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*Opening Remarks delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at a seminar entitled “The Concerns of Siblings of Persons with Disability” – part of a project funded by the Fond għall-Għaqdiet Volontarji, organised by Equal Partners Foundation – 13 April 2018*

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[Salutations]

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to share some opening remarks at the opening of this seminar, which, as I am informed, will provide essential opportunities for families, and in particular the siblings of persons with disabilities, to share experiences, and also to discover practical strategies for empowerment and support.

Let me begin by commending the Equal Partners Foundation, and in particular Dr Elena Tanti Burlo and her colleagues, for facilitating this event.

I must also take this opportunity to welcome Mr Don Meyer to Malta. As the director of the Sibling Support Project, his expertise in this area will, I am sure, be of great benefit to all the individuals who are participating in these workshops.

There are more than one billion people with physical and mental disabilities in the world, who face daily challenges. These daily challenges are often shared by their families and loved ones.

However, I believe that it is necessary to provide effective support to all such individuals and their families.

We must take a community-based approach, by expanding our circle of care, to reach out to families. In the process, we shall be honouring our national commitment to universal human rights, as we will be protecting the intrinsic dignity of each person.

It is essential for all stakeholders to work together, creating stronger partnerships between our authorities and civil society activists, to respond to the challenges faced by people with disabilities.

As a Maltese society, we must recognise the importance of accepting, of valuing, and indeed, of celebrating, our diversity.

In this way, we will be breaking the stereotypes and overcoming the prejudices, and incorrect perceptions, which are still preventing the full inclusion of all persons.

I am confident that, thanks to these workshops, you shall address the important contributions that siblings make in the lives of one another, and their particular role as champions of diversity and support.

I am informed that there are over 200 “Sibshops”, all around the world, which specifically target the potential of brothers and sisters to nurture healthy and positive relationships with their disabled siblings.

The needs of such siblings, and the complex dynamics within their families, must be addressed in ways that promote the holistic wellbeing of each and every individual.

When support and solidarity begin within the family, then it will naturally expand into our communities, our society, and ultimately, our whole world.

I am pleased to note that this project was made possible by the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, as this spirit of support and solidarity is at the heart of its mission.

I am also pleased to say that the generosity of the people of the Maltese Islands, through the MCCFF, is creating tangible and dignified opportunities for the empowerment of our people, not only by addressing their present concerns, but also changing underlying cycles of injustice and exclusion.

I believe that the most important changes to our society happen from the grassroots, and so we must also continue to empower civil society and our local communities.

We must continue to offer a helping hand in times of need, by putting our ideals of social solidarity into practical action.

This solidarity, which so clearly exists amongst the siblings within many families, creates an environment where care and service for others is encouraged, by respecting and nurturing the people around us.

Solidarity is an essential value, which strengthens our democracy, ensuring that freedom and justice are safeguarded.

Furthermore, our solidarity with all the members of society implies a special commitment to the most vulnerable and marginalised individuals and groups amongst us.

Each and every one of us must make the commitment, to do all that we can, to end cycles of discrimination, oppression, and social alienation, and replace them with processes of positive peace, sustainable inclusion, and the celebration of diversity.

I augur you much success with the upcoming workshops, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of this seminar.

Thank you for your attention.