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*Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the High-Level Global Conference on the Universal Prohibition of Corporal Punishment, 31 May 2018*

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[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,  
Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to welcome so many professionals, practitioners, policy-makers, politicians, and activists, from all over the world, to my country, for a constructive discussion, and opportunity for sharing, about this vital topic.

Your presence at this year's High-Level Global Conference on the Universal Prohibition of Corporal Punishment is evidence of the commitment that you and your country have, to end all forms of violence against children across the world.

Let me begin my opening remarks by commending the work of the team at my Office and my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, who have collaborated with the Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity, and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion, to make this conference a reality.

I must also commend the work that has been done, and continues to be done, by the government of Malta, to ensure that children's rights are more effectively promoted and prioritised.

It is encouraging to note that the Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity is in the process of further revising the most recent enactment of the Child Protection Act, to further reinforce the protection of our children through appropriate legislation and policy.

Furthermore, the launch of the first National Children's Policy in Malta, on Universal Children's Day last year, is creating a stronger context in which professionals and families can pursue the holistic wellbeing of each and every child in Malta.

The National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting 2016-2024 is another important measure, to also educate Maltese parents about non-abusive and non-violent forms of discipline, and to encourage a society that is more peaceful, more respectful, and more capable of meeting the complex needs of children and families.

My Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has contributed to this environment of discussion, debate, and dialogue, by being a strong voice for children, and being a champion for their rights, for dignified participation.

My Foundation reflects my own deepest belief, that children are the experts on childhood.

If our laws and our policies, regarding children, do not respond to the real experiences and concerns of the child, then they are, at best, incomplete; at worst, they lack authenticity and authority.

Surely, our laws and policies will be irrelevant, if they do not reflect the true aspirations of our children.

For this reason, over the next two days, I encourage you to listen to the voices of children themselves, who have the space during this conference, through the video presentation which was created by the members of the Children's Council; the Young People's Council; and the Children's Consultation Group, within my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society.

We are all here to work together.

We are all here to send a strong message, of zero tolerance towards violence against children, as one united family of nations.

Corporal punishment is not only an unacceptable violation of a child's rights; It is also a serious attack on the child's intrinsic human dignity, and undermines the wellbeing of our communities and societies.

As we all know, children develop their personalities and attitudes based upon the experiences they have received, particularly at the most formative periods in their young lives.

This should be fully understood by all caregivers, within the context of the far-reaching and long-term negative effects that violence can have upon the development of a child.

Corporal punishment does not improve children's behaviour. Rather, it demonstrates aggressive attitudes which can later manifest in antisocial and destructive activities.

I am proud to say that, in February 2014, the Maltese Parliament amended the Criminal Code to effectively prohibit all corporal punishment of children in the Maltese Islands. Before this reform, the exercise of "moderate" corporal punishment was accepted.

However, the 2014 amendment added a clause to the article, clarifying that no form of corporal punishment can be considered “moderate”.

There can be no excuse for physically harming children, because there is nothing reasonable about inflicting violence upon our children.

Outside of the home, corporal punishment is also entirely unlawful in the Maltese Islands, in our schools, day care centres, alternative care settings, and penal institutions.

In this regard, while we must acknowledge that Malta has made significant legislative progress, changing the hearts and minds requires a cultural shift, backed up by appropriate and effective policies and support.

For this reason, I believe that it is crucial for us to prioritise a cultural change in all of our societies around the world.

Where the culture of corporal punishment still exists, we must move beyond attitudes of fear, of shame, and of silence.

In such circumstances, we must also create the necessary opportunities for healing, within all families and communities.

To achieve this great shift, from a culture of corporal punishment to a culture of dignity, we must educate parents and caregivers, to pursue non-violent and non-abusive forms of discipline, which are rooted in dialogue, respect, and care.

We must also ensure that our countries, and the international community as a whole, work together to safeguard all children from any sort of violence.

The path forward is clear, as strongly reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the most widely ratified UN Convention in the world.

The CRC highlights the fact that countries are duty bound to “take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence.”

In addition, countries across the world are also committed to achieve the United Nations’ Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals.

SDG 16 specifically aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, with target 16.2 specifically aiming to end all forms of violence against children by 2030.

Abolishing corporal punishment must be an essential component of the strategies in all of our countries, to end every form of violence against children.

I believe that the media has a vital role to play, by working in synergy to promote processes of legal reform, and social policy measures, in order to help in bringing about the necessary transformation.

The international community cannot stand by, while violence against children is trivialised, normalised, or ignored in so many parts of the world.

Humanity must hold itself to account.

I would like to take this opportunity to urge closer collaboration between civil society activists and the respective authorities of our countries, to give more visibility, and to put the issue of the abolition of corporal punishment on the global agenda.

By standing up against corporal punishment, we are uniting for the equal rights of each and every child.

We are affirming our commitment to protect the human dignity of our children, and to safeguard their physical and mental integrity.

On concluding, I would like to state that if we are truly committed in our efforts to build peace among our nations, we must surely begin by making peace in our homes.

The world has never needed peace so desperately. We must ensure that our children are effectively shown that violence is never a solution.

Only respect, dignity, and love can change the world.

Thank you for your attention.