

Speech delivered by HE Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the “Power Together” session during the Women Political Leaders Global Forum Global Summit, 27 November 2018

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to be with you, and to share the work that we are doing through our #Girl2Leader Campaign.

As patron of this important campaign, it is our vision that Women Political Leaders shares its mission of empowerment and support to encourage girls and young women all over the world, to stand up and be counted.

We believe that women and men should have the same opportunities to share their voices and to be respected as valued and equal contributors to create a world that embraces equality and inclusion a world which can enjoy peace and build prosperity.

In a few days’ time, we will be commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is a commemoration that provides us with an opportunity to remember, and to remind everybody, that when we work for equality and women’s rights, we are fundamentally working to achieve the full enjoyment of our universal human rights.

We need to use this opportunity to endeavour further and harder to meet the targets of equality and equity that are expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We cannot afford to be complacent.

We must not accept the exclusion of girls and women from being fully participative, in the important discussions of policy making and decision taking, in all of our countries.

Gender equality must be at the heart of our democracies.

Gender inequalities diminish the potential of our nations, in all sectors.

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 humanity.

For this reason, we need to empower girls and women, to be a force of activism, for the much-needed positive change.

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

We must use our influence, to urge our respective governments not to just pledge their commitment to gender equality, but also to invest sustainably in the potential of all of our children.

We need to urge our respective governments, to ensure the empowerment of our girls, to match their leadership skills with those of our boys.

Unfortunately, even in the European Union, the region from which I come from, there are still unacceptable disparities between women and men.

Infact, the 2018 “Report on Equality between Women and Men in the EU”, is stating that, though women across Europe have the legislative right to equality, empowerment, and safety however, many societies in the EU, have not yet translated these rights into the necessary transformation on the ground.

This same report states that, in some European countries, the political and economic participation of women is moving backwards.

There is an abundance of data and statistics that show that women, in the European Union, are under-represented in decision-making positions, such as in politics and in business While the gender pay gap, is a shocking 16%.

Unfortunately, discrimination is so deeply embedded within our societies, that it sometimes goes ignored or unseen, and even worse, at times, accepted.

A very telling example, is the scientific study conducted by MIT (Massachusetts Institute for Technology), in the USA, which showed participants a promotional video of an entrepreneurship project.

The same project was first presented by a man, and then by a woman.

This scientific study discovered that 68 per cent of participants would give the necessary funding for the project, to a man, but only 32 per cent said they would give funding, for this same project, to a woman.

This is truly alarming, especially when we remember that entrepreneurship is central to job creation, to economic growth, and to inclusive prosperity.

Another truly concerning study, published in last year's Science Journal, asked children to guess whether a "very intelligent" protagonist in a children's story was a man or a woman.

The study indicated that, by the age of six, girls were considerably less likely to guess that the protagonist was a woman.

This clearly shows just how early our young girls are being negatively influenced by gender stereotypes in our societies.

This is a clear indication of the effects of a patriarchal culture in all of our countries.

This is evidence of how much more, we need to do, to transform our behaviours, to create the necessary culture change, to achieve equality and equity.

I believe that we must stop and urgently ask ourselves what is going wrong, in our societies, after 70 years of committing ourselves to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

How is it that women are still not being given an equal opportunity to succeed in the economic sector?

How is it that we are failing our girls, by not encouraging and creating the rightful environment to be empowered, to have the necessary self-belief and self-confidence in their abilities, and potential?

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

This is what the #Girl2Leader campaign is all about.

We need to pull up our socks, and work harder, to achieve gender equality and equity.

We owe this to our daughters, our societies, and our countries.

This was the goal that motivated us to conduct a national conversation, with hundreds of students in Malta and Gozo.

Let me share some of the amazing experiences we had, during our commemoration of this year's International Day of the Girl.

I was so inspired by the narratives shared by our students, both girls and boys, by their correct assessment of the situation, by their resilience in the face of challenges, and by their determination to make a difference.

