

APS: Malta Sustainability Forum

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Women

by

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I would like to thank APS and its team, for the invite to address this seminar about Women.

The issues that affect women are numerous.

Research is showing that the COVID-19 pandemic, has further exacerbated inequalities, injustices, and discrimination against women across the globe.

On the other hand, the pandemic has also given better visibility to the strength, the strong communication skills, the resilience, and the clarity of women leaders in their strategies to overcome this crisis.

A research study by the University of Dublin, has established that women-led countries have suffered, six times fewer, pandemic related deaths, than those countries led by men.

The Centre for Economic Policy Research and the World Economic Forum in an analysis of 194 countries, highlighted the relative early

success, of Germany, New Zealand, Denmark, Taiwan, and Finland, in addressing the challenges created by the pandemic.

These countries are all led by female head of governments. The research established this success to their ability of their proactive and coordinated policy responses.

Women are also acting as front liners and make up almost 70% of the global healthcare workforce.

We must also acknowledge, the female researchers who have been tirelessly working alongside male researchers, in the rapid search for a solution to beat the virus.

The closure of schools has put further pressure on the wellbeing of women.

Mothers had to become the teachers of their children, often juggling with their own careers, and their normal responsibilities of raising and caring for the whole family.

This situation is further compounded for those mothers who are raising children with disabilities or children with learning difficulties.

A research study by UN Women, is clearly showing that the pandemic is negatively impacting women much harder.

UN Women are also highlighting a regression in our journey, towards gender equality.

Another report on Women in Politics: Local and European Trends, stated that at this current rate it would take 107 years to close the gender gap.

What about female participation in the economy?

The gender pay gap is one of the serious issues affecting women world-wide.

How are we to implement the Sustainable Development Goals when a persistent gender pay gap is prevailing?

How are we to encourage more women to participate in the economic when female workers are so significantly discriminated?

According to UN Women, the gender pay gap is estimated to be at 23%.

This means that women are earning 77% of what men earn.

In Malta, the overall gender pay gap is 12%, however this varies from one sector to another. For example the gender pay gap in Malta, for the Financial Sector reaches 28%.

This is very worrying as we know that the financial sector in Malta is now a very much female driven workforce.

The situation in some countries, regarding female participation in the work force, is fundamentally devastating.

UN Women state that globally over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from even having the same jobs as men.

The following are some gruesome indicators emanating from an assessment of 189 countries in 2018. There are:

- 104 countries which still have laws preventing women from working in specific jobs;
- 59 countries have no laws on sexual harassment at the work place; and
- 18 countries where husbands can legally prevent their wives from working.

UN Women are also highlighting, that women and children are struggling with new swathes of poverty and material deprivation due to loss of income. They are estimating that globally, 193 million women and girls aged 15 and over are living on less than, \$1.90 a day.

A 2020 PWC Women in Work Index estimates that increasing the female employment rates in OECD countries to match that of Sweden, could boost GDP by over \$6 trillion.

In Malta, there was a 12% increase in female participation in the workforce, between 2013 and 2018.

This was very much, as a result of, the free childcare services provided by Government.

This fact, undoubtedly shows that given the right policies, there are great possibilities in narrowing the gender gap.

Another interesting indicator for Malta, is that females are outperforming their male peers in education.

The achievement of women in education is in fact highlighted in the tertiary sector, where female graduates, out-number male graduates.

The indicator for early school leavers is also showing a new trend in education, whereby, early school leavers aged 18 to the 24, is higher for males than females.

The early school leaving gender gap stands at 3% between genders.

Another predominant concern which I would like to briefly mention, is Domestic Violence.

Dr Marcelline Naudi, who is our home born and bred international expert, will undoubtedly enlighten us with her expertise on the subject.

Domestic violence, has been drastically triggered by social isolation and lockdown measures.

UN Women state that globally, 35% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse.

They further state that, 243 million women, between the ages of 15-49, were victims of abuse by their partners in the last 12 months prior to the pandemic.

Data is showing us that the situation is even worse now, with calls to helplines having increased by five times more in some countries.

Patriarchy is still prevailing, also in Europe, despite the adoption of the Istanbul Convention by the Council of Europe in 2011.

I am proud to note, that Malta is not only a signatory to the Istanbul Convention, but has also transposed the convention into our legislation.

However more has to be done, to address the patriarchal mentality in Malta, as domestic violence is still a societal scourge. The effects of the pandemic on domestic violence victims is also felt in Malta.

