

**Lecture given by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta – part of the Mary McAleese Women in Leadership Lecture Series, at Dublin City University, 11 February 2019**

**I am truly honoured to have been invited to this prestigious university, to deliver a lecture about the role of women in leadership.**

**I would like to commend Professor Mary McAleese, who instituted this series of Women in Leadership Lectures.**

**Professor McAleese and myself are in a small minority of women who have experienced the life of being a President of a European country.**

**Although we come from different regions of Europe, I am convinced that we have both faced similar experiences due to the fact that we are women, in a role that has been traditionally perceived to be for men.**

**I am sure that many of the women present here today, have experienced similar challenges. Yet we have, in our own ways, achieved the necessary empowerment, overcome the many challenges, to be leaders and role models.**

**I believe that being examples for our younger generations is one of the most important contributions we can make, as women in leadership.**

**Role models are very important for our younger generations. This has been my tangible experience. Both when I was Minister, and then, when I came to the Presidency, I had the experience of young girls coming up to me and asking me: “President, what should I study to become President?”.**

**I would like also to share another experience with you. This is the Girl2Leader Campaign, which is a global initiative launched by the Women Political Leaders Forum in 2017.**

**As patron of this worldwide initiative, workshops held in Malta during these last two years, on the occasion of the International Day of the Girl, have done so much to empower leadership among girls and young women, through the Girl2Leader Campaign.**

**We created an important dialogue with students from around the Maltese Islands to share their own experiences, and discuss their future aspirations.**

**I was truly inspired by the narratives that were shared by the participating students. Their narratives clearly showed, that the situation was different, from when I was a young woman myself.**

**When I was sixteen, I was the only girl to stand for election for the Students' Union of the college I attended. Nowadays, I am impressed with the many more girls who are participating in political life, even from a young age.**

**This fact gives me great satisfaction, as girls need to believe in themselves, and come forward alongside boys. This is the way to address the long-standing democratic deficit. Such participation is imperative, because I believe that young people must be the game changers to achieve equality and equity in our societies.**

**We definitely need the participation of our youth in the political life of our countries, not only to combat negative gender stereotypism, but moreover, to provide positive and relevant perspectives for an ever-changing world.**

**In this context, let me quote some of the participants of the workshops we held last October in Malta, as part of the Girl2Leader Campaign.**

**One participant, Maria, said that, she believes that “too many people in Malta say that women are not suitable for political roles. This perspective needs to change, and we are the ones who will change it.”**

**Another student, Matthew, had said that “Unfortunately, in Malta and all over the world, women have to deal with stereotypes and unfair expectations. This situation leads to discrimination. Our society looks at feminism and women’s empowerment as a movement of hatred against men, and this leads to people being scared of change.”**

**Another Student, Annemarie, said that “Girls need to fight injustice and be the change, with authentic power. Someday I want to be able to share my opinion in a group of guys and have my opinion received as just another opinion, not prejudiced because I am a girl.”**

**It was truly encouraging to witness the students, aged 16 – 19, sharing their deeply held beliefs that women and men must be equally respected, they must be equally valued, and they must be equally encouraged to share their experiences and aspirations.**

**This is, above all, what a commitment to equality and inclusion is all about.**

**When we speak of equality and women leadership, we are also committed to human rights.**

**Last December, the international community celebrated the 70th Anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.**

**This year ahead of us is providing us with an opportunity to affirm the full force of the United Nations declaration, by endeavouring further and harder for equality and women's rights - as women's rights are human rights.**

**In this way, we will be making a practical effort to effectively implement universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.**

**If we do not recognise the rights of women, especially women who are experiencing discrimination, oppression, and injustices, there cannot be a serious commitment to human dignity and wellbeing.**

**Gender equality must be at the heart of our democracies, for our democracies to be relevant, and to thrive.**

**It is evident that we are at a most precarious period of time, in the history of our planet. Environmental degradation, social tensions, and violent conflicts are threatening our world, and are becoming the order of the day.**

**For this reason, we cannot be complacent.**

**We need to empower our girls and our boys, to be activists, for the much needed positive change in our societies.**

**We need our girls and women to equally join forces with men and boys, in the leadership of our communities and societies.**

**I am sure that there are many young women, who are leaders in their respective communities. I would like to urge each and every one of them to use their influence, to hold their authorities and institutions accountable to their responsibility, to make gender equality a reality in our lifetime.**

**Achieving gender equality is also part-and-parcel of the global commitment, made by all of our governments in 2015, to implement the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.**

**In particular SDG Number 5 highlights the importance of gender equality, equity, and empowerment, and a sustainable investment in the potential of all of our children.**

**This international commitment is all the more important when we recognise that 1 in every 8 persons in the world is a girl, who has unique challenges, needs, and aspirations for the future.**

**Unfortunately, even in the European Union there are unacceptable disparities between women and men.**

**According to last year's "Report on Equality between Women and Men in the EU", women across Europe have the legislative right to equality, empowerment, and safety, but for many women in the EU, these rights have not yet been translated into practical improvements in their daily lives.**

**As we all know, education is the key for a more sustainable, empowered, and equal world.**

**However, according to the latest indicators from the United Nations, an estimated 131 million girls around the world remain out of school and face multiple barriers to education.**

**This is most worrying.**

**According to the latest data from the UN, the number of out of school girls at primary level is growing, from 32 million in 2015 to 34 million in 2016.**

**The "Report on Equality between Women and Men in the EU", which I made reference to earlier, shows how this backsliding is taking place in the lives of women, even in certain European Union Member States.**

**The report indicates that, “in some countries, the political and economic participation of women is moving backwards. An abundance of data and statistics show that women, who make up half of our population, are under-represented in decision-making positions in politics and in business, and still earn on average 16 per cent less than men across the European Union.”**

**Unfortunately, discrimination is so deeply embedded within our societies, that it sometimes goes ignored or unseen, and is eventually accepted as the norm.**

**We must urgently ask ourselves what is going wrong, in our societies, after seven decades of saying that we are committed to the implementation of universal human rights?**

**To address these concerns, I believe that we must, first of all, overcome dangerous and discriminatory mentalities, while also working harder to encourage and support young women to believe in themselves, and to take up leadership roles.**

**In Malta, just as in Ireland and so many of our countries, we have all the necessary legislation in place to enjoy full gender equality and equity.**

**However, we need to do more to change underlying prejudice and attitudes, within our families, communities, and society.**

**We need to change this situation, because there are still cultural and social barriers that are holding back our progress, from enjoying full and effective gender equality and equity.**

**According to the “Support for Women and Girls’ Leadership” Report, published by the Overseas Development Institute, which is a UK think-tank, early intervention for girls is an essential factor, to help develop, and encourage their critical leadership skills.**

**The report highlights the importance of a supportive family environment, the presence of role models, and a formal educational system that values the participation of girls and young women.**

**By investing in leadership skills, for girls and young women, our societies can progressively change stereotypes and end gender discrimination, by tackling it at its source.**

**Furthermore, I am convinced that giving more visibility to examples of female leadership will inspire our younger generation.**

**The media has an important role in all this .... When the media creates more awareness of the excellent work being done by women leaders, it creates opportunities to promote the much-needed role models ..... to normalise the idea and give more visibility to the presence of women in roles of authority.**

**I believe that women need to work together more. I also believe that women can truly shift the balance, if we work together.**

**On the other hand, the endeavours of civil society is crucial, to keep gender equality and equity high on national and international agendas.**

**Women's organisations are best placed to promote gender equality and equity. Throughout history, powerful coalitions of women, working together in networks and organisations, have been catalysts to bring about improvements in the lives of communities and societies.**

**For example, the International Alliance of Women, which was founded in 1904, is still one of the most active international NGOs, working to promote women's human rights around the world.**

**Let me also mention the groundbreaking work of the African Women's Development Fund, which is the first foundation to support the work of women's**

**rights organisations throughout Africa, by linking together over 1,300 civil society groups in a powerful network of solidarity and support.**

**Let me also draw your attention to a study, co-authored by Professor Esther Duflo, who specialises in Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics, within the Massachusetts Institute for Technology.**

**The report highlights the importance of female role models, to nurture the ambitions of girls and young women.**

**The report indicates that observing inspirational women in political life encourages girls and young women to pursue their aspirations in a tangible way.**

**Professor Duflo reports that the gender gap in education for teenage girls is reduced, in areas where women have a role within local governance.**

**The report highlights the importance of parental support, saying that when parents see women in leadership positions, within their communities, they are 25 percent more likely to have higher expectations for their daughters.**

**This creates a home environment which is supportive of the ambitions of our girls and young women, also helping to narrow the gender gap in educational areas.**

**According to Professor Duflo, “these benefits are due to a role model effect. Seeing women in charge has persuaded parents and teens that women can run things. This has increased their ambitions. Changing perceptions and giving hope can have a direct impact on reality.”**

**Therefore, it is clear that having women in positions of authority transforms public perceptions. It opens peoples’ minds about the qualities that a leader should have, and who can be a figure of authority within our societies.**

**When female leaders are under-represented, this has a direct and long-term negative impact on our girls and young women.**

**For us to effectively reach equality, women must not only be collaborators. Women must equally share positions of leadership, to ensure that a positive, sustainable and long-lasting improvement is achieved in our regions and our world.**

**In my role as the President of Malta, and as one of only two female heads of state within the Mediterranean, I have had first-hand experiences of the specific challenges being faced by women and girls.**

**Through my experiences, I can say that many of these challenges are due to multi-layered and intersectional instances of social, economic, and cultural discrimination, injustices, and inequalities.**

**While we must certainly speak about these challenges, let me begin by reminding all of us that women have, throughout our history, stood out as inspiring contributors to the prosperity and the progress of the world.**

**Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to the late Fatima Mernissi, the celebrated Moroccan scholar and feminist.**

**Mernissi said that “the real mistake of women was to let the space of producing history fall into the hands of men alone.”**

**I truly agree with such a statement.**

**We must correct this mistake, by creating and safeguarding spaces to celebrate the history of women. Such spaces can only be effectively maintained when they are supported by strategies of social and economic empowerment.**

**Let me draw your attention to an example from my own part of the world.**

**The “Women’s Empowerment in the Mediterranean Region Report”, commissioned by the European Committee of the Regions, last year, states that differences in opportunities between women and men cannot only be explained by gaps in educational attainment.**

**Rather, it is the socio-cultural norms and the resulting lack of supportive structures regarding women, and their place in the family and their communities, which results in discrimination within the workplace and society.**

**Furthermore, the report highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive data of the situation of women in the Mediterranean Region.**

**Dear friends,**

**I believe that we must be the catalyst, to address gender inequalities, which create unnecessary social tensions in our communities and in our nations.**

**We must, through our work, achieve effective gender equality, to build a culture of positive peace.**

**As we know, the participation of women is essential, to achieve the effective prevention and resolution of conflict, whilst also sowing the seeds of positive peace.**

**In this context, let me mention some powerful indicators.**

**According to data from the International Peace Institute, the participation of women creates peace agreements that are 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years.**

**Studies conducted by Erik Melander, Professor of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University in Sweden, have found that when more women are politically involved, there are markedly lower risks of civil war, and a reduced likelihood of political violence.**

**Furthermore, a global survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union has found that the participation of women in the world of politics restores trust in governments.**

**According to the same global survey, the participation of women in politics also increases the amount of attention paid by political authorities, to social welfare, legal protection, and the transparency of governments and the business sector.**

**The World Bank also reported that higher levels of gender equality are linked to a lower risk of violent conflict, both within and between countries.**

**On the other hand, until last year, only 2 percent of peace mediators were women, and women made up a mere 8 percent of negotiators.**

**These figures, from UN Women, are a clear indication of just how little space is found for the contributions of women in the peace process, even though we have precise, fact-based data to support the importance of women's participation.**

**It is sad to realise that only two women in history have served as chief negotiators.**

**Therefore, it is clear to me, that the continued failure to involve women in the peace process is ignoring the scientifically proved effectiveness of women.**

**As we all know, without peace, our efforts to promote gender equality and justice, will be fruitless.**

**I hope that the European Commission's Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality, which will draw to a conclusion this year, will give us the necessary information to more effectively address the cultural and social dynamics that perpetuate gender-based discrimination in our countries.**

**On concluding, I believe that the level of gender equality in our countries is a reflection of how far we have come, to build effective democracies and to work for sustainable development.**

**I would like to encourage everyone, as one human family, to explore innovative ways of empowering and inspiring women, especially our younger generations, to be today's champions and the future leaders of our world.**

**Thank you for your attention.**