

**National Council of Women
Annual General Meeting
Saturday 28 January 2023
Victoria Hotel, Gorg Borg Olivier Street, Sliema
8 – 10 minutes**

Good morning.

I would like to thank the President of the National Council of Women, Ms Doreen Borg Zammit, and the Committee, for your kind invitation to address the Annual General Meeting of the National Council of Women.

I feel honoured to be addressing the longest serving women's rights organisation on our islands.

I have followed the National Council of Women since my childhood. Probably because of my family background being the eldest child in a family of 6 six children with 5 of us being girls. My father's strong belief in our competence as girls, made me look out for those people who believed in the competence and abilities of women.

I was brought up to believe that we as girls, are as competent as boys, and that there were no limits to what our abilities can reach. I was lucky to have lived through a childhood where gender equality was never an issue.

I therefore would like to salute the founders of NCW and thank the former and present members of NCW for your unwavering hard work in creating awareness, in informing, in educating and in empowering Maltese Society, over these many

years, about so many issues and rights that impacted and still impact on women's lives and their wellbeing.

I must note that the NCW has in the process of its nearly 60 years of existence, has been a strong voice for change and for the empowerment of so many women in our society.

I therefore feel honoured today to be addressing for the very first time this Annual General Meeting of the National Council of Women.

As a woman of this country, I would like to thank you for your activism to promote women's rights.

Indeed, I believe that we have come a long way since the acquisition of universal suffrage, seventy years ago, and the other subsequent important steps forward in addressing gender equality.

However, I am sure that we all agree, that there are still giant steps that we need to take to assert the enjoyment and safeguarding of all Women's Human Rights, to ensure a productive and respectful life, free from exploitation, discrimination, and violence for all women in our country.

I would like therefore to highlight a few very important challenges that women are still facing in our county. We might be very comfortable to say that on paper through a multitude of legislation passed through our Parliament during these last decades, we as women have acquired most of our rights.

However, upon looking at some of the data available, we are immediately aware of the urgent need to ensure that gender equality needs much more than legislation to be effectively enjoyed by all.

Together with the importance of the right legislation in place, there is also the need for a thorough culture change and mental leap in the way we manage the life of our society.

Let's take for example, **women in employment**.

If we look at Malta's 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%.

This is a great leap forward, however we know that there are issues related to gendered patterns of precarious employment.

A Study by the title of: **Gender Differences in Precarious Work Settings** uses human capital and gender stratification theory to answer three research questions concerning the gendered patterns of precarious employment, the effects of human capital investments and family obligations on precarious employment, and the extent that these investments and obligations affect precarious employment differently for men and women.

The study suggests:

- a) that women are more likely to work in low quality job settings;
- b) that gender discrepancies in benefits and union protection are explained by differences in men's and women's human capital, family investments, and other work-related situations; and,
- c) that gender differences in wages and part-time work status result from workplace discrimination towards women.

On the other hand, data from the World Bank also 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 therefore women are at increased risk of precarity.**

Precarious work is a sure way of compounding on the issue of the feminization of poverty.

I also personally perceive that the issue of the gender pay gap, also creates risks of precarity and undoubtedly creates a flagrant violation of the fundamental rights to equality and equity.

We very well know that **when more women work economies grow**, as has been clearly said by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which also emphasizes that: **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.**

According to the World Economic Forum, ***it will take 136 years to bridge the overall gender gap and 268 years to bridge the economic gap***¹.

We therefore cannot sit on our laurels and feel comfortable that more and more women are in paid employment and stop there. Neither can we feel comfortable that more of our girls and young women are in education and reaching new heights in qualified professions and stop there.

We know that a subtle gendered perspective still exists, even with regards to the most qualified and warranted female professionals, and this is happening, even though our legislation precludes discrimination.

We need to ensure that these issues of precarious work, and the gender pay gap, are addressed. These issues are even the more urgent when we know that a huge number of migrant women are now working in our country. Research shows, and it is also evidenced from known situations, that migrant women are at a higher risk of precarious work.

We have to ensure that our work to address gender inequalities is centered around the needs of all women living in our country, whoever they might be or from wherever they come from.

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/04/136-years-is-the-estimated-journey-time-to-gender-equality/>

Let me now give another example and I would like to highlight issues surrounding the scourge of **violence against women**.

Legislative wise, we can say that, in Malta, we have most of the legal requirements on paper to make us feel free and safe, 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 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 and/or sexual violence.

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.

Just this week we saw data published by the United Nations that stated that four Maltese girls were trafficked in the country for sexual exploitation between 2017 and 2020. I believe that the statistic could be higher if we consider all the women living in Malta, and if we also consider that some cases are not even reported, in particular where migrant girls and women are concerned.

One very important step forward was taken last year, when our country acknowledged Femicide as a specific criminal act in our criminal code.

