



SPEECH BY H.E. MARIE LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA, PRESIDENT OF MALTA ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE COMMONWEALTH WOMEN'S FORUM: 'WOMEN AHEAD, BE ALL YOU CAN BE'

SUNDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2015

I am honoured to be addressing this first-ever, Women's Forum, being held just prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, here in Malta.

The convening of the Women's Forum shows the commitment of the Commonwealth to the estimated one billion women living within it and to shared concerns regarding issues of gender experience, by each and every one of us.

I am sure you will deliberate, on the contribution women must make, in a spirit of collaboration and free participation, towards the political, economic and social transformation of our communities, within our own countries, and ultimately, the world.

In so doing, you will, undoubtedly, identify both the opportunities, and the barriers, faced by women, even in the twenty-first century.

I am confident that the Women's Forum will highlight the lived experiences of women today, and hopefully become a catalyst to influence much needed and long awaited changes.

We must ask ourselves, what is the reality of women's lives today?

According to United Nations data - In leadership and political participation, only 22 per cent of all national parliamentarians were female as of August 2015, a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995; so slow that, at this rate, it will take another 50 years to reach parity.

[According to Diaz and Tordjman], in 31 major peace processes that took place between 1992 and 2011, women represented, on average, nine per cent of formal negotiating delegations, four per cent of peace process signatories, and 2.4 per cent as chief mediators.

Meanwhile, the 2015 International Labour Organization report entitled 'Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum' shows, that over the last 20 years, there has been a surge in the number of women employed in senior and middle management positions. It finds that women have attained 20 per cent or more, of all board positions, in just a handful of countries.

On the same note, the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap report for 2015, states, that if we do not initiate some fundamental changes, it is going to take 81 years to see parity in women's participation in the economy.

According to data issued by the United Nations Women, more than 1.3 billion women, that is over one third of women, do not have an account in financial institutions worldwide, while in sub-Saharan Africa, only 23 % of girls complete their primary education.

Even when measuring achievements for women, we find great disparity among nations. While some nations celebrate an increase in the representation of women in our respective parliaments, others are celebrating women's access to clean water.

Addressing the Women's International Forum in January this year at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and currently, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, identified 2015 as a very important year for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

This is, because this year, the United Nations, reviewed the progress of two important agendas directly related to women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

In response to the review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, called the report 'a wake-up call', further elaborating, and I quote:

'the report is a salutary account of a world that has not, in the main, improved much for women and girls, and for some, has got a lot worse'.

Unfortunately, after twenty years, the same barriers and constraints recognised by the Beijing signatories still exist globally.

Persistent conflicts, global financial and economic crisis, volatile food and energy prices, and climate change, have negatively impacted on women and girls, leading to intensified inequalities and vulnerability.

Similarly, the review report of the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, offers no reprieve. Resolution 1325 initially drew attention to the differential impact of armed conflict on women, their exclusion from conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping and peace building, and the complex links, between gender equality, and international peace and security.

Since the adoption of the resolution 15 years ago, conflicts have continued to increase throughout the world, taking on new and increasingly challenging forms.

Unfortunately, we are all becoming familiar with the rise of violent extremism, and terrorism, targeting on whole communities, and in particular, the enforced vulnerability of women and girls.

The outcomes of conflicts include atrocities such as rape, and systematic sexual and gender-based crimes; while other realities for women across the globe include restrictions in education, denied access to healthcare and participation in public life. Women's situations are often made even worse, by natural disasters and humanitarian crisis.

We must shift this dangerous paradigm, where women are perched to be helpless victims of conflict, or relegated to much needed but limiting roles as grassroots activists, and foster an environment where women are acknowledged as policy motivators, as decision makers, as leaders.

I truly believe that more leadership by women can make a difference in international peace and security, by offering a nuanced perspective through processes of dialogue that bring us all together as one.

Here again, I quote the report on the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security:

'In an era when armed extremist groups, place the subordination of women at the top of their agenda, our response should be unwavering support for empowering girls and women'.

The newly adopted United Nations 2030 Goals for Sustainable Development also reflect this priority.

The goal that concerns us here also reflects the very aim of this Forum as it states the need to, and I quote:

‘To achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’.

