
Opening Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at a conference organized on the occasion of International Women's Day 2018 by the Malta Institute of Accountants

9th March 2018

It is my pleasure to contribute to the opening of this conference, entitled: “Inspire to Achieve”. I would like to take the opportunity to commend the Malta Institute of Accountants for taking this initiative, to focus on women’s issues and their economic empowerment.

As professionals who are active within Malta’s economic and financial sectors, you are ideally placed to be activists for positive change.

You have the ability to make a strong contribution, to create an environment that is conducive to the socio-economic empowerment of women in the Maltese Islands, but also to be catalysts, to help in the empowerment of our future generations.

Today’s generation of girls and young women is growing up at a time of unprecedented social, political, economic, and environmental change. In response to such challenges, I believe that we require stronger strategies for leadership and innovation.

I also believe that our society, and our whole world, would benefit from strong female role models, whose example will inspire both our young women and our young men, to become true champions of gender equality and socio-economic inclusion.

It was for this reason that EMPOWER was set up. EMPOWER is Malta’s first Platform of Organisations for Women, which has been facilitated by my Foundation ... the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, about a year ago.

EMPOWER is encouraging more women to participate in positions of influence and leadership, while also creating closer synergies among national organisations for women in the world of commerce, business, and social activism.

Such organisations, and initiatives, are so necessary when we know that, according to indicators from the World Economic Forum, it will take an estimated 170 years more, to achieve full gender parity, if we keep the same pace in our journey towards equality.

We cannot afford to wait that long.

This situation indicates a huge democratic deficit, but also, as Nelson Mandela once said, “to deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”

Women’s rights are human rights.

Notwithstanding the large employment gender gap of over 25 percentage points, between Maltese men and women, the 2017 European Institute for Gender Equality Index shows some signs of positive developments. Most importantly, these include an increase in the level of women engaged in full-time employment.

However, according to recent data from Malta’s National Statistics Office, nearly a quarter of Maltese women claim that they are unable to work due to personal and family responsibilities.

Moreover, the European Institute for Gender Equality index notes that one of the most serious challenges for gender equality in Malta is the unequal division of time spent by women and men on unpaid work, which includes care, domestic chores, and social activities.

Another indicator from the latest European Institute for Gender Equality index, shows that the share of women who are members of boards in the largest quoted companies, is only 3.8 percent, compared to an EU average of 21.7 percent.

When it comes to the share of board members of Malta's central bank, only 20 percent are women, as opposed to 80 percent of men.

As regards to the top levels of decision-making, and according to the 2018 European Commission's Report on Equality Between Women and Men, women account for less than 20 percent of our parliamentary members in Malta.

The European Commission's report also echoes the European Institute for Gender Equality index, stating that Malta is among the worst performers on the gender employment gap, in Europe.

Also, according to the European Commission's Report, women across the European Union are still a long way off from achieving full economic independence.

**In comparison to men, women still tend to be employed less;
they are employed in lower-paid sectors;
they work, on average, 6 hours longer per week than men and have fewer paid hours;
and women also face fewer and slower promotions.**

Women in the EU are over-represented in industries with low pay levels, and under-represented in well paid industries, thereby significantly contributing to the gender pay gap, across the European Union.

Definitely, we need to find innovative ways to address this troubling situation, especially in our own society.

We need to ensure that women's voices are being heard, especially where decisions, which directly impact the livelihoods of all of our society, including the future of our women and girls, are being made.

Research shows that economies grow when women achieve full economic participation. Societies become stronger when women and girls are participating, and contributing to the prosperity of our country.

For this reason, I believe we must continue to take action, together, to urgently close the gender pay gap. It is unacceptable, in 2018, that women are still being paid less than men, for the same quality of work.

Women cannot go on being paid less;

women cannot go on being underrepresented in political, social, and economic sectors;

and the authentic voices and concerns of women cannot be ignored in our media and across our culture, as a recent study, by the European Commission, has shown.

We cannot be complacent in the face of such far-reaching discrimination.

Let me reiterate, that I truly believe, that our communities, and our whole society, would benefit from strong female role models, whose example will continue to inspire both our young women and men to become true champions of gender equality, equity, and inclusion.

I augur, that you shall continue working, within your professional capacities, to promote and prioritise the participation of all of our women and girls, alongside men and boys, for the benefit of our communities, of our society, and beyond.

Our efforts to secure gender equality, and the equitable social and economic empowerment of women and girls, are not only an individual and social responsibility.

It is also a responsibility for our country, and for all of humanity. The empowerment of women is part of our commitment to succeed in achieving the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and to actively reach its Sustainable Development Goals into action.

In particular, we must show our commitment to implement, specifically, Sustainable Development Goal Number 5, which targets the need for the empowerment of women and girls, around the world.

In this way, we shall not only be strengthening the economic potential of our Maltese Islands, but also putting into effective practice the democratic ideals that underpin

our commitment to universal human rights ... and I would like to reiterate that women's rights are essentially human rights.

I would like to encourage you to find ways of empowering the women, but also the men, of Malta, together, to realise the need for us all to work together as valued collaborators and contributors.

Hence, I encourage you to be united, in pursuit of sustainable peace, inclusive prosperity, and meaningful wellbeing for all, promoting and safeguarding equality and dignity, for each and every member of our Maltese society, and all of humanity.

I encourage you to be agents of change, in the best interests of equality, inclusion, and universal human rights, in our country.

Thank you.