

Opening Speech, Maternal Mental Health Conference, 25 May

It is a pleasure to open this conference, organised by the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Malta.

Let me begin by commending you on your efforts, to raise awareness in the area of maternal mental health, to be a positive influence on national policies, and to improve attitudes towards maternal mental health in our country.

At last year's commemoration of World Maternal Health Day, where my remarks also focused on the importance of mothers' mental health, I made it clear that when we speak about issues of maternal health, we are not simply speaking of women's issues.

Issues of maternal health are an issue of fundamental human rights.

Maternal mental wellbeing is an essential component in the healthy development of our families and communities, and this fact must be recognised and promoted, to ensure healthier lives for all the citizens of the Maltese Islands.

Achieving this objective is at the heart of Sustainable Development Goal Number 3, as part of the United Nations' Agenda 2030. The Agenda provides all of our countries with a practical action plan for the sustainable future of our world. It takes global goals and proposes ways each one of us, as individuals and as communities, can take action to improve the wellbeing of our societies.

The mental and physical health of mothers, as the cornerstone of stronger families, is essential to ensure the wellbeing of society.

Therefore, we must continue to focus our attention on addressing issues of postpartum depression, and its effects on mother-infant relations, child growth, and development.

I believe that there is a need for us to work together to develop parallel strategies at both a national and an EU-level. Now is the time for us to push for directives within the European Union, which further highlight the need for a holistic strategy on maternal mental health.

In this way, efforts around our different nations will work in synergy with one another. On the one hand, this will send a powerful message about our united solidarity, as different Member States, to further strengthen our communities, while, on the other hand, taking practical actions to show solidarity with mothers themselves who are experiencing issues of mental health.

We cannot allow stigma and silence to surround vital issues of mental health. I am sorry to say that the stigma attached to mental health, in general, only increases when we talk about the particular experiences of mothers with depression. There is a sense of shame and a reluctance to reach out for help, at a time when help is most desperately needed.

Some of the fear experienced by women is a result of the social and cultural pressures to be the perfect parent, which lead many women to remain silent.

There is no doubt that motherhood is a wonderful time in a woman's life, but we must also be comfortable talking about the stress and the challenges which form part of that experience.

Reaching for help, when we need it, should not be seen as a sign of weakness. It is often one of the most courageous things we can do.

Talking, connecting, and building honest and open relationships are crucial for mental wellbeing. This sense of openness should be part of day-to-day family life. We must be comfortable to ask for help from family members, friends, and figures of trust. Often, a simple conversation is the first step towards receiving support and help.

Therefore, if we are to ensure the effective implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 3, and protect the mental health of all mothers, then we must do more, as a concerned society, to reach out to mothers who experience postnatal depression and other challenges to their mental health.

Entire families will benefit from strategies which empower women, particularly those going through, or who have gone through, pregnancy. For this reason, recent efforts in our country to strengthen the family, for example, recent positive parenting policies, are to be commended.

However, we must do more to nurture stronger synergies between civil society and national authorities, to ensure that these policies are fully implemented, and that the experiences of women continue to be included in the formulation and the ongoing review of our policies.

Women and families deserve to be supported in a variety of ways, especially when issues of mental health, as a result of pregnancy, become a cause of concern.

According to indicators from the World Health Organisation, about 10 percent of all pregnant women and 13 percent of women who have just given birth experience a mental disorder, particularly depression.

These figures are even more alarming in developing countries, where over 15 percent of women, during pregnancy, and 19 percent of women, after child birth, are reported to experience depression.

Yet maternal mental disorders are treatable. We must ensure that mothers experiencing depression, and other conditions, know that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Effective interventions can be delivered, by focusing on interdisciplinary action, which uses the expertise of professionals and specialists to deliver care as soon as it is needed. Early detection is essential, and for this reason, pregnant women and mothers in the postpartum period can, and should, be screened for maternal mental health disorders.

Furthermore, let us not forget that, although fathers don't experience the same physical changes as women do through pregnancy and childbirth, they are still exposed to some of the same triggers of stress, which can lead to depression.

A family's mental health must be treated holistically, just as the wellbeing of our individual families is reflected in the health of our communities, our society, and our nation.

We must work together to create resilient communities and more resilient women, by prioritising support systems which are equipped with the necessary resources to make effective interventions.

I believe that we must strengthen the resilience of women, at every stage of their lives, to ensure that every woman can face life with an empowered and dignified attitude. Proactively safeguarding the wellbeing of mothers is a positive intervention that prevents future disturbances, which can have long-term social impact.

Healthier mothers are an investment in the wellbeing of our communities, and Maltese society as a whole.

Let me conclude by once again stating that pregnant women and mothers in the postpartum period can, and should, have easily accessible screening for maternal mental health disorders. Once diagnosed, they should be supported at every step of their journey towards improved mental wellbeing.

We must pool our resources, across civil society, to lobby our national and European authorities, to ensure that there are enforceable and effective directives which address issues of maternal mental health. These would be of particular benefit, especially at an EU level.

Finally, we must do more to break the stigma associated with issues of maternal depression, and other challenges to maternal mental health. It is not acceptable that a woman should feel alone with her struggles, especially in a society like ours, where we honour and respect the role of motherhood in so many ways.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of your deliberations.