

Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at the ELSA Annual Conference entitled “The Right to Education”, 28 November 2018

Distinguished academics,

Dear students,

It is my pleasure to address you, to celebrate the European Law Students Association Day.

It is heartwarming to note that law students all across Europe are using this important opportunity, to highlight one of the organisation’s key commitments, which is to promote universal rights and fundamental freedoms.

This year’s event is being organised just a few days before the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

While human rights and fundamental freedoms should be at the heart of our democracies, we all know that the full promise of the Universal

Declaration is, unfortunately, not yet fully enjoyed ... however, the fact that this Universal Declaration has endured for seven decades is evidence of the universality of its values.

This Universal Declaration is the most widely approved statement by humanity, in favour of equality, justice, and human dignity.

It empowers all of us, to endeavour and to stand for an equitable quality of life, by protecting our fundamental freedoms.

Human rights remind us of our interconnectedness, as human beings.

Human right also remind us of the need to not only protect our own rights, but also the rights of others, especially the most vulnerable members of our societies.

After seventy years, human rights have lost none of their relevance, today.

This is especially because the world is changing so rapidly and, unfortunately, is facing many challenges of social, economic, and environmental concern.

I am pleased to note that today's event is highlighting one particular right ... the right to education.

Education is a fundamental human right, and through safeguarding this right, individuals can effectively achieve access to further rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes it clear that human beings have the right to expect free and mandatory education.

This commitment was also reiterated by the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

Education is key, for a human being to acquire dignity, and to reach his or her full potential.

Education safeguards vulnerable groups, and our communities, from exploitation.

Education is a promoter of democracy, human rights, and active participation in society.

Education creates the potential for critical thinking.

The right to access to education is also at the heart of the global struggle to end poverty and reduce inequality, throughout the world.

Last year's "Reducing Poverty" policy paper, released by UNESCO, states that there are still as many as 61 million children who do not receive a primary level of education, across the world.

However, UNESCO also tells us, through this same report, that every additional year in education, received by a child, creates a tangible and an inter-generational reduction in inequalities.

Implementing the universal right to education is essential, to achieve a sustainable change, on a global level.

The international community is aware of this need, so much so that it has committed itself to achieve the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals.

In fact, SDG Number 4 commits our global authorities, to ensure that inclusive, equitable, and quality education is accessible to all of humanity, by 2030.

Education is the key that will allow us to achieve the other Sustainable Development Goals.

As we all know when people receive a quality education, they are also empowered to break cycles of poverty and exclusion.

On the other hand, I believe that, to ensure that education addresses poverty and exclusion, it must have a human rights-based perspective, and be accessible to all.

Human rights are not for the privileged few, but they are the basic values upon which each and every life is built and lived, with dignity.

All of us, regardless of our culture, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background, are entitled to enjoy the fullness of our universal rights and fundamental freedoms.

Human rights are not policy commitments or political manifestos, which we can change and vary, depending on the short-term needs of the moment.

Human rights transcend time, and the right to their enjoyment eliminates borders.

Human rights are a reminder of the legally enforceable duties, to which every country and every government must be held responsible, towards its peoples.

When we look at the world through a human rights-based perspective, we cannot be at peace if there is one single child without access to education.

That one child would be experiencing an unacceptable violation of his or her intrinsic right to education.

Such a violation does not only undermine the dignity of those individuals who experience it, but it undermines all of us.

That is why it is so shocking, to know that there are 61 million children whose right to primary education is being violated, disregarded, and ignored.

On the other hand, we all know that the right to education is complex, and touches upon a variety of concerns.

Education is a social right, which entitles individuals to expect an education that meets their requirements, in a rapidly changing world.

The right to education liberates us, and it protects individuals and their families from interference, by ensuring that their legitimate cultural and social needs are being respected by the relevant authorities.

Furthermore, the right to education protects minority groups from dominant ideologies and the risk of propaganda, which can threaten the educational environment.

Education is also an equality right, to ensure that nobody is excluded from their rightful opportunity to learn and to expand their horizons.

Education has a multiplier effect, leading us to enjoy all of our other rights and freedoms. Without access to education, an individual cannot access these rights in an effective way.

The right to freedom of speech, the right to employment, and the right to democratic participation are deeply connected with the right to education, which equips individuals and entire communities to be constructive contributors to society, and active partners to achieve the common good.

Above all, education is an intrinsic right.

Education has value and meaning on its own terms, and not only as a pathway to other important benefits, such as dignified employment.

In the inspiring words of the Universal Declaration, education must lead “to the full development of the human personality”, while promoting processes of understanding, friendship, and peace among all of the peoples of the world.

Furthermore, let me take this opportunity to say that we must do more to highlight the specific challenges being faced by half of the world’s population, women and girls, to access their right to education.

Approximately one-third of the countries in the developing regions of the world have not, as yet, achieved gender equality in the area of primary education.

Such disparities are limiting the opportunities that young women have in their lives, to achieve their aspirations in the sectors of education, work, and personal development.

Our own Euro-Mediterranean Region is also affected, in negative and far-reaching ways, by the stereotypes and gender discrimination

which still affect the educational choices and opportunities which are open to women.

Therefore, ensuring full and free access to gender-equal education is a means of transforming the future for our girls and young women, while also transforming our culture as a whole, for the benefit of both girls and boys, women and men.

On concluding, let me share the wise words of Nelson Mandela, who said that education is the most powerful tool with which we can change the world.

Therefore, I urge our authorities to ensure that the investment in our educational system is effectively encouraging all of our children and young people, to be critical thinkers, creative contributors, and active participants within Maltese society.

If we ensure that our educational system is effectively encouraging our children to become active citizens, we will truly be taking our democracy to the next level, and creating a future of peace and prosperity, for the benefit of the people of the Maltese Islands.

Thank you for your attention.