
Closing Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the PFWS Couple Relationship in the 21st Century Conference,

9 February 2018

Distinguished guests

Dear friends

I would like to share some brief remarks at the end of this important conference.

First of all, I would like to reiterate how proud I am, that this conference has welcomed the participation of professionals, academics, and practitioners, from so many countries. I am so pleased that everybody in this room is united, by a shared commitment to strengthen and to explore couple relationships, for the benefit of our children, our families, our communities, and our societies.

I am also pleased to note that so many people have participated in this conference, in their different capacities, whether as researchers, as policy-makers, and as committed individuals.

It is indeed a pleasure to observe that you are all working in various fields, however, you are all dedicated and determined to continue with your efforts, to support the holistic wellbeing of social relationships, and to explore strategies for improving their wellbeing.

I feel so proud that this collaboration, between my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society through the efforts of the National Centre for Family Research, and the International Commission on Couple and Family Relations, is making a practical contribution towards achieving these essential goals and help to deepen our thinking in this important sector.

The research and narratives shared over the past days have highlighted just how complex, how intricate, and how varied couple relationships are, in the 21st Century. The topics that were discussed have included a focus on the growing diversity of cultural and social contexts, from all over the world, which characterise couple relationships and singledom.

It is encouraging to note that couples of all formations have received due attention. There has also been an emphasis on the therapeutic opportunities, which are open to people, in order to further improve their relationships.

Most interesting is the fact that factors which directly affect the stability of couple relationships, both nationally and internationally, have been addressed by the keynote speakers and various panelists, and I would like to highlight a few of their insightful remarks.

One observation, quoted by Professor Angela Abela during her keynote speech on Wednesday, is that poor relationships are a direct contributor to poor mental health.

It has also been identified that poverty and precarity are triggering factors for depression and distress in relationships, with repercussions on families and entire communities.

Respect, trust, love, and reciprocity were all highlighted as important qualities, in that order, which lead to good relationships, and which make it possible for people to navigate the challenges of life in a more stable, united, and positive way.

Professor Abela also referred to worrying indicators from Malta, that 20 to 25% of people describe themselves as being in distress about their relationships, and that the incidence of marital separations are on the increase.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to call for more research in this essential area of couple relationships, particularly in the Maltese context. Let us consider what practical and proactive steps we can take, to support people who are experiencing difficulty in their relationships.

I believe that, through this conference, we have already taken some steps towards a more holistic understanding of why couple relationships are breaking down, and how they can be more effectively strengthened and nurtured.

I further believe that such a focus, on the strengthening of couple relationships, must now be taken to the next level.

One way this can be done, as has been highlighted by numerous speakers, is to take into account the momentous social and cultural changes, which are occurring in our societies.

As has been said, for example, traditional pathways to marriage are shifting, and marriage is no longer a universal expectation in life. In fact, rates of cohabitation have

increased, and this conference has included several speakers who confirmed that there is recent evidence, which is challenging the idea that cohabitation is a less stable option.

There are other changes to the social context that need to be taken on board, in order for our discussions and policies to more accurately reflect the lived reality of Maltese society, and other societies across the world.

These are occurring in various areas of private and public life, including shifting norms around the idea of romantic love, the balance between work and home life, and notions of gender roles and expectations.

I am also pleased to note that this conference highlighted the lived experiences of a broad diversity of individuals and groups, including LGBTIQ couple relationships, and the particular challenges which are faced by minority communities within our societies.

Let me refer to Dr David Frost, who yesterday stated that, in terms of same-gender relationships, there is much more that needs to be done to address the threats of discrimination and prejudice, which further complicate the full and free flourishing of such relationships.

This places an added burden on the couple, and we must place the responsibility on our authorities, and ourselves, to build wider social structures which effectively eradicate hate crimes and discrimination, where ever they exist.

I believe that, in order for our discussions about all kinds of couple relationship to be relevant, they must more accurately reflect all of the complex realities of our citizens.

Most fundamentally, all of our approaches must be mindful of the intrinsic dignity of each and every member of our respective societies.

Let me also take some time to highlight some other statements, which were made by participants during this conference.

I am especially pleased with the intervention of the Hon Michael Falzon, Minister for Family, Children's Rights, and Social Solidarity, particularly his statement that our country must do more, to effectively implement the Positive Parenting Policy.

This policy will have an immense impact on the wellbeing of our families and communities, and I look forward to seeing its full implementation in the near future.

Let me also mention the contributions of Professors Philip and Carolyn Cohen, who discussed the changes that children bring to the couple relationship.

They highlighted the essential need for healthy relationships within family structures. One of the factors that was highlighted is the positive effects of preventative therapeutic engagement, as a means to reinforce the connection between couples, specifically in relation to bringing up children.

On concluding, let me say that I feel proud that my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, through its National Centre for Family Research, and the International Commission on Couple and Family Relations, have collaborated to make this conference a reality.

Our organisations have become stronger, by being united in our mutual goal of exploring and promoting the wellbeing of individuals, both within couple relationships and singledom.

I am convinced that when our strengths meet, in synergy, we can become a powerful force for positive social change.

I also feel proud of all of our eminent speakers and of each and every one who participated in this important conference.

Finally, I would like to encourage all of us to continue to work and incorporate active strategies for the betterment of our relationships, always mindful of the fact that healthy couple relationships result in more healthy families, communities, and societies.

I believe that pursuing the goal of positive relationship-building is a key component, to keep nurturing societies which truly live up to their obligation, to pursue holistic wellbeing for the benefit of all.

Thank you for your attention.