

Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Conference on Gender Equality organized during the Incoming State Visit by the President of Tunisia, 6 February 2019

Your Excellency, President Béji Caid Essebsi

[Honourable Minister]

Honourable Members of Parliament

Deputy Speaker Ms Claudette Buttigieg

Excellencies

Distinguished guests

Dear friends

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Verdala Palace.

The topic of today's conference is especially close to my heart, and it provides an excellent opportunity for us to learn from one another.

Today we can share our reflections and our concerns, about the critical issue of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Let me begin by commending the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, at the University of Malta, the Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia, and members of my Office, for co-facilitating this event.

In particular, I would like to thank Professor Stephen Calleya for his inspiring leadership of MEDAC, and the tremendous contribution he has made to educate,

empower, and support countless young diplomats, from all over the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

Let me also thank my dear friend and colleague, President Essebsi, who will also be sharing his thoughts with us about this important subject matter.

I will begin my remarks by quoting the words of Ms Abderrahim, the first-ever female mayor of Tunis.

She said, “People are finally giving their trust to women. We must take the opportunity to change sexist mentalities, to challenge obstacles, and to break taboos. That's why I want to give a huge role to women. I think women are writing their own story, not the ones someone else has dictated to them.”

These eloquent and inspiring words reflect, in my opinion, the key to today's conference.

This conference is also providing us with the opportunity to celebrate the participation of women.

When we celebrate the participation of women, we are fundamentally celebrating our democratic values.

We must protect the safe and respectful spaces, provided by our democracies, in which to share our stories, to explore our narratives, and to learn from one another.

In the light of the rapid changes that are taking place in today's world, we must be brave to implement our vision for the future of Mediterranean women and their empowerment.

We are living at a time when we must respond to the complex phenomena that are facing our families and communities, within our region. Unfortunately, these phenomena include conflicts, precarity, environmental degradation, and increasing flows of migrants seeking hope and safety.

However, we must also acknowledge the new opportunities for economic, social, and political change in the Mediterranean.

I have had first-hand experiences of the specific challenges that women face in the Mediterranean, on my many visits to countries within our region.

I have also been aware of the great resilience and courage which Mediterranean women and girls show, each and every day, to improve their lives and to safeguard the lives of their families.

Increasing the social and political visibility of women is, I believe, essential.

Therefore, let us celebrate the fact that, seven years after the Revolution in Tunisia in 2011, and four years after the adoption of a new Constitution, women already make up 47 per cent of the local council positions in Tunisia, following the May 2018 elections.

Your Excellency, my dear friend President Essebsi, I must commend you on this impressive achievement.... I must commend you on your commitment to make Tunisia, the first Arab Nation, to approve gender equality in inheritance law.

I am so proud of our Mediterranean Sister country, to bring about a silent revolution to secure an effective democracy, by putting gender equality on the top of the national agenda.

Dear Friend, President Essebsi, I must acknowledge your courage, for being a stalwart of equality, by also setting up the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee, and assigned it to propose reforms for the Tunisian legislative system, with the purpose of increasing freedoms in the State.

It is admirable of the Tunisians, to adopt a Constitution whereby, the rights and duties of Tunisian men and women are equal, and that the State is committed to defending women's rights, and works on supporting and developing them.

Furthermore, undoubtedly there has been the political will to support such endeavours in Tunisia. For example, I am also informed about the creation of a Women's Political Academy, which is a joint project facilitated by UN Women and the Tunisian women's rights organisation, Aswat Nissa, known as Women's Voices.

I am also informed that this Academy has trained women candidates, by providing skills that include gender studies, governance, and media relations.

Tunisia, in a short while, is matching up to the most advanced countries, which are leading the way for gender equality.

I augur that the forthcoming parliamentary elections, which will be held in Tunisia later this year, will result in further successes for gender equality.

Here in Malta, during these last years, we have also seen further improvements regarding gender equality and gender equity. Let me give a couple of examples of some important changes.

For example, there was a significant increase in female participation throughout the Maltese workforce. This is thanks to the political will and practical strategies, which include the introduction of free childcare centres for all women who work, together with an in-work benefit for women who are returning to full time employment.

As a result, female participation in the Maltese workforce has increased by 16%, in a short while.

Another example is the fact that we have reached gender parity in the Judiciary.

Moreover, female University students have outnumbered their male counterparts. Subsequently, this results in more female professionals in all sectors.