From the 1st October to the 21st November 2020, 248 reports were submitted to the newly set up Gender Based Domestic Violence Police Unit.

We must also note that the setting up of a dedicated Police Unit, was undoubtedly another step in the right direction.

Femicide is another huge concern. Femicide is a daily global reality. UNODC (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) reports, that 137 women are killed by a member of their family every day.

Femicide also exists in Malta, with 16 cases of femicide in 10 years, between 2010 to 2020.

How can we ever reach the target set by the UN Agenda 2030 to eliminate violence against women if we continue to experience such daily realities?

Before ending my contribution, I would also like to mention some other serious global issues, like:

- **Child Marriages:**

UNICEF estimates that 12 million girls marry before the age of 18 every single year.

In Malta too, child marriage was permissible for decades. Girls were permitted to marry at the age of 14 years and boys could marry at 16 years of age. **We have been called to remedy this situation.**

- **Female Genital Mutilation:**

WHO estimates that at least 200 million women and girls, aged between 15-49, have undergone female genital mutilation in 30 countries. This cultural imposed practice on girls is horrendous.

I am pleased to note that Malta has recently legislated against FGM.

- **Maternal Health Services:**

WHO has estimated before the pandemic, that 810 women die from preventable causes related to childbirth and pregnancy every day.

A research study by Women Political Leaders in 2018, has established that 1 in 10 women in the European Union do not have access to maternal health care.

According to data from WHO, 1800 maternal deaths occur every year in the European region alone.

I fear that although Malta has one of the most formidable health systems, we might not be offering enough for migrant women in the sector due to diverse cultures and traditions.

I now turn to the key concern that can unleash the necessary change for gender equality and sustainably address the many discriminatory gender gaps.

This is women's leadership and political participation.

Strategies and policies must embrace a gender lens to ensure true and effective equality.

Now that most of the world governments are focusing on recovery plans, for a post pandemic revival, it is the opportune time to ensure that women's perspectives and aspirations are included.

But how can strategies, policies and recovery plans reflect the input of women when:

- **Only 24% of all national parliamentarians were women as of February 2019.**
- **As of June 2019, only 11 women were serving as Head of States and 12 women were serving as Head of Governments.**
- **As of February 2019, only 3 countries (Rwanda, Cuba and Bolivia) had 50 per cent of female parliamentarians.**

No wonder the world is in such misery!

How can half of the world's population be marginalised and absent from the decision taking and policy making tables!

No wonder gender equality has been repeatedly been discussed for decades ad nauseam!

Malta is not much better off.

It is shameful, that after more than 70 years of universal suffrage, female representation in our Parliament is only 13%.

Malta in fact has the third lowest percentage of female parliamentary representation, while female representation in Local Government is not much better. It is the eight lowest in 42 countries.

The issue of positive action in Malta and elsewhere is imperative, as a transitional approach to parliamentary gender equality.

This is the only way forward to live up to the commitment of implementing Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals.

We cannot afford to be complacent.

We need the necessary action now.

If women are a pillar of strength during this unprecedented crisis, then women are also the necessary hope for a sustainable future.

The world needs to be transformed by effective gender equality, to enable our human family to survive and overcome the socio-economic challenges.

Women alongside men, can be key to essential revival of our economies, quality of life, wellbeing and peace.

Women are agents of change and together with men can ensure not only the essential recovery, but the most needed sustainable way forward for all humanity.

Currently Malta is working on the first gender equality mainstreaming strategy and action plan, which aims to provide a comprehensive vision towards gender equality and to establish a framework for the advancement and empowerment of women.

I augur that this strategy will achieve its aims, of introducing measures to address this differential treatment for women and men, also provide for the elimination of gender pay gap and set up a structure to mainstream gender equality in society as a whole.

However, authorities must also ensure that ALL women are included irrespective of from where they come from. There must be greater involvement of women coming from marginalized communities, such as women with disabilities and ethnic minorities. They are after all the experts of their own lives.

Gone should be the days when men impose their vision and aspirations on all of society.

Gender Equality must not be a stand-alone goal, but an essential cross-cutting priority to ensure sustainable communities and societies.

Women and men together must join forces and fight this longstanding battle for the equality, equity and wellbeing of all.

We need bold policies that can shift course and accelerate progress.

We must end poverty and violence, and all inequalities, in all forms and everywhere.

On concluding, I would like to urge each and every one of us, to work together.

To mentor each other.

To support one another.

To encourage boys and men to be the heroes of our societies, by ensuring equality, equity and justice for all.

This is what gender equality is all about.