

Thank you for the invitation and the privilege to speak at this event today.

The promise of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is that no one should be left behind. That is a great promise, when we can all move forward together, but how can we guarantee this for women, children and people in desperate situations, who are subject to many types of vulnerabilities, including violence and oppression?

The call to ensure the inclusion and welfare of others, especially those who are at risk of becoming vulnerable in one way or another, is the creed and inspiration of many religions, faiths and cultures around the world. 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself'. The expectation is that we shall be blessed by helping others, because we may also need help one day, and because our resources are by the sheer providence from God or a spiritual force, and the aim is to enjoy but also bless others. These concepts have been taught to people from childhood, in mosques, synagogues and churches, as well as the sacred gatherings of many faiths, for centuries, where the responsibility belongs to everyone, not only the state or the religious authorities, but everyone is part of that responsibility, and therefore, everyone, even those without any power, have some power not only to affect their own lives but the lives of others.

At the same time, historical events where nations and leaders commit genocide and atrocities that shock the world in the Second World War, raise centre stage the demand that the dignity and human rights of all people are upheld, with a Universal Declaration, and a commitment by nations and a monitoring mechanism that should prevent such atrocities from happening again. This is a very important milestone in the history of humanity, because it establishes the responsibility of states to adhere to international agreements and treaties, and international bodies that monitor this progress.

Against this historical backdrop, Malta becomes an independent nation, joins the European Union, develops its infrastructure, and over the years, just like other countries, faith and religion and spirituality taken a more individualistic meaning as community ties become weaker, the role of traditions less meaningful, and the concept of God and the community providing care gets more and more replaced by the state as the patriarchal provider. Women in Malta experience a shift of expectations, from expectations of getting married, having children and providing family care, to one where they should be working and have a bigger share in economic participation, even because it is no longer financially possible to raise a family on one salary.

Of course, there is still the historical expectation for women to be the number one carer in the family. So women became machines, working outside the home and inside the home, continuously, re-considering their priorities and re-configuring their life goals, to catch up with their dreams and the impossible tasks imposed upon them by these development goals, their family and society. They almost become superheroes, however social attitudes towards them do not change, and they continue to experience prejudices and discrimination at home as well as the workplace, even the threat to their life does not stop. In Malta since 2022 when femicide became a crime in Malta, there have been three femicides. In Italy in 2024 there were 113 femicides, 99 by relatives, partners and ex-partners. Why does this violence still exist with all this development?

One of the reasons - in many situations, women are never really part of the in-group, or the ones making decisions, even about their own lives. When they are, they are still forced to uphold patriarchal values and to make patriarchal decisions, and punished for not making them, sometimes women are used against each other in order to ensure that the real progress for women never happens. Even when women become liberated from one type of violence, they explain that they escape one form of violence to another.

Perhaps one way to ensure no one is left behind to speak up, whoever you are, in whatever capacity you have. Belonging, self-identity and group identity are basic human needs, and we know that children's physical and psychosocial development is so dependent on the nurture of their primary caregivers in the early years, but also on the safety of the environment around them, which is not uniform or standard for all children. Some children face very difficult situations because are born to families who are struggling financially, socially, psychologically. From pregnancy, they are exposed to harmful situations, which have a tremendous impact on their lives.

We are not equal at birth, or even before birth, when you consider the suffering some pregnant women and mothers go through, some of them struggling for basic food and safety, running away from war and violence, protecting their children, taking dangerous journeys across the world to flee from violence; external violence from the enemy, internal violence from the family and community, until they arrive at our shores and airports. For many women and girls, wherever they come from, home is not a safe place. And often religious spaces remain indifferent and silent on issues of violence and injustice towards women and girls. So while we may provide care to the victims, remaining silent contributes to the ongoing violence. And this is the same in the family, violence continues even when family members provide care but because they do not speak to the violence itself, so it never stops.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that globally, 85,000 women and girls were killed intentionally in 2023. Sixty per cent of these homicides –51,000- were committed by intimate partners or other family members. One hundred and forty women and girls die every day at the hands of their partner or a close relative, which means one woman is killed every 10 minutes. The UN Women Executive Director, Sima Bahous, highlighted: “Violence against women and girls is not inevitable—it is preventable. We need robust legislation, improved data collection, greater government accountability, a zero-tolerance culture, and increased funding for women’s rights organizations and institutional bodies.

