

Her-Story: Discovering Women's history in Malta
Saturday 14th January 2023
Fort St. Angelo Birgu
8 – 10 minutes

Firstly, I would like to thank Prof. Yosanne Vella for her invitation to share my thoughts with you at the beginning of this interesting conference.

I also want to commend Yosanne for her hard work to organise this conference. I feel honoured to have the opportunity to participate in this, first ever conference to be held on the historical participation of women in our society.

Indeed, the topics chosen triggered memories of the mile-stones women have achieved in our country, but sadly, they also trigger the urge for many more much needed actions to safeguard and ensure the effectiveness of gender equality, and equity.

I will therefore delve into some of the current contexts relating to the concepts you will discuss during your deliberations today. I will take a global helicopter view of the situation of such contexts and give a brief focus on the current reality in our country.

Let me start with Motherhood

Article 24 (d) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically states to ensure appropriate prenatal and postnatal healthcare for all mothers and their children.

The United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Goal 3.1 stipulates that by 2030, we must reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100 000 live births.

Yet, according to the World Health Organisation, 830 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth every single day.

In Europe, indicators show that annually, eight out of every 100,000 women in the European Union die while giving birth, and according to data from the World Health Organisation, every year, there are about 1,800 maternal deaths in the entire European region.

Moreover, research shows that migrant and refugee women and Roma women face elevated risks of marginalisation and social exclusion, when it comes to accessing even the most basic maternal healthcare.

This is in contrast to the situation in Malta. It is indeed worth noting that thanks to the ongoing investment in our quality health care system no maternal deaths were registered in the last fifteen years.

Undoubtedly, our maternal health care specialists are the main contributors to the decrease in maternal deaths to higher vigilance of the professional teams, better antenatal care, and free accessible health care for the entire population.

Likewise, family friendly measures have improved dramatically. For example, maternity leave is currently eighteen weeks, with the mother being entitled to the same rights and benefits, including the right to apply for promotion.

However, there is still room for further improvement, in particular in the perinatal mental health sector.

More investment needs to be considered in this essential aspect of our healthcare system.

Now let me turn to another context that this conference will be focusing on, that is Women and Slavery

I am certain that all of us would want to believe that slavery is confined to history, but the scourge of slavery still exists today, though in a different context.

According to the latest Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2022)¹ from Walk Free, the International Labour Organization and the International Organization for Migration, almost 50 million people live in modern slavery.

Anti-Slavery International defines modern slavery as when an individual is exploited by others, for personal or commercial gain, and whether the individual is tricked, coerced, or forced, into a situation of exploitation and subsequently loses their freedom.

Modern slavery includes human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced prostitution, forced marriage, debt bondage, organ removal or being forced to be soldiers. Whichever form it takes, slavery destroys human potential, human dignity and human life.

We must note that indicators evidently show that over half of all forced labourers, and nearly all victims of sex trafficking, are women and girls.

¹ Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage, Geneva, September 2022

In fact, it is estimated that 6.3 million people are in situations of forced sexual exploitation but four out of five of these are women and girls.²

Goal 8 of The United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals specifically calls for an end to slavery, and states that we must *take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025, end child labour in all its forms.*"

Crises like the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change made people even more vulnerable to exploitation.

Research also shows that the resulting impact of slavery last for the rest of a person's live and can have inter-generational impact. Slavery distorts demography, increases gender discrimination and violence, and increases the burden of disease.

² Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage 2022 International Labour Organisation, IOM and Walk Free

We definitely cannot let our societies believe that slavery belongs to the past, or that it is a shameful part of humanity's history, which we can afford to put behind us.

Today, modern slavery is also prevalent in Malta, mostly in the form of forced labour.

Whether it is women being trafficked for prostitution or massage parlours, platform workers, abused migrant workers, who are coerced to come to Malta on false pretensions, all are at risk of exploitation.

The reality that such women face when they arrive here is often far from their promised expectations and aspirations. Instead, they have to work with dangerous working conditions, underpayment and exaggerated long hours of work. Some take on job-related debts, such as burdensome recruitment fees, and find themselves unable to pay that money.

Unfortunately, no local statistics or data exist to verify these realities, until some extraordinary action takes place and the perpetrators are prosecuted.

One thing is certain. Slavery is with us today, and we need to act to stop such horrendous violations to Women Human Rights.