Gender equality is an affirmation of basic human dignity, and is necessary to create harmonious, and peaceful societies.

It is a fundamental component in sustainable development. We must recognise, that issues of gender are strongly linked with other goals, and will have tremendous effects, on the overall success of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Even if some progress has been made, the fact is that women, girls and gender minorities, continue to occupy a disadvantaged position, throughout the world.

This inequality is not limited to location. It is also not limited to whether their oppression occurs in poor households, or in developing countries.

Discrimination occurs in both situations of peace and conflict; however, it is much more devastating in situations of conflict.

Reports continuously show, that inequalities persist worldwide, affecting a wide range of rights. These include health, education, public and political life, employment, and access to justice.

In looking at a more equal future, we must all recognise that gender inequality negatively affects all people, regardless of their gender identities.

The road toward gender equality should be viewed not merely as a transfer of opportunities or privileges from one group to another, but as a fundamental necessity if we are to achieve the enjoyment of all our rights.

The HeForShe campaign, spearheaded by UN Women is a leading global campaign on gender equality. Together with fellow Heads of State, I am committed to this campaign and its message of gender equality.

Together with other Champions, we are determined to make a difference in the lives of women and girls worldwide.

To this mandate, through my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, I have added a significant focus on the protection, and empowerment, of gender minorities. We encourage all other HeForShe champions to do the same, recognising the importance of gender self-determination, in the creation of peace oriented and dignity affirming societies.

A key message of the campaign, is that gender equality is not an issue faced by women or gender minorities alone. It is, in fact, a human rights issue that affects us all.

We all stand to benefit from gender equality, liberating us from prescribed social roles and the gender stereotypes of a binary system that must be interrogated, and transformed. I hereby commend UN Women for this powerful initiative, and congratulate all those who have joined this campaign worldwide.

Together, we can reduce inequalities and create a world that reflects our most profound and deeply-held values.

I urge you, distinguished friends, to become champions of gender equality, so that others shall follow your example and join the HeForShe campaign, to end the discrimination faced by so many, worldwide.

Your endorsement will encourage men and boys to join this solidarity movement and thus create a more inclusive and just world for all.

When all nations agreed with the Sustainable Development Goals, they set 2030 as the target date to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women. I believe that the time is ripe to move from rhetoric to action, before we run out of time.

May this Women's Forum move beyond simply discussions. We must encourage our Governments present for CHOGM, to act to ensure the wellbeing of women, girls and gender minorities, marking an end to the various inequalities and atrocities experience around the world, at this very moment.

Participation of women makes a huge difference to the socio-economic agenda, and the competence of women as leaders, where this is present, has been seen to bring about positive changes, in all spheres of life. Yet, the potential of women is still left untapped. I trust, by focusing on the empowerment of women, the Forum will elicit innovative ways of encouraging women to take an active role in society, allowing women and girls to play their part.

It is only when women are present in numbers, that they can make a real difference.

I feel confident that this Forum will provide the perfect opportunity, to address these issues, and endeavour to unearth possible responses, to the challenges faced by, millions of women.

May the Women's Forum be a catalyst for Heads of Government to act in ways that bring about true and effective equality.

The Commonwealth can then be an inspiration to the world, a light in a time of growing darkness by bringing about change, systemic and sustained transformations in the lives of women and girls across the globe.

On concluding, I would like to share a quote by Mr Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations:

'Justice for women takes more than new laws and new funding. Ultimately, we need new mindsets'.

May you all emerge from this Forum with new mindsets about the role of women in the world today.

Only then will you, as agents of change, influence and disseminate a new mindset in order to achieve a real change, in the lives of all women. We must work together to create an environment where women may stand in their truth and speak with their own voice, free to be, ALL THAT THEY CAN BE.

Let us work to make this historic Forum, a landmark to bring about true and effective democracy to our nations, and all humankind, by ensuring true and effective equality for women and girls across the globe.

True democracy demands nothing less.

Thank you.



H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
President of Malta

- Web | president.gov.mt
- Email | president@gov.mt
- Facebook | Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca
- Twitter | @president.mt
- Instagram | president.mt