Although our progress is indeed commendable, there are still disparities, which are reflected in particular, in a widening gender pay gap. Although Maltese Women have enjoyed equal pay for decades, however, this phenomenon has

caught up with us too, as this is a situation which is present throughout the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

These disparities are a new form of the same old discrimination and inequalities.

This situation shows us that legislation alone will not help us to achieve full gender equality. There has to also be the political will to put in place the necessary policies to reach our democratic aspirations.

We cannot afford to ignore such inequalities and injustices.

As we all know, women play a vital role in a country's socio-economic growth. We know that when we undervalue the contributions of women, the whole socio-economic life of the country suffers.

In this context, I would like to bring to the fore a very telling indicator regarding our region from OECD. This indicator shows us that gender equality in the economic sector could increase the GDP of the Mediterranean Region, by more than 25%.

Indicators from UNIDO are also telling us that Mediterranean women have identified several factors which need to be addressed, to achieve the necessary level of economic empowerment. These factors include further access to markets;

stronger networks; gender-sensitive financial services; and an emphasis on women's entrepreneurship.

We need, as women, to work together within our region.

We need to network further.

Therefore, I believe that the Union for the Mediterranean, can provide the necessary infrastructure to bring Mediterranean Women, for often together. The Union for the Mediterranean is already promoting these goals, by supporting gender equality and the empowerment of women within our region.

I am pleased to say that Malta and Tunisia collaborate effectively, alongside our fellow Mediterranean countries, through the work of the Union for the Mediterranean.

I am convinced that this conference is a positive first step for Malta and Tunisia to collaborate effectively also within this regional framework.

We must continue to persevere, to strengthen the gender equality agenda, as above all, gender equality is a fundamental human right.

We must continue to persevere, because after 70 years since the UN Declaration of Human Rights we are still facing gender inequalities in most of our countries.

So much so that the United Nations, in 2015 has put, at the heart of Agenda 2030, and its Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals gender equality.

As we all know, SDG Number 5 in particular, binds the international community, to end all forms of gender discrimination, and to achieve the meaningful empowerment of women and girls by 2030.

Promoting the full implementation of women's rights and access to all opportunities is crucial, to end all forms of gender discrimination.

The Ministers of the 43 Member States of the Union for the Mediterranean, through the Ministerial Declarations of Istanbul, Marrakech, Paris, and, most recently, Cairo, are also supporting Agenda 2030, thanks to a region-wide agenda to promote women's rights, in close collaboration with civil society activists.

I am convinced that this collaboration, between our national authorities and civil society organisations, is essential, to create gender equality and justice for all.

Knowing that, our audience is made up of civil society activists, I would like to encourage you to further collaborate together, and to join our counterparts within our region, to achieve these goals.

Dear friends,

I believe that the empowerment of women is the foundation for a peaceful and prosperous future in our Euro-Mediterranean Region.

We cannot allow gender-based challenges, such as discrimination and violence against women, to continue standing in our way, and preventing us from reaching our full democratic goals.

According to reports of the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation, femicide, which is the killing of women simply because they are women, is a "silent scourge" in the Mediterranean Region.

I am proud of the fact that both Malta and Tunisia have the proper legislation in place, to combat violence against women.

I believe it is essential for us to take these strategies further.

Even though, we can be proud of many achievements we cannot sit on our laurels. We need to endeavour further.

It is time for us to address the underlying mentality and stereotypism, which are constraining so many girls and women, and excluding them from active participation in economic, social, and political life.

I am pleased to say that Tunisia and Malta are shining a light, to lead the way in our region, to promote these values of inclusion, participation, social justice, and democratic values.

Even though the Mediterranean Region has undergone dramatic upheavals in recent years, the resilient nature of the advances that are being made in gender equality, by both of our countries, gives me great hope.

Gender equality means that women and men, can enjoy the ability to control their own destinies, and to achieve their own visions for their own future, their own families, communities, and country.

Gender equality is the necessary way forward, towards effective democracy, and the respect that deserves to be given to the full dignity of all genders.

Truly effective gender equality only occurs when women have the ability to influence the normative rules that govern society, and can fully access their universal rights and fundamental freedoms.

I am confident that this conference will further contribute, to foster dialogue between Malta and Tunisia, to promote these values of gender equality and effective democracy.

Let me therefore encourage all of us, to continue finding ways of uniting the women of the Mediterranean, to share their narratives and their experiences and to lead the way forward for a flourishing democratic region, where human dignity is at the top of all of our aspirations.

Thank you for your attention.