
*Keynote Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at the
Global Meeting of the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society in Paris*

[Salutations]

It is my pleasure to address this Women's Forum, and contribute in the discussion regarding the chosen theme: "Daring to Lead in a Disrupted World."

During the last Women's Conference held in Rome, the topic of my contribution centred around issues of security and peace, within an overarching theme of "Revitalising Europe with Women's Energy for Peace and Prosperity."

This previous theme, chosen for the Women's Forum in Rome, is naturally connected to today's deliberations. I am convinced that today, we will continue to deepen our important discussions, which are so relevant to the daily lives of our communities and societies.

Let me therefore begin by saying that the role of women's leadership, to guide the necessary transformation of our institutions and societies, must take place as part of a collaborative effort, which should embrace all of the stakeholders within our countries.

I believe that though the world is passing through a bleak period, we must stand up to the challenges that are being felt across our world.

We must pluck up courage to take effective action, to implement strategies that ensure gender equity, equality, and full inclusion.

We must find the ways to take the necessary concrete steps, to capitalise on this changing global situation.

We all know that populism has reasserted itself in many of our countries, as an unfortunate response to perceived threats and a sense of unease, which this disruption and uncertainty is causing across the world.

We are living in a world that is experiencing great changes due to new patterns of human movement, as a result of armed conflicts, deep-rooted poverty, the challenges of precarity, and drastic changes in the world's climate.

Women and girls are acutely suffering from the consequences of armed conflict, which is resulting in much higher rates of gender-based violence.

Women and girls are rendered vulnerable to poverty and precarity, due to the loss of jobs and the destruction of vital assets such as a lack of proper educational opportunities and basic shelter.

Essential health services are also severely affected, which is creating spikes in maternal mortality rates. In fact, the most recent data from UN Women, reports that, the rate of maternal mortality is 2.5 times higher in conflict and post-conflict areas.

Women and girls are often on the run to escape conflict-affected countries.

Mass displacement of people has become the order of the day.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, women comprise nearly half of all refugees worldwide. Research shows that gender is a major factor, which creates higher risks for women and girls in such situations.

Let me therefore encourage you, to take this opportunity, during this forum, to respond to some questions, which I would like to pose, to stimulate further thought:

What sort of safe spaces can we create, to listen to the voices of women and girls within our institutions?

How can we empower women and girls to become effective activists for sustainable change?

How can women and girls become the strong agents of their own freedom?

What concrete efforts can we make, for increased female leadership?

Our strategies to promote women's leadership must aim to have an effect on all levels of political, social, and economic life, to ensure the necessary successful transformation, that is much needed in this disrupted world.

We must address the social, cultural, political, and economic marginalisation which is currently being experienced by too many of our girls and women.

Let us not be alienated, and forget that each of our countries is affected by these issues, including developed economies.

We surely cannot afford to forget indicators from the World Economic Forum, which states that it shall take some 170 years to achieve meaningful gender parity on a global scale, if we keep the same pace of today.

It is clear that in order to pursue the goals of gender equity and equality, within our institutions, we must first find effective strategies for reforming our systems.

We must challenge our status quo, which, unfortunately, is maintaining and sustaining the marginalisation of some individuals and groups, and gives privileges to others.

We must be bold, and take practical and timely measures to reform these systems that are not working, to ensure equity, equality, and full inclusion.

I truly believe that we must do much more.

We must, each and every one of us, working together, continue to give visibility to such issues, to ensure that the international community is further committed to do its utmost, to provide the necessary effective systems, for the much needed positive outcomes for our societies, everywhere.

We must create, and free up, spaces of frank and honest discussion about equal gender representation, across the entire structures of our organisations and institutions, at every level of engagement.

I am convinced that in this context, women would feel more secure in the fact that their voices are being heard, and their participation is being valued.

Furthermore, we must hold people in positions of authority accountable for the decisions that they make, within an institutional setting. We cannot accept that certain decisions remain hidden or go unexplained, especially if they are affecting the lives of women and girls.

We must highlight the importance of transparency, and encourage an environment of sharing and support, within our institutional structures, to ensure fully equitable, equal, and inclusive societies.

