

Opening Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta during the inauguration of 'Artemisia: 100 Remarkable Women', an exhibition organised by the Network of Young Women Leaders, Sala Antoine de Paule, San Anton Palace

7 August 2017

Ms Muscat

Ms Zita Gurmai

Honourable Members of Parliament

Dear friends

It is my pleasure to inaugurate this project, celebrating the stories of "100 Remarkable Women", and their narratives of courage, of leadership, and of hope.

I am proud to note that the Network of Young Women Leaders is growing, and is undertaking meaningful initiatives, which focus on gender-empowerment.

I remember when this Network was launched, with the support of my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, during this year's International Women's Day celebrations, when we realised the importance of this organisation.

The Network was not only created to provide a safe space for young women, to come together and to explore their ambitions.

The Network is also encouraging connections between women of different generations, by providing an environment where women, who are already active in political life, can offer their expertise and support.

Moreover, my private meetings with the Network's executive committee have greatly impressed me, thanks to the dedication of the members of the group.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to commend the group, for their commitment to ensure that young women in Malta and Gozo have a voice, and can work together, to promote equity and inclusion within our communities and across our society.

Although we have, both as an international community and as a country, made important strides forward to improve gender equality, there is still so much to be done.

Inequalities between women and men, between girls and boys, continue to play a negative role in the lives of countless individuals and families.

Unacceptable discrepancies, in terms of women's economic and political empowerment, are having a destructive effect within our global economies and cultures.

Women are being paid less; women are being underrepresented in political, social, and economic sectors; and the authentic voices and concerns of women are less likely to be heard in our media and across our culture.

We cannot be complacent in the face of such pervasive discrimination.

One particular point, that I want to draw your attention to, during my remarks today, is the crucial need for women to be visible role models in society.

We need more inspirational female figures, to encourage the participation of girls and young women in the social, political, cultural, and economic lives of our communities and our society.

For this reason, today's exhibition is particularly timely and necessary, because when we talk about motivating young women to achieve their full potential, I believe that we must, first of all, lead by example.

Therefore, let me draw your attention to a recent study, co-authored by Esther Duflo, Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics, at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT).

The report highlights the importance of female role models, to determine the attitudes and to nurture the ambitions of girls and young women.

The report gives visibility to communities in India, over multiple decades, where female representation in local government was secured thanks to a quota system.

It offers conclusive evidence for the powerful effect that direct leadership, through inspirational women in political life, can have, on the future prospects of girls and young women.

The results of the report are remarkable.

Localities which had long-serving female leaders, in positions of authority within local government, saw a massive reduction in the gender gap in education for teenage girls. This was due to the fact that girls had set higher goals for themselves, and worked towards achieving these goals.

The report also states that parents are 25 percent more likely to have higher expectations for their daughters, when women leaders are active role models, which thereby creates a home environment to support and nurture their daughters' ambitions.

This parental support, in itself, helps to significantly narrow the gender gap, and create an environment of increased opportunities.

According to Professor Duflo, and I quote;

“We think these benefits are due to a role model effect. Seeing women in charge has persuaded parents and teens that women can run things. This has increased their ambitions. Changing perceptions and giving hope can have a direct impact on reality.” End quote.

The study reveals just how far-reaching the inspirational effect of women leaders can be, and should encourage us to implement quota systems, and other strategies, for the inclusion of women at all levels of political and socio-economic life.

In today’s world, some ten countries in Europe, including Norway, France, and Spain, have already approved quota systems to ensure female representation on corporate boards.

This is an important step forward, towards closing the gender pay gap, but most importantly, to ensure that inspiring examples of female leadership are present within the corporate world.

Having women in positions of authority transforms public perceptions, opening peoples' minds about who can lead, and the qualities that are important in effective leadership.

Therefore, there is no doubt that under-representation of female leadership, in positions of influence and authority, is having a negative impact on young women.

Gender quotas are one strategy which can help to speed up positive change, and encourage the ambitions of the next generation of girls and young women.

Moreover, our efforts to secure gender equality, and the equitable empowerment of women and girls, will be putting the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals, into action.

In particular, it will show our commitment to implement Sustainable Development Goal Number 5, which specifically targets the particular challenges of poverty, exclusion, and violence that women and girls face, around the world.

In order to actively address such challenges, and transform them into opportunities for positive development, we must make use of all the leadership skills at our disposal.

We must include women's contributions, at every level of our cultural, social, economic, and political sectors, and women's skills, perspectives, and attitudes.

Often, women's own experiences of oppression and discrimination are the catalyst that we need, to ensure that such inequalities are not perpetuated, through our policies and practices, in the future.

I believe that this is one of the most important contributions we can make, as women, to achieve the positive transformation of our society.

We can bring our own experiences of what it means to be marginalised, to be under-represented, and to be under-valued, and we can work together to make sure that such examples of discrimination end now.

We must be the champions of social justice, because we have all experienced injustice.

We must bring a message of hope, because we all know how hopeless it can feel, to be unfairly held back or side-lined because of our gender.

We must be courageous activists for peace and wellbeing, by guiding our national and international policies in ways that are inclusive, fully participatory, and respectful of our diversity.

I am confident that with the contributions of Malta's young women, the political future of our nation is in safe hands.

Let us continue working together, building new synergies between the expertise of women who have spent their whole lives working for equality, and the enthusiasm of our young women who are just starting their careers.

I wish you all every success for the future, and I thank you for your attention.