
Opening Address delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the PFWS Conference on Couple Relationships in the 21st Century

7th February 2018

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends.

I am pleased to welcome you all to Malta at the opening of this three day conference, which is focused on couple relationships in the 21st Century.

It is truly gratifying to welcome such a globally diverse and multidisciplinary group of participants to this conference, and I hope you shall find some time to enjoy the heritage of our Maltese Islands, during your stay.

Let me also take this opportunity to commend the team at my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, for their dedication, and for organising today's conference, by working closely with the Foundation's National Centre for Family Research, and the International Commission on Couple and Family Relationships.

We are all looking forward to follow the contributions of our exceptional lineup of speakers, panelists, and presenters, who have joined us from all over the world, to discuss, to debate, and to critically engage with the themes of today's conference; namely, the nature of couple relationships, and how different couples are living in the modern world, across diverse cultural and social contexts.

I have no doubt that the next three days will give rise to many thoughtful reflections, as we exchange ideas and contemplate the many ways in which couple relationships are evolving, and taking on new meanings in today's world.

Relationships are, without doubt, one of the most important and central aspects of our lives. In fact, they are a cornerstone of our holistic sense of wellbeing, and are crucial to the healthy development of our communities and our societies.

According to data from various sources, including the UK-based Mental Health Foundation, people who are more socially connected to family, friends, and their communities are, and I quote, “happier, physically healthier, and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected.”

There are also clear links between the quality of parental couple relationships and children’s mental health. This was stated in a research article entitled “Couple Relationships and Children's Mental Health”, published by the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology. The article recommends that our national healthcare policies do more, to provide good-quality care for children and families, by respecting their individual contexts and concerns.

Moreover, my own first-hand experience as former Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity, and my current role as President, has shown me just how important these positive couple relationships are, to determine the holistic wellbeing of our children, our families, our communities, and our society as a whole.

Therefore, let me take this opportunity to urge all of us, in our various capacities, to prioritise our efforts to build, maintain, and promote good relationships, and to effectively tackle the barriers which stop us, and others, from forming them.

Over the past three years, my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has created numerous opportunities to prioritise such strategies for relationship-building. We have created safe and respectful spaces for the people of Malta and Gozo to come together, with the aim of expressing and developing their wellbeing.

On this occasion, through the efforts of the Foundation's National Centre for Family Research, working in collaboration with the International Commission on Couple and Family Relationships, the Foundation is facilitating a dynamic space for us, to advance our knowledge about relationships.

We shall also be able to more clearly explore how such knowledge intersects within the important concept of wellbeing.

This conference comes on the heels of the launch of the most recent study from the National Centre for Family Research, within the President's Foundation, and which was conducted under the direction of Professor Angela Abela. The study explores the expectations, and the lived experiences, of couples in the Maltese Islands.

The study highlights the central impact which contextual factors, within contemporary society, are having on couple relationships today. These factors include the struggle to find time as a couple, and to attain a satisfactory balance between work and family life.

Furthermore, the study explores the expectations of couple relationships and family life, and the pressures which are created by the media, and by a growing sense of alienation due to the consumerist culture.

The perceived fragility of contemporary couple relationships, and the ease with which they all too often break apart, also emerges in these research findings.

In order to build loving, sustainable, and solid relationships, the study reveals that reciprocal respect, trust, and fidelity are essential. The findings of this study highlight the importance of nurturing strong couple relationships, to safeguard the wellbeing of individuals, and also, of their dependent children.

The study draws our attention to the significance of promoting stable couple relationships within our society, in which respectful dialogue, loving care, and mindful collaboration all have a major role to play.

Over the next few days, we will be able to consider this recent work, and other examples of research and good practice, from around the globe. Such opportunities for constructive sharing among researchers and practitioners is of the utmost importance, in order for us to move forward in synergy, with a shared message of wellbeing.

On concluding, let me say that healthy, sustainable relationships and holistic wellbeing are intimately intertwined, and that we cannot achieve one without also safeguarding the other.

Therefore, I urge all of you to make good use of the space which this conference is providing, not only by sharing your findings, but also by being innovative. Let me encourage you to promote practical steps forward, in order to make an active contribution to the social policies and strategies of your various national authorities.

In this way, we shall be ensuring that the central role of couple relationships, which are at the root of all communities and societies, continues to be nurtured and strengthened, and also to be given the importance which they deserve.

I believe that by focusing our attention on the area of couple relationships, we are creating an atmosphere where the wellbeing of each and every one of us is nourished and promoted, for the ultimate benefit of all humanity.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to following the outcomes of this conference.