

Speech delivered by HE Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the "Bringing Mediterranean Women together in pursuit of peace, prosperity and wellbeing through the sustainable development of Mediterranean Tourism" Workshop during the Mediterranean Tourism Forum organized by the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation, 15 February 2019

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to address this workshop, and to share some reflections that I hope will stimulate your deliberations.

I will focus my remarks on the role of women, as crucial collaborators to achieve peace, prosperity, and wellbeing through sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean.

Whenever we talk about the role of tourism as a motivator for long-term sustainability, I believe that this is also an invitation to our authorities and industry stakeholders, to promote the equal and equitable participation of women within the sector.

Before going further into my contribution, I must once again commend the work of Tony Zahra and Andrew Agius Muscat, together with their collaborators and the board of governors, for sharing the vision of the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation.

Together, we are uniting people from the Mediterranean and beyond, in a common pursuit for peace and prosperity, through tourism.

Furthermore, I am pleased to note that this gender perspective is being brought into the industry, because there is still an unacceptable lack of scientific research in many of our countries, about how women are being impacted by the sectors of tourism and hospitality.

I believe it is vital for us to keep highlighting the vital role that women can, and do, play, in order to make our commitment to sustainability, through the tourism industry, more effective.

To do so, we need to invest in the necessary data, to develop practical policies which empower and incentivise women to be more active partners in the future of tourism within our Mediterranean Region.

In this context, I hope that you will consider possibilities for partnerships, between private sector stakeholders and educational or research institutions, to make this investment a reality.

Such research is all the more important, because, according to the “Global Report on Women in Tourism”, commissioned by UN Women, tourism is one of the world's largest generators of wealth and employment.

This same report states that tourism further provides a wide range of income-generation opportunities for women, particularly in developing regions.

A more recent overview of the role of women in the industry was published last year, in a special issue of the Journal of Tourism, Culture and Communication.

This special issue, entitled “Gender and Tourism”, explores particular strengths and challenges that the industry is creating in the lives of women in the Mediterranean, and beyond.

For example, it revealed that tourism entrepreneurship is an excellent pathway for women to negotiate discriminatory social norms and power dynamics, which are still prevalent in our societies.

It is essential for our countries to invest in more opportunities for women to start their own businesses and provide their own services, if we are truly committed to gender equality and empowerment.

Unfortunately, according to the latest data provided by the National Statistics Office in Malta, the number of female entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry is negligible in the Maltese Islands.

When we take this fact in context, we can see that women are not being enabled to achieve entrepreneurship opportunities and therefore, to effectively address discriminatory imbalances of power.

Therefore, it is imperative that we take action, now.

We must do more, to make the tourism industry a more gender-inclusive and gender-conscious industry, throughout our region.

Another important study entitled “Tourism, Cultural Activities and Sustainability”, published last year in the Journal of Tourism and Management Studies, states that culture is becoming the preferred activity of tourists visiting the Mediterranean Region, and that women have a central role to play, to expand cultural and community-based projects.

We know that women are significant contributors to the cultural fabric of our societies, thanks to the vibrant social networks and investment in cultural capital which women make possible.

Improving our knowledge about the factors that contribute to new consumer demands will, therefore, have positive benefits for women, and all of our communities.

A multi-year study, published in the Handbook of Sustainability and Social Science Research in 2017, proposes the concept of “super-diversity” as a key for the future of a more gender inclusive, diverse, and participative tourism industry.

The study highlights the importance of collaborations between national and local government, working alongside civil society stakeholders and the private sector, to ensure that women and men are equally empowered by the benefits of tourism and the hospitality sector.

Such super-diversity means investing in the perspectives of women as the holders of cultural capital, and as key implementors of sustainable tourism initiatives in the future.

Another report, entitled “Women: Empowerment through Tourism”, which was included in the United Nations World Tourism Organisation's action plan on women's empowerment in tourism, states that the participation of women in tourism has a positive impact across various levels of engagement.

The examples given in this report show us that tourism is a powerful promoter for equitable and sustainable development, especially in marginalised communities. Such community level empowerment is the direct result of empowering women and their families.

Data from this report also reveals that empowering women translates into direct economic profits, which are felt across society as a whole.

I am convinced that, through the efforts of the tourism industry, it is possible for us to take tourism's strategies for sustainable development to the next level, by prioritising the visible participation, and more so, the leadership potential, of women.

As we all are aware, women definitely bring their own particular skills and abilities, with the capacity to make a unique contribution to the prosperity of our communities and businesses.

This fact is also underlined by the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals.

In particular SDG Number 8 focuses on the importance of sustainable economies, and its ninth target specifically says that the international community must devise and implement policies that promote sustainable tourism.

SDG 8 is putting pressure on all of us to be more innovative in our endeavours, to create new jobs and promote local culture and products.

The tourism sector also has the responsibility to take effective action, to achieve the environmental mandate of Sustainable Development Goals Number 14 and Number 15.

These goals, to preserve land-based and marine ecosystems, are part of a holistic culture of dignity and respect, which we must show towards our precious planet.

However, such a culture cannot be achieved without, first and foremost, addressing Sustainable Development Goal 5, to make gender equality, equity, and inclusion a reality in our lifetime.

Let me urge all of you to make every effort possible, to ensure that the tourism industry keeps developing its potential, as an enabler of equality, peace, and prosperity.

The women of the Mediterranean are ideal ambassadors of sustainable tourism, because it is women who are so often at the heart of the family, the community, and society.

When women are given their rightful visibility, and the tools they need to prosper and be empowered, then our entire Mediterranean Region will reap long-term benefits, for many decades to come.

Thank you.