and asylum-seekers, to gain social capital; to interact with national authorities; and to access their rights more effectively.**

**Moreover, honouring the voices of children is a priority on my Foundation's agenda. This is evident in our annual Child Wellbeing conference, and our ongoing community of learning and child-empowerment methodology, entitled 'The President's Secret Garden'.**

**These are all geared towards creating a continuous process of dialogue, with children and young people. Indeed, my Foundation is guided by its own Children and Young Persons Councils, which inform its work at every level of development.**

**Last year's Child Wellbeing conference, entitled 'Access to Justice for Vulnerable Children', included the narratives of children and their experiences of the justice system in various European countries.**

**This conference also featured an expert from FRA, who presented the findings for the Fundamental Rights Agency's 'Child-Friendly Justice' report.**

**I believe that the concerns and recommendations of every group and community must be highlighted, at all steps of our national and international journeys, to actively promote a stronger culture of universal human rights.**

**We must make it clear that the voices of our citizens matter; that they are taken up seriously; and that their aspirations for the future are being acted upon.**

**Safe spaces for dialogue are especially necessary when we encounter people who are experiencing precarity, exclusion, and injustice.**

**For people living in situations of vulnerability, universal human rights are a crucial lifeline. However, people living in such situations are often focused on their basic needs.**

**Even though Europe has been a pioneer of universal human rights, since their very inception, and although we have certainly come a long way, we must admit that there is still the urgent need for a more rigorous implementation of a genuinely democratic and rights-based perspective, even within our nations.**

**We must be courageous enough to ask ourselves why there are increasing numbers of our citizens, who are expressing disillusionment and dissatisfaction, with the status quo they encounter within our societies.**

**One factor, which is pushing people further away from effective processes of democratic inclusion, and the full enjoyment of their rights, is the phenomenon of poverty.**

**I believe that the phenomenon of poverty is impeding the realisation of our full aspirations for universal human rights and freedoms in Europe.**

**Let me remind you of the latest indicators from Eurostat, which state that almost 119 million people, or 23.7 percent of the populations within our member states, are living at risk of poverty or social exclusion.**

**This means that roughly one in four people in the EU have experienced some form of serious monetary poverty; severe material deprivation; and/or very low work intensity.**

**Such exclusion and deprivation has far-reaching effects.**

**The social, cultural, and political implications of economic disenfranchisement cannot be ignored. For this reason, the deprivation of economic and material resources is not only a monetary phenomenon.**

**Poverty is a profoundly damaging violation of human dignity.**

**Poverty cuts off individuals, their families, and their entire communities, from the lifeline of universal human rights.**

**Poverty is a full-scale attack on universal human rights, eroding a person's right to health, to food, to education, and to housing.**

**Poverty reduces a person's effective access to justice, to equitable political participation, and to social mobility.**

**Moreover, poverty can jeopardise the very safety and stability of an individual, their family, and their community.**

**This state of affairs shows us that we cannot be complacent anymore, if we truly want to enjoy universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.**

**I believe that we must address the eradication of poverty within our European Union as a matter of utmost urgency, thereby securing more adequate access to fundamental rights for all our citizens.**

**Let me now speak, in some more detail, about the assaults on human dignity, and therefore on human rights, being experienced by women as a result of poverty.**

**Women are more likely to be exposed to intersectional vulnerabilities of poverty and exclusion. This is due to discriminatory economic and social processes, which are embedded within our societies, and continue to deprive women of their wellbeing.**

**We are witnessing the ongoing feminisation of poverty, within our Union.**

**The feminisation of poverty is a direct consequence of various structural factors that we can, and must, take urgent action to address.**

**Such factors include adverse cultural and social stereotyping; gender pay gaps; gender-based discrimination; and policies which make it difficult to achieve a healthy work-life balance, with direct consequences for female participation in the economic, social, and political life of our nations.**

**Women's lower employment rates, across member states, means that economic empowerment for women is especially problematic in some countries.**

**Across their lives, women are a vulnerable group, due to their increased risk of poverty, and are therefore less secure in their fundamental human rights.**

**This is clearly stated in the European Commission's '2017 Report on Equality between Women and Men in the EU', and I quote;**

***“Although women are successful in gaining qualifications, their subsequent careers are often more interrupted, they have lower pay, and their careers are flatter. As a consequence, they earn less than men over their life cycle, and their pensions are lower.”*** End quote.

**Furthermore, a recent report issued by the European Institute for Gender Equality shows that higher risks of poverty or social exclusion, faced by women, increase in later life.**

**This report also states that disability also significantly elevates threats of poverty and social exclusion, and women with disabilities face greater risks than men.**

**This report further indicates that gender differences are also reflected in European indicators on extreme poverty, with women especially exposed to problems of unaffordable housing.**

**Moreover, women from migrant backgrounds are at an even more elevated risk for each of these concerns, as supported by data from a**

**European-wide workshop on the Main Causes of Female Poverty, organised by the FEMM Committee.**

**Indeed, the discrimination faced by refugees and migrants, and the links between such discrimination and poverty, is a cause for serious concern within our European Union.**

**When refugees and migrants are denied access to fundamental economic and social rights, this is a violation of their fundamental human rights.**

**Such violations are rooted in a larger cultural context, which we must confront. These violations are part of structural and systemic processes of discrimination and prejudice, which we cannot afford to ignore.**

**We cannot allow the rhetoric of division, which is becoming louder across many of our countries, to go unchallenged, at the risk of weakening our commitment to universal human rights.**

**No country in the our Union can, or should, feel isolated, when it comes to addressing the phenomenon of migration in a sensitive and dignified manner.**

**Therefore, let me affirm the perspectives put forward by Malta, during its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, that we must make more efforts to be made for our nations to work in synergy, to safeguard the rights of migrants and refugees, and to prevent the risks of discrimination within our societies.**

**Discrimination, of any kind, is a fundamental threat to universal human rights.**

**We must make our commitment, to safeguard the wellbeing of all people, especially the most vulnerable, a cornerstone of all our endeavours.**

**For this reason, poverty and precarity cannot go on being overlooked, and nor can the intersectional risks faced by women and vulnerable migrants in particular.**

**Poverty and precarity are key factors which degrade human dignity, and prevent full access to fundamental human rights.**

**Let us promote the eradication of poverty, thereby making real efforts to secure meaningful access to fundamental human rights, for all the individuals and communities within Europe, and beyond.**

**This will also bring us closer to achieving our global commitments, laid out by the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals, which was signed by all the leaders of our nations.**

**The first, and most essential, of the Sustainable Development Goals is achieving an end to all forms of poverty.**

**Agenda 2030 is a binding agreement, decided upon by all our governments, which must motivate us to address the underlying oppressions and injustices caused by poverty and precarity.**

**We need to continue to work together. We must enhance our synergies, across national governments, European authorities, and civil society organisations, to address the links between poverty, access to universal human rights, and the promotion of holistic wellbeing.**

**I believe that, in this way, we can create more effective and efficient responses to the many facets of poverty, thereby emphasising a truly rights-based approach.**

**Such an approach will keep us attentive to the daily assaults on human dignity, being experienced by vulnerable people who are living in poverty and precarity.**

**On concluding, let me quote the words of former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who said;**

***"Wherever we lift one soul from a life of poverty, we are defending human rights. Whenever we fail in this mission, we are failing human rights."* End quote.**

**Let us make the time, now, when we end the scourge of poverty, within our European Union and beyond, as part of our commitment to secure the universal rights and freedoms of all.**

**Let us affirm the fundamental dignity of all human beings, by acting upon our duty to strive for the best interests all individuals and communities, and especially, the most vulnerable members of our society.**

**Thank you for your attention.**