

FIDEM's International Women's Day Conference
Wednesday 8th March 2023

Firstly, I would like to thank you for inviting me to this informative and interesting conference. I must also commend Sabine, and her team at FIDEM, for bringing such a reputable list of speakers and experts together, to discuss these longstanding issues that continue to impact the lives of women.

I still remember over 40 years ago, when I was Secretary General of the Labour Party, and pioneering the first celebration of women's day, together with Maggie Moran, who was then, President of Socialist Women.

We have come a long way since the achievement of universal suffrage over 75 years ago.

Year after year, we have come together on International Women's Day to discuss, deliberate, commit, listen to experts, suggest, and recommend ways to end discrimination against women.

And yet, we continue to appeal repeatedly to our authorities and all stakeholders, to address, gender inequalities and inequities to ensure that women's human rights are safeguarded.

I believe as many other women do, that unless we look at gender inequality and inequity from a societal holistic perspective we will continue to meet in the future, on International Women's Day and go on speaking, discussing and recommending ad nauseam, and practically either getting nowhere, or achieve very little progress every year.

Although over the past decades a number of gigantic leaps forward have been achieved, but we must also acknowledge that we are still living in a patriarchal culture.

The hundreds of domestic violence cases that are reported each year, and the horrendous femicides that we have witnessed each, and every year, are clear evidence of this discriminating culture.

And this is, notwithstanding that as a country, we have a body of laws that should make us proud.

Malta has been a forerunner in transposing the Istanbul Convention into our national legislation, however domestic violence and femicide continue to plague our country.

Another important step forward was also taken last year when we acknowledged femicide as a specific criminal act.

We are therefore now also very aware that although legislation is very important, but we have not achieved what is essential, to overcome the persisting patriarchal culture in our society.

We still must strive harder 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, as full rights holders.

I believe that we need a thorough review of our education system and be brave enough to bring about the necessary changes.

An education system that builds on respect and the wellbeing of all without prejudice.

It is by investing in our Children and Young People that we can achieve the necessary sustainable culture change and mental leap.

I believe that this is the only way to build the much-needed respect and wellbeing, and the acknowledgement that each and every member of society whatever the gender must be regarded as an equal and valued contributor in our society.

It is through education that we can truly and effectively address the necessary culture change and put an end to gender based discrimination.

We have tried for decades to emphasis, that it is our right as women, to enjoy a productive and respectful life, free from exploitation, discrimination, and violence.

Although we have achieved a great deal, however we must admit that we are definitely far off from ensuring the enjoyment of women's human rights for all women without prejudice.

Let me now take a couple of examples.

I will start with taking a brief look at the situation of women regarding employment.

So if we look at female employment rates in our country that stands at around 70.8% and the fact that 60% of university students are female, we can easily say that we have managed to make huge leaps forward in the last couple of decades. However, we know that there are still very persisting issues related to gendered patterns in employment.

We know that gender differences in wages and part-time work status result from subtle workplace gender based discrimination against women.

Furthermore, the issue of the gender pay gap, also creates risks of precarity and undoubtedly creates a clear violation of the fundamental rights to equality and equity, and also risks the intensification of the feminisation of poverty.

It is evident to me that we 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.

What will we do? When we know that the proportion of women on the boards of the largest publicly listed companies registered in the EU Member States reached 30%, whereas in Malta, women account for hardly 10% of board members?

Why have we achieved parity within the judiciary but not in the appointment of Constitutional roles?

Why only one in four members of Parliament are women, even after the implementation of the recent corrective measures aiming at equal representation.

We are definitely still far off from achieving gender equality and equity.

I am convinced that it is with the collective endeavours of the whole of society, that we can overcome the obstacles to ensure the enjoyment of equality and equity for all genders.

I want to stress that the issue of gender equality and equity is not a woman's issue, but it is the issue that impacts on all members of our society. It is an issue of effective democracy. It is an issue of universal fundamental human rights.

We also need to work at changing this perception, that Women's Day and these issues are only women's concerns.

Let me take another example.

The gender pay gap is now also a pressing issue, that needs to be addressed.

It must be addressed, by ensuring that parity is respected in high management positions.

We can address this.

However, we need to create quality flexible jobs with the right policies in place, that allow women and men to balance ambition with caring responsibilities and work life balance.

The gender pay gap, must be addressed, with a change in culture, that empowers our society, to realise that caring responsibilities and employment are effectively shared equally between women and men.

We have to address it with re-designed jobs at all levels, to ensure that career progression even if on a part-time basis due to balancing employment and caring responsibilities, is achieved.

We definitely need to have a national reflection, a thorough strategy, effective policies, and a sustainable action plan with all the necessary resources available, to ensure that we eliminate all sorts of gender based discrimination.

On the other hand, we need to ensure that in such a process, we embrace all women without prejudice. We cannot simply be comfortable in providing mainstream strategies and policies and forget migrant girls and women, women with disabilities, transgender women, and other vulnerable women.

We must not take comfort from the fact that the majority of women are breaking the glass ceiling and stop there. Mainstream strategies and policies, without the necessary focus on vulnerable women, will make their vulnerability invisible.

On this women's day, I would like also to remind everyone that this country like all other European countries is different now, in the sense that we are now a multicultural society, and therefore new challenges are present.

I will just mention, the issue of child marriages and female genital mutilation. These are new challenges that are real amongst us. We also need to focus on such issues to empower our girls and boys through our education system to uphold the values that give the full dignity and respect to all girls and women without prejudice.

On concluding, I would like to reiterate the need to advocate for more endeavours in educating and empowering our children in the respect and dignity that is rightfully deserved to all genders. I believe that investing in our children and young people is the only sustainable way in achieving true and effective equality for all genders without prejudice.

Finally, I would like to end by addressing the men living in our country, and our authorities, by quoting Emma Watson's words, when she said that: ***It is time that we all see gender as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals.***

I augur the FIDEM Foundation many more years of supporting and empowering vulnerable people by facilitating access to life-changing educational opportunities and wellbeing.