Women in war and peace

Quoting a chapter from history, you know very well that during World War 2, women worked in hospitals, schools, charitable institutions, and in factories. Women also became part of an extended female workforce working the fields to keep produce going, in victory kitchens, in the food and laundry logistical services for the British Services, and the population as a whole.³

However, history has also shown us that women were absent from the peace negotiating tables and are still practically absent. I strongly believe that women need to be at the negotiating tables as well as on the ground.

In October 2000, the United Nations and its Member States adopted the Security Council Resolution 1325, to promote the participation of women in decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.

Resolution 1325 addresses not only the unwarranted impact of war on women but goes beyond to establish the pivotal role women

³ The role of women in WW11: the case of Malta; unpublished thesis. Simon Cusens 2014

should and do play in conflict management, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

Resolution 1325 calls for increased participation of women at all levels of decision-making, including in national, regional, and international institutions; in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict, and in peace negotiations.

Although it has been over a decade since the passing of this Resolution, the scourge of gender-based discrimination and violence are still stalling its effective implementation.

According to the International Peace Institute, and notwithstanding the Security Council Resolution, only 9% of the peace negotiators are women even today.

This is particularly worrying, as research by the same Institute also showed that when women were included in peace building processes, there was a 35% increase in the probability of it lasting for more than 15 years.

The recommended peace building measures include the active participation and contribution of civil society at grassroots level, as they can assist in constructing non-violent means of dealing with

conflict, or as an outcome of official negotiations when one or both sides reject any other force for whatever reason.

Taking in consideration our local scenario, it is worth noting that Malta's Ambassador to the United Nations is a woman, at a very important moment when Malta has a seat in the Security Council and will take up the Chair of the Security Council within a few weeks from now.

Malta's Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security is also a woman.

Undoubtedly these are proud moments in our history where Maltese women are leading.

Female Entrepreneurs and Female Employment

I believe that, as an international community, we must put more energy into Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 5.5, which commits our nations to achieve women's full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making roles.

According to the World Economic Forum, it will take 136 years to bridge the overall gender gap and 268 years to bridge the economic gap⁴.

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/04/136-years-is-the-estimated-journey-time-to-gender-equality/>

Such reports and indicators are an urgent call to action for the international community to do more to achieve gender parity in the world of work.

We cannot allow discriminatory economic, social, and cultural barriers, which are faced by women across the globe, to continue undermining women's lives.

In today's climate of uncertainty, when we are constantly facing so many challenges, we cannot afford to be complacent about our objectives to achieve gender equity and equality.

We need to implement practical legislation, policies, and initiatives, which transform the institutions, the practices, and the world-view that are threatening the wellbeing of all women.

Such strategies for sharing and mutual learning are crucial to address issues of prosperity. In the words of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and I quote;

“When more women work, economies grow. An increase in female labour force participation, or a reduction in the gap between women's and men's labour force participation, results in faster economic growth.” End quote.

If we look at data for Malta regarding employment rates, we see that, in the third quarter of 2022, female employment rates stood at 70.8% compared to male employment rate of 83.4 per cent.

This is a vast improvement from the figures for 2009 where female employment rate stood at under 40%.

We have come a long way in many contexts, however even if some of us, currently enjoy greater access to our fundamental freedoms, the fact that so many women and girls are still at risk of exploitation and discrimination means that we cannot feel truly free.

Legislative wise, we can say that we have most of the legal requirements on paper to make us feel free, however the patriarchal culture is still very real in our midst. Malta has been a forerunner in transposing the Istanbul Convention into our national legislation, however, domestic violence and femicide have continued to be the horrendous experience of so many women living in our country.

Undoubtedly this reality does not make women in Malta free, secure, and equal.

We cannot sit on our laurels.

We cannot be complacent.

We cannot be complacent, when indicators from the World Health Organisation also show us that 1 in 3 women, around the world, are at grave risk of physical or sexual violence.

We cannot be complacent, when data from the World Bank tells us that women around the world are consistently paid less than men, earning on average only 60 to 75 per cent of men's wages, and are therefore at increased risk of precarity.

I truly believe that it is only then, that the lessons learnt from history can help us and future generations, to build a more peaceful and equitable world.

I will end my contribution with an inspirational quote, that hopefully, during this most interesting conference about women in history, can help further stimulate your thoughts on the important process of women's journey from history to today's reality and to tomorrow's much needed endeavours to ensure women's full participation and the enjoyment of effective equality, and equity.

Gloria Steinem, the writer, lecturer, and political activist, once said:
'we've begun to raise daughters more like sons but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters.'

I augur Yosanne, all the eminent speakers and each and everyone of you, a successful conference.