Access to protection and justice is critical if we are to really address violence against women. Many women find themselves at the mercy of family members and intimate partners, waiting for years to be set free by the justice system. Meanwhile they remain stuck, unable to move on, and this is also part of the violence. Many of these women are raising children in the meantime, coping with financial pressures, living in fear and stress. Health, education, housing, jobs and psychosocial services are ever so critical in supporting families, adults, children in dealing with their trauma, in helping people understand how to cope, and regain some control over their present situation. We need to improve the way we deliver these services, the commitment and resources, and the coordination between the judicial, protection and the support systems. We need to ensure that no one is left behind, that children’s rights are heard and respected, no matter where they come from, or whether they have family members or anyone standing up for them. Human rights are universal, inalienable and indivisible, and it is our responsibility to ensure them for everyone.

I felt these reflections were very important, to bring to the table the very fact that, in line with the event and the topic, ‘Barra u Gewwa’, who is inside the group and who is outside the group – the fact that even if we are women doing our best to try and understand other women who have come from other parts of the world , where they have experienced even more discrimination, abuse and trauma, the gap is so wide that we also find ourselves many times unable to understand, and therefore unable to support the other. We feel like we cannot cross over and support that person because they seem to come from a different world, and the skills we need to visit that world are simply not obtained through knowledge and theory, and not simply because we stand on their side, but we need to have an open heart and an open mind, and we need to dive in, act fast, do deeper work to ensure access to services for people who have been through the most complex situations, including children who have been through multiple traumas, war, violence, family separation, abuse and exploitation.

The best way to ensure access to services is to ensure representation within our services, that is, that we encourage and support people coming from backgrounds of vulnerability, or very close to those backgrounds, who not only work in our services, but have a voice in decision making. This is the best way to ensure that our programmes are just, accessible, and equitable. And therefore, how are we identifying and supporting these people, to empower them in this work and ensure no one is left behind?

I have had the privilege of working in different contexts, one of these has been working in pastoral ministry within migrant-led churches. As a Maltese woman this was a great privilege for me, because I had to immerse myself into different cultures and expressions, limitations, beliefs and values that were sometimes different than my own. Having an open heart and mind helped me adapt and learn, but the greater privilege was to slowly find my way on the inside of groups of women whose stories would not reach the service providers, because there was no trust. Many women leave their countries when they experience violence, usually from family members and intimate partners, where they become isolated and stuck in the situation. They become outsiders, rejected, left in the dark. I met several migrant women working in the cleaning and caring industries who had left their country not because they needed a job, because they had a good job in their country, they could make it...but because they were experiencing domestic violence and they lack the protection of the state and the community and family in their country. They knew, if they took a job abroad this would be acceptable to the family since they would be able to send money and improve the family's well being. So they left their families for this socially acceptable reason, but in reality they were hoping their husband would find another woman while they were away, which seemed to be a common strategy among this group of women, since after their husbands would find someone else, they could return and live safely with their children. I met many women with this story. They had to leave everything they loved, go to a strange land, hoping to return to a better future. What a fate, but how brave and ingenious they were in solving their problem.

The spiritual space is not an easy one for women. It is also a space where they have to navigate, often, between liberation and violence. Let me define violence. Attitudes of prejudice against women, direct psychological and physical harm, and exclusion from leadership or information, this is all part of violence that I have encountered in religious spaces and the homes of people from all faiths and religions. Many religious leaders are unable to address it because by doing so they are afraid of breaking the family, of disappointing men and ultimately creating sometimes very powerful enemies. But the concept of justice and love and peace is a very spiritual one. In the Bible God answers the prayers of those trusted unjustly –in the

story of Abigail the abused, Hannah the childless, the adulteress - God changes the story, from one of despair and doom to one of victory and hope. But also, God sends leaders and makes commandments to protect the vulnerable, and this is why spiritual and religious authorities must address these issues of justice. I will end my speech with a personal story.

It was mother's day, about 10 years ago, when I decided to share a message in Church about the treatment of women. There were many beautiful messages and flowers, and I had felt for a long time that some things needed to be said. And I made all the women stand up and I told the church that every woman here has experienced some type of violence, simply because they are women. I went through the different types and forms of violence, and how you cannot honour women if you are part of the violence, and if you don't stand against that violence, it matters very little.

And after that message women came and told me their story – how they had harassed by their in laws, their husbands, their parents, their partners, and their children. And how others had taken power over them and used their vulnerability to control them and isolate them, how they had to keep their suffering a secret in order to fit in a community in a family that was ready to strike them out in no time. Some brothers in the church thought it was a harsh message, others said I spoke as a 'white Maltese woman', but others thanked me for saying what needed to be said, and mentioned how they and their mothers had suffered this violence back home. One man told me, my father left us when I was still in the womb, his first ever call to me was when I reached Europe, can you believe it?

I would like to thank you once again for inviting me to speak in this gathering, for giving a space to both professionalism and spirituality, and I encourage everyone here to continue the work to ensure that no one is left behind.

Ms Marcelle Bugre