

SPEECH BY  
H.E. MARIE-LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA  
FORMER PRESIDENT OF MALTA

## Embracing Diversity for a Peaceful World – May 2019

Let me start by thanking BPW Europe for inviting me to be here with you today.

In our endeavour to understand the concept of what constitutes peace, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides us with the necessary guidance and inspiration.

In fact, the very first sentence of its preamble underlines that for peace to be achieved in the world, everyone must feel that they can enjoy their full dignity and have effective access to their fundamental rights.

This same sentence also makes reference to the 'human family' – which is a key concept that needs to be central to our thinking, on what constitutes a peaceful world.

***This definitely means, that embracing diversity is fundamental to peace.***

Diversity is multidimensional. It can refer to differences in age, gender, sexual orientations, ability, socio-economic status, and culture.

There is so much to say about each, that it is impossible to focus on them all and do them justice.

Therefore, the focus of my contribution today will mainly be on cultural diversity.

Achieving global peace has been, for millennia, a difficult objective. Unfortunately, after 70 years since the establishment of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is a value chain to the attainment of peace, conflicts remain a reality in many parts of the world.

However, on a more positive note, the international community remains committed to peace. In fact, the International community, in 2015, approved the Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations member states, at that time, agreed, once again, to promote peaceful and inclusive societies.

The United Nations was established following the atrocities of a terrible world war, however, seventy years later, war is still a reality in many parts of the world, where people are subsequently forced to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere.

We all know that refugees often face terrible fates.

As a woman from the Mediterranean Region, and more precisely, from the central Mediterranean route, my country has seen whole boatloads of people reaching Malta, since a long time ago.

I personally have witnessed:

- *Children, separated from their parents.*
- *Husbands, wives, children, torn with despair, desperately looking for their family members.*
- *Shock-stricken and emotionally-broken mothers and fathers looking for their children.*
- *Traumatised children looking for their siblings.*

These tragedies continue to this day in the Mediterranean and across so many other regions in the world. Unfortunately, only the lucky few who manage to survive, such traumatic situations are then welcomed by people of good faith and communities that embrace diversity.

Yet believing in diversity is not enough.

Diversity needs to be part of a wider and more comprehensive rights-based approach.

We need a change in culture and mentality.

We need a change in attitudes and behaviour.

We need to uphold diversity, as a way of life.

Education is a key component for this approach - We need to build a culture of positive peace - as peace is not the absence of war.

Peace can be achieved when each and every one of us feel valued, respected, and embraced in one integrated society, and in one human family.

In many of our countries, we speak of integration and inclusion, however, many in our respective societies, think that integration and inclusion mean that “the other,” “the stranger,”

“the migrant,” must be subjected to give up his or her culture, and adopt and adapt to our culture.

Integration and inclusion is all about respecting each other’s cultures, and the enjoyment and celebration of our diversity.

***Integration is not assimilation or segregation.***

It is important that our education systems adapt and change so to become environments that welcome, accept, and respect diverse cultures.

Our schools have to be supported to have a proper conducive environment to embrace the different cultures.

Our schools should provide, in essence, a safe environment where children from diverse cultures can come together in a spirit of mutual acceptance and respect.

Such effective, inclusive, education will surely foster an environment where children can thrive together, and respect each other, irrespective of their origin, faith or colour.

***Schools must therefore become the safe spaces, where respect for diversity can flourish and be celebrated.***

Creating safe spaces in schools is a priority for my Foundation, the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. Through our flagship outreach activity, which we called ‘The Secret Garden,’ we reach hundreds of schoolchildren annually, with activities that promote and encourage, inclusivity, equality, diversity, tolerance, respect, and above all, peace.

Through this invaluable work, we are creating a community of learning, to help build the necessary resilience within our communities. This is a way of sowing the seeds, to reap the benefits of an inclusive, equal, and equitable society.

Our efforts at embracing diversity need to be accompanied by an overarching strategy for inclusion. This must prioritise a positive peace approach, that champions respect and solidarity, with diverse groups, that today make up the social fabric of our diverse communities.

Societies are becoming multicultural and diverse in a relatively short period of time. Globalisation is helping this rapid, social change. As much as globalisation has brought economic and technological changes, globalisation is helping people to seek new pastures.

Therefore, migration is not only due to conflict, poverty, and/or environmental degradation, but also, because societies are aspiring more, and beyond their shores or borders.

Therefore, the necessary adjustment to cater for such rapid change needs a vision, and leadership, to happen at the same pace.

Professionals, stakeholders and all those involved, therefore need to be adequately supported and trained.

One such initiative of support in Malta is spearheaded by the Malta Trust Foundation, an organisation which I chair. It provides free psychological support to students within a school in Malta, which is hosting more than forty nationalities.

Such support services need to be given to children, families, and all stakeholders who are experiencing and living through these changes.

Education and support need to be one part of a bigger picture.

As members of communities in our respective countries, we need to speak up, to highlight the benefits of diversity.

***We need to highlight the social and economic wealth that we, as diverse communities, derive from embracing diversity.***

On community-level, we also need to engage with one another and create safe spaces, where people from different social backgrounds can come together, to share and learn about each other's cultures and beliefs. Such engagement is an opportunity, to identify the benefits of embracing diversity, and also to identify challenges that exist.

***Each and every one of us needs to adopt such an approach, whether we are women, men, parents, professionals, workers, policy makers, locals, migrants, we need to work in synergy to reach this objective.***

We need to deepen and appreciate our understanding of the value added, that diversity brings, so as to ensure a harmonious way of life, as local communities, and above all as one human family.

***We must seek what unites us, rather than what divides us.***

This deepening of our understanding towards each other's cultures will result in a shift of mentality, which is so necessary. We must move away from discourse that fudges integration and assimilation.

Integration needs to be a situation where everyone can live together in peace. It is a state where all those involved can identify and embrace the common elements that unite us as human beings, irrespective of who we are, or where we come from.

If this is achieved, resistance to diversity is replaced with respect, appreciation, and a society that truly embraces, and celebrates our universal human rights.

In essence, changes in approach and mentality, need to happen from all sides.

The onus for change should not be seen as the sole responsibility of refugees and migrants.

Change should come from within each and every one of us.

To ensure a peaceful world we need to work for peace that stems from within us.

***Therefore it is the responsibility of every one of us to change and adapt.***

On an international level, we need to look at the root causes that force people to flee from their homes.

We need to examine and address causes of unrest and conflict.

In the words of the UN Secretary General António Guterres we need a holistic approach which prioritises prevention, and addresses the root causes of conflict by integrating peace, sustainable development and human rights.

That is why Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is critical for addressing inequalities and achieving a peaceful world.

It takes a holistic approach to address inequalities and strive towards sustainable development for all.

The commitment by the international community *to leave no one behind* is an unprecedented commitment, that through the Sustainable Development Goals, aims at helping all societies, and in particular, the most vulnerable people across the globe.

In this context, I would like to make reference to a statement jointly issued by Eurochild, an organisation which I was recently elected President of, and a number of other organisations, to emphasise the need for the implementation of the United Nations Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals.

In this statement, we called on the international community to endeavour harder to put an end to extreme poverty in all its forms, by raising incomes, providing universal social protection systems and ensure equitable access to quality essential public services such as health, education, nutrition, water sanitation and child protection.

Also in this context, we must also look closer to home. We need to analyse deeply, to understand how individual young people, who have been born and bred in our democracies, have been tempted into radicalisation.

We urgently need to determine, what effective initiatives can be taken, to address the failures in our democracies, that have not foreseen the rise of extremism within Europe itself.

Fact-based information needs to be shared amongst us, and with people worldwide, so as to counteract against the misinformation, and fake news, that is being disseminated by populist political actors..... that are adopting a scaremongering tactic.

Although, I urge our authorities to pull up their socks, however, I cannot expect governments to address these challenges on their own.

Civil society organisations are fundamental to facilitate communication, by sharing the correct information, and help to instil change and bring people together.

Civil society organisations therefore need to be on the ground and share their knowledge, expertise, feedback and recommendations with decision makers.

I believe that NGOs worldwide need to be at the heart of promoting an appreciation of diversity, so as to help in building a culture of positive peace for our harmonious co-existence.

That is why I would like to commend and encourage BPW to continue promoting an appreciation of diversity and to further pursue efforts towards a peace in the world.

Let me once again urge you, to remember that embracing diversity is essential for a peaceful world.

Nonetheless, we need to look at a wider picture.

We need to adopt a comprehensive multi-dimensional approach that foster - *a world built on the respect of human dignity and human rights for the benefit of all of our, one human family.*

The participation of women in these processes is essential to achieve the effective prevention and resolution of conflict, whilst also sowing the seeds for a culture of positive peace.

Unfortunately, recent indicators, show us that, only 2 percent of peace mediators were women, and women only made up a mere 8 percent of peace negotiators.

These indicators, 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 and success of women's participation.

The continued failure to involve women in the peace process is ignoring the scientifically proved effectiveness of women in this regard. This needs to change if we truly believe in equality, and yearn for peaceful co-existence.

On concluding, after seventy years since the establishment of the United Nations and its vision for a peaceful world, our mission is still not accomplished.

Throughout the decades, different initiatives, like the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals continue to push for a world that respects, equality, diversity, equity, inclusion, and human rights.

In real terms, we are still struggling to embrace diversity and to live in peace as one human family.



***Therefore, we need to work harder.***

As states, as communities, as international organisations, as civil society activists, we need to work in synergy.

If we work in unity, resistance to diversity will be replaced with respect, with human dignity, with equality and equity.

This undoubtedly, will effectively secure, our human rights, for each and every one of us, whoever we are, or wherever we might come from.

As women, I believe, we have an extra responsibility, we are leaders in our families, we are leaders in our places of work, we are leaders in our communities.

As women, we need to be brave.

As women, we need to stand up to be counted - as peace is not an option.

Working for peace is the only way forward for all of us - working for peace, is the only way forward to realise that we belong to one human family.

Thank you.

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*Delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Former President of Malta, at the BPW Europe Conference, Galway, May 2019.*

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W: [marielouisecoleiropreca.com](http://marielouisecoleiropreca.com)

 @mlcp.mt

 @MarieLouise\_MT

 @marielouisecoleirpreca\_mt

