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*Opening Address, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at a Conference on Psychiatry and the Arts, organized by Mount Carmel Hospital, 13 July 2018*

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It is my pleasure to welcome you all to Verdala Palace.

Verdala is a perfect example of how the natural and built environment complement one another, in enriching ways. For this reason, it is an ideal venue for the subject of this prestigious two-day conference, which, as I am told, will explore the links between psychiatry, mental health, and the Arts.

Let me begin by commending the organisers of this conference, and the important collaboration that has been created among the University of Malta; Malta's Psychiatric Services; the Clinical School of Clare College, Cambridge; the Centro Studi Psichiatrici in Italy; and the Collaborating Centre for Values-Based Practice in Health and Social Care, of St Catherine's College, Oxford.

In particular, I must thank Dr Anton Grech and Dr Mark Agius, for their efforts to make this conference a reality. It has come at an ideal time, while Malta is celebrating Valletta's term as European Capital of Culture for 2018.

It is the goal for Valletta, as European capital of culture, to not only showcase Maltese identity and heritage, but to highlight the spirit of solidarity and friendship which was the foundation for our European Union, and Malta's aspirations to connect with communities and societies from all across the world, on all levels.

I am informed that the line-up for this conference will engage with the Arts in a broad and comprehensive way, to include a focus on the visual arts, the performing arts, architecture, dance, and music.

I am pleased that there are many distinguished speakers, who will address these topics in more detail throughout the conference. Therefore, I will share some of my thoughts, to hopefully stimulate further your deliberations over the next two days.

First and foremost, I am sure we would all agree that what distinguishes the Arts from other skills is their direct application of human creativity, in order to create new and inspiring ways of understanding the world.

I believe that such creativity is essential for the holistic wellbeing of every individual and community, across society.

Creativity, in its most fundamental form, is an imaginative process, which takes different kinds of information and brings them together in synthesis. In so doing, new ideas are created, and old ones are positively transformed.

Creativity is a dynamic process in constant evolution, generating endless innovation and reflecting life in all of its vigour.

Creative people are open to diverse experiences, and are able to think “outside the box”. This gives them the opportunity to be more independent in their judgements and actions, thereby discovering opportunities for connection with the world around them.

Creativity is a catalyst for critical thinking, which, I believe, is a skill that we must emphasise in our society, especially among our children and young people.

For this reason, we must ensure that all voices are valued, and have respectful spaces in which to be heard. These include the voices of people of all ethnicities, genders, and generations.

I believe that, in particular, we must support members of minority groups or other communities, which are excluded from full participation in mainstream culture and, therefore, are at higher risks of vulnerability and precarity.

Women are one such group, and I hope that a gender-sensitive approach to the subject of creativity, psycho-social wellbeing, and participation in the Arts will be explored, during this conference.

The access that women have, in the cultural sector, is an important indication of their ability to promote policies and projects which reflect the needs, concerns, and aspirations of women in a realistic and proactive way.

This makes the latest data on cultural employment, provided by Eurostat, all the more disturbing.

Indicators state that Malta is one of six EU Member States where women's shares in cultural employment are the lowest recorded in the European Union.

More must be done to address this troubling situation, and to create a context of equality and inclusion for women and girls.

There are other areas in which we should focus our attention, to maximise the potential for creativity in our society.

As we all know, Malta and the rest of the European Union are experiencing a rapidly ageing population. Data from the European Commission is telling us that the share of people aged 80 years or more will be more than double current demographics, by 2080.

This will mean that 13% of the population of the EU will require specialised geriatric care and support.

In this context, decades of research have demonstrated that, in people with dementia and other neurological conditions, the ability to create art remains long after speech and language have diminished.

Research has also shown that creating visual art reduces stress and promotes relaxation in people who are hospitalised, or cannot leave their homes due to serious illnesses.

Recent research suggests that, to avoid cognitive decline, doing creative activities may be more effective than merely appreciating creative works.

A 2017 report from the Mayo Clinic Study of Ageing indicated that people over 70 who did crafts projects had a lower risk of developing mild cognitive impairment than did those who engaged in more passive forms of artistic appreciation.

These findings were preceded by a 2014 German study, which showed that retired people who painted and sculpted had a marked improvement in their spatial reasoning and emotional resilience.

On concluding, let me reiterate my firm conviction that the links between sustainable mental, emotional, and social wellbeing are profoundly connected to the celebration of creativity in our communities and throughout society.

We must continue to promote opportunities for creativity amongst our children and young people; minority and vulnerable groups; and the ageing populations of our various countries.

In this way, we shall be promoting resilience and long-term development, while also preparing our citizens to face the challenges of a rapidly changing world, with open minds and a sense of innovation.

I augur all of you an informative conference, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of your deliberations.

Thank you for your attention.