Let me share with you, some of the inspiring words, by students themselves, during their deliberations.

Matthew:

“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.”

He then said that, “Men must do their part to achieve women’s empowerment and equality. More women are needed in leadership positions, by breaking patriarchal culture. There is no natural law that says women should stay at home and men should go to work. A compromise needs to be reached for the betterment of our country. Malta needs more women in leadership positions. Men need to encourage women and give them the support they need.”

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. We have to ask ourselves, as young people, what we can do to make a change?”

I saw just how much things have changed, from when I was sixteen when I was the only girl to stand for elections, at the time, for the Students’ Union, but now, there are many girls who are interested and who want to get involved and many boys that think that they should.

On the 10th of December, we will begin a year of commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This year can be an ideal opportunity, for the #Girl2Leader campaign to highlight innovative opportunities for the participation of girls, boys and young women.

I urge you to join the #Girl2Leader movement to make this anniversary another opportunity to nurture the political and social interests of our girls, boys and young women, by encouraging them to stand up to make a difference.

I would like to appeal to each and every one of you, to share this message across our countries and regions, but also to endeavour, and to take up the lead, to bring girls and boys together, to empower them in realising, that we need both girls and boys, to achieve peace and prosperity, in our countries, regions, and across the world.

Let's make this year a special year, by endeavouring harder, reaching further, and connecting together, to ensure that the commitment made by our foremothers and forefathers seventy years ago, leads to effective equality and equity, for all the members of our human family.

I am convinced that we can achieve our goals, if we encourage and support our girls, boys, and young women to be advocates and activists for change.

If we truly want the much-needed, sustainable transformation of patriarchal culture, to overcome stereotypism and discrimination, then we must work in synergy across the globe, within our nations and across our regions.

We need to help this change, to begin from the grass-roots of our societies, as part of a bottom-up approach. Only then will the top-down legislative and policy changes be effective.

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

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

We need to change the perceptions, because these are the cultural and social barriers that still impede our progress to achieve equality and equity.

Girls and young women must be supported to discover their own strengths, and to know that they do not need to act like men in order to achieve their aspirations.

As women, we have our own voices.

We have our own important views.

We have our own precious contribution to make, to better the chances of our ailing and unequal world.

According to the “Support for Women and Girls’ Leadership” Report, published by the Overseas Development Institute in 2015, early intervention for girls is an essential factor, to 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 these 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 we need to see more inspiring examples of female leadership, in the media and throughout society.

By giving greater visibility to the excellent work we are doing, as women leaders, we will be creating the much-needed role models, to normalise the idea and the presence of women in roles of authority.

That is why I joined Women Political Leaders as it is doing just that. and that is why I would like to take this opportunity to commend the work being done by Women Political Leaders, and in particular its founders Silvana and Hannah, for their endeavours to bring together so many women leaders from across the globe.

That is why I joined forces with WPL, as I believe that women working together can shift the balance.

Our endeavours, as WPL, and the endeavours of all civil society is crucial, to keep gender equality and equity high on the international agenda.

Women's organisations are best placed to promote gender equality and equity.

We have already seen throughout history, that powerful coalitions of women, working together in networks and organisations, have been catalysts to bring about improvements in the lives of women and their countries.

The responsibility to achieve the inclusion of women as political, economic, and social collaborators is also an intrinsic part of the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals.

All of our countries are signatories to this visionary road-map for the future of our world.

In particular, SDG Number 5 mandates the international community to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of our girls and women, within our lifetimes.

Achieving this goal is at the heart of the #Girl2Leader campaign.

I, once again encourage you, and urge you, to join the #Girl2Leader campaign, to enhance the participation, the inclusion, and the leadership, of our girls and young women, across every level of our societies.

Let me therefore invite all of you, as women leaders, to further develop the #Girl2Leader campaign, for the benefit of our girls and young women, all over the world.

We are here to share.

We are here to support.

But above all, we are here to act.

Thank you for your attention.