I recall, during my Presidency, addressing the Members of the European Parliament within the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, the FEMM, on the outcomes of a four-year COST Action, led by Maltese experts and academics together with a group of other experts and academics from across Europe about "Femicide in Europe".

The call of these group of experts was for the setting up of a European Observatory on Femicide.

Unfortunately the EU Commission did not embrace the call from these group of learned women, however I am proud to note that on the initiative of our very own Maltese expert Prof Marceline Naudi, and with the collaboration of the University of Malta, a European-wide observatory on Femicide, was set up in Malta.

Yet, the reality is that we are experiencing more and more incidence of femicide in our country, and with each and every one, of these horrendous crimes, Maltese society is shocked to the core, and women living in this country become and feel more and more unsafe.

We must not be complacent about this terrible situation.

It is not enough that after each horrifying of these inhuman act, we get verbal declarations, and then our processes and systems continue to fail us, when they are supposed to be there to safeguard all women.

How many vigils do we have to organize and attend, after each and every one of these terrible criminal acts, for the necessary actions to be taken?

We must be bold and take all necessary effective steps to ensure that women and girls are protected, with the full force of our laws, policies, and the necessary resources in place.

We are all aware that such measures must form part of a larger transformation to prioritise the visibility of women, to empower our children in the recognition of gender equality as the necessary gateway to the effective enjoyment and safeguarding of Women's Human Rights.

Definitely, we cannot be complacent, when we know that one in 20 women have been the victims of rape, and 55% of women have been victims of sexual harassment.

We cannot be silent, when we know about the devastating indicators which tell us that one in three women has experienced psychological abuse by a partner, and that one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence, by an adult, during childhood.

We need to take action to bring our country closer to achieving the full potential of the United Nations Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals, which provide a roadmap for the sustainable prosperity and wellbeing of all members of our human family.

We are committed as a country to Agenda 2030, where SDG 5, explicitly calls for an end to all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls, while also taking proactive measures to ensure equity and empowerment.

This is not a privilege bestowed to women, this is simply doing what is right, and putting human rights in action.

We must tirelessly continue remind that women's rights are human rights.

No woman should live in fear for her life, simply because she is a woman.

We must strive to create a country where all women and girls are safe, in the knowledge that we are all committed to ensure their full potential, and to nurture and sustain their wellbeing.

We need to dig deeper into what needs to be done, to address this cultural plague.

We need to have a national reflection, a thorough strategy, effective policies, an effective action plan and make all resources needed available.

We also need to work together, with all stakeholders, together with civil society organisations, and deliver effectively on our commitment in addressing gender-based violence for an equal, equitable and peaceful society.

I have also noticed that you have a very thorough agenda embracing many important aspects of a woman's life in today's society, aspects where there is much need for proper discussion, and necessary actions to be taken, to ensure that no woman in this country is left behind.

I must commend you on the choice of such a rich array of relevant issues that are impacting on the basic rights of women in our country.

I am pleased that you are so up to date on the realities that many women are facing today.

I am impressed by your forthcoming discussion on digitalization, climate change, inclusion and sustainability. All these issues can impact in no small way to a situation where feminization of poverty is further accentuated, in our country and beyond.

I am truly pleased that NCW is a proactive organisation, and is continuing in bringing to the table such important discussions.

Let me encourage you to bring your discussions on a national level too.

Your advocacy matters.

We must ensure that all of us out there, are aware of the higher risks such challenges bring to women's rights.

These are another set of issues which can impact on and violate women's human rights.

It is so important that everyone is aware that the rightful enjoyment of Women's Rights is not a static process, but we need to be all the time on the alert of new challenges that arise, with all socio-economic progress.

I truly believe that our work for gender equality and equity does not have a start and end date, but it is work in progress.

Your continuous work and discussions today is evidence of an organisation that though it was born in another era, but it has regenerated itself over time and every time. This is also evidence of the relevance of the NCW that need to continue to grow to be, as it has been along the nearly 60 years of its existence, a strong voice for women in this country.

Yes, we have achieved a lot, but there is still a way to go, to be comfortable enough to say, that gender equality and equity is a way of life in our society.

There are many issues that are still hindering our girls and young women from their essential contribution to our communities and society.

There are still real barriers that deny the rightful enjoyment and the necessary effective safeguards of all rights to women in our country.

We must advocate for more endeavours in educating and empowering our children in the respect and dignity that is rightfully deserved to all genders.

NWC has been a strong voice and must continue to be today, tomorrow and in the years to come.

My last call in my contribution today, is to the men living in our country, and to all of our authorities.

I would like to use Emma Watson' words, when she said that:

It is time that we all see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals.

Finally, I augur you a successful Annual General Meeting and many, many years of activism towards the wellbeing of all women in our society.