For example, the 2016 UN Security Council's "Report of the Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security" tells us that 7 out of 10 peace agreements signed in 2015 included gender specific provisions.

However, data from a report entitled "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations", quoted by UN Women, tells us that only 2 percent of chief mediators, 4 percent of witnesses and signatories, and 9 percent of negotiators, involved in peace processes, are women.

This highlights a deep contrast between the fact that peace agreements which include gender specific provisions were reached without the full and equitable participation of women!

How can we expect to transform our institutions, and make them more open to the concerns, aspirations, and experiences of women, when women are not part of the most fundamental processes which seek to end violence and to create peace and prosperity?

Since women are disproportionately suffering the consequences of conflict, I believe even more strongly that women must attain more prominent positions of influence and leadership, so as to be fully participative in the process of attaining and sustaining peace.

Another beneficial strategy, which we should make use of, is to find ways of promoting the free flow of information across our organisations and institutions. We must ensure that knowledge is effectively shared, to identify strengths and weaknesses, so as to tackle the challenges more effectively.

In this context, fora such as the one we are participating in today, gives us an essential platform to reach such aims.

We must acknowledge gender diversity as a vital contributor to the success of all of our institutions, and across our societies, not only because it is a point of moral necessity, but also because it makes good social, economic, and political sense.

According to a recent Gallup study of more than 800 participating business units from the retail and hospitality industries, it was noted that gender-diverse business units have scored better financial outcomes than those dominated by one gender.

Research also suggests that gender-diverse teams perform better than single-gender teams, because of the different perspectives and insights that collaborative teams, which include people of all genders, can bring.

Therefore, respecting gender diversity will not only help our societies, but also our economic sectors. Women must be encouraged to share their talents and expertise, as valued collaborators, with a unique contribution to make across all facets of life.

In order to make these goals a reality, I believe that we must, first and foremost, find ways of making gender equity, equality, and inclusion an issue which is embraced by everybody.

Gender equity, equality, and inclusion cannot remain a closed conversation, with the same people talking about the same issues, year after year.

We must take our aspirations out into the world, to transmit a strong message in favour gender equity, equality, and inclusion.

We must ensure that each and every one of us is aware of the benefits that we can all gain, when half of the world's population is treated with dignity, and given the due space to flourish.

Secondly, I believe that we must continue to invest in research-based data, which empowers people to understand the net benefits that a shift towards gender equality can have, in our social, political, and economic lives.

Thirdly, we must promote strategies for resilience and solidarity. The road towards achieving gender equality and respect for diversity is difficult.

For this reason, we must work together, to be strong and effective in the face of challenges, and also, opposition.

This is why the celebration of gender diversity is a designated goal of the United Nations' Agenda 2030, with its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

Goal Number 5, in particular, commits our nations to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, by 2030. This goal can only be achieved when we call for deep-rooted reforms of our institutions, so that they reflect the depth of our aspirations for equality, equity, and respect for diversity.

Thanks to this United Nations' framework, we know what must be done. So let's do it.

On concluding, let me reiterate, that the role of women's leadership is essential in guiding and transforming our institutions.

I am certain that women's leadership will bring the necessary participation, of all the members of our communities, which can result in stronger, more resilient, and more inclusive societies.

We are all called to be the builders of sustainable peace, particularly at this disrupted and uncertain time in the history of our world.

Sustainable Development Goal Number 5 can only become a reality when we address the fundamental inequality that still keeps too many women, girls, and gender minorities from reaching the fullness of their aspirations.

In the mean time, I look forward to welcoming you all to Malta, in April of next year, for the next Women's Forum. I am sure that we shall continue to deepen our discussions, bringing more focus on the importance of regional and global approaches to gender equity, equality, and inclusion.

In this context, I truly believe that we must create stronger connections between Europe and the Mediterranean, in order to address issues of inequalities, migration, security, and peace-building for the benefit of women, themselves, and the whole of our societies.

Finally, I am convinced that we owe it to our selves, but even more so, to our future generations, to ensure that the world we are shaping is one in which the promises of gender equity, equality, and inclusion, and the full dignity of each and every human being, will become a reality.