

DEVOTION Cost Action

University of Malta

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Distinguished Guests, Colleagues and Friends

I would like to thank you, Prof Jean Calleja-Agius for inviting me to speak at this final conference of the DEVOTION COST Action.

It is an honour to be here, and a privilege to witness the remarkable work that has been carried out, by all the members, and participants of this network.

I cherish the opportunity to work alongside dedicated professionals like yourselves, to make a positive impact on society.

I am pleased that over the past four years, DEVOTION was also a means of connection with a pan-European multidisciplinary group of researchers dedicated to perinatal care.

The Perinatal period needs visibility and I completely agree you're your recommendation that it should be perceived as a neuro biopsychosocial area.

Unfortunately, perinatal care is still perceived by many only from a medical perspective.

Perinatal care is the first stage of life for an infant, and we know very well that child development depends not only on the medical care of the mother but also on the psychosocial aspect of the parents in particular the mother.

It is therefore so meaningful that as a European multidisciplinary group, you are aiming at establishing a universal standard of care, prevent and minimize birth trauma, and optimize birth experiences.

Indeed, your dedication and collaboration towards achieving these goals is truly inspiring.

I am pleased that today, you are gathered here to showcase the outcomes of this collaboration and I am hopeful that you will plan the way forward for further and more future collaborations.

I believe that continuing this research process, to raise awareness, and advocate, about the importance of a neuro biopsychosocial approach to perinatal services, is crucial for necessary preventive measures, initiatives, and policies, aiming also at a positive socio-economic environment for our societies and countries.

I truly commend you for all the work you have done throughout these four years. I am certain that the tasks required by the COST Action required hard work and dedication, but your achievements are truly extraordinary.

I would like to therefore encourage you to keep the momentum and continue with your advocacy on the right perspective and approach, in the development of further necessary services, that are needed to ensure that perinatal health, is given its due importance for the benefit of all members of society, in particular the mother, the infant and the family.

The depth of knowledge and expertise that you bring to the table is invaluable, in shaping evidence-based practices and policies, that can make a real difference in the lives of women, infants, and families.

I want to congratulate you, as well for working together, during the past years, and hope that you will continue to work together, and share your expertise and experiences for many years to come.

Humanity needs your genuine hard work, abilities, and capacity to drive the needed change together.

I was asked to share with you some significant experiences, during my life journey. All through my life I focused on children's wellbeing, and

today I have the privilege of also working with Children, primarily on the safeguarding of their human rights and wellbeing.

As a woman involved in politics for some decades, in a male-dominated society, I have faced numerous challenges. However, my passion for making a difference in the lives of children and families has always driven me forward, and gave me courage to stand up for what I always believed was right for the deserved dignity that each, and everyone in our society, deserves.

Throughout my life, and in whichever role I held, including in the role of President of my country, and prior to that, as Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity, I have dedicated my energy to championing the human rights and wellbeing of children, families, and the disadvantaged in our society.

As a mother, a former politician, and a Children's Human Rights Defender, I understand the importance of safe maternal and child healthcare for all. That is why I have championed initiatives such as:

- a. The BIRTH COST Action in 2018, where Prof Jean Calleja-Agius was so much involved.
- b. The Perinatal Mental Health Alliance's Project: RISE-UP in 2020.

- c. The Women Political Leaders research study on Equal Access to Maternal Healthcare in the European Union in 2017, and the research study, the State of Maternal Mental Health in Europe in 2019.

In the process of my life journey, I have realized how invisible children tend to become, with politicians and other authorities, and therefore I took some tangible initiatives on a national level, whereby I set up the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society in 2014.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has managed over the years to bring children in regular and structured child participation processes.

I am very proud of the numerous amazing contributions that Children across our islands, and in particular members of our established Children's Council have managed over the years.

One very recent initiative whereby Prof Jean Calleja-Agius, together with Dr Sandra Morena and Prof Olga Gouni, took was the collaboration with the Children's Council within the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, when a Children's Summit entitled: COVID and YOU, was organized.

The idea for a Children's Summit was completely developed by Children and led by Children themselves.

I am so glad that the proceedings will soon be published as what the children had to say is significantly important.

In 2015, I set up The Malta Trust Foundation. This is a privately-funded foundation. We provide services for disadvantaged children and young people aiming at filling up gaps within our support systems.

Lately I was also catalyst in the setting up of a Children's Rights Observatory in Malta. This Observatory is a collaboration between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Faculty for Social Wellbeing within the University of Malta.

Since 2019 I was also elected in the role of President of Eurochild, which is a pan-European unique network, that spans over 41 countries in Europe, and brings together about 4,000 civil society organisations that work with and for children.

My role as President of Eurochild further enhances my commitment to working for and with Children throughout Europe. I am also striving in my deliberations with leaders and politicians at European level, to place children at the heart of European policies.

It is my strong belief that if children are given their rightful space at decision-making, alongside other stakeholders, we can ensure that children's rights and their wellbeing will be enjoyed by all members of society.

Child participation is the gateway to all other Children Human Rights.

Last November I was also elected in the role of President of the newly set up, Mediterranean Children's Movement. This is a very first attempt to bring the Children of the 23 Mediterranean countries together, in dialogue. Through this movement we aim to address Child Poverty, and Peace education. This is a way of ensuring the enjoyment of Children's Human Rights, by all children living in the Mediterranean region.

My involvement in children's human rights both on a European and Mediterranean level, is to contribute in highlighting the need for children's rights to become a priority on the political and socio-economic agenda, so as to encourage our governments to create the space to be informed by children.

On an EU level I have been active in advocating for a Child Guarantee, which I am proud to say that for the very first time the EU is dedicating

funds to specifically address child poverty through tangible initiatives focused on: early childhood development and care, education, health, nutrition, and housing.

It is in all this context that I have endeared so much to the crucial work of the DEVOTION COST Action.

As we all know, traumatic births can have long-term effects on both the mother and the child, and that is why your work is invaluable. Such research and the sharing of clinical practices, which can inform policy is imperative to address such a crucial issue in the holistic wellbeing of the mother and the infant.

I perceive and truly believe that the wellbeing of the mother and infant is beyond the social aspect one's life. It is an issue that has also a most important economic dimension, that impacts on the whole of our societies.

I was very pleased to learn from your position paper that you have taken, into account, another aspect of the need for a socio-economic

approach to traumatic birth and childbirth-related post traumatic stress disorder.

It was a pleasure to read about the tangible key recommendations, which you have made, for policy, research, and practice in this field.

I truly commend, your efforts and hard work.

I am also so glad that you emphasized the need for national and international guidelines for maternity and mental health care to increase awareness of perinatal mental health problems, including traumatic birth and childbirth-related post-traumatic stress disorder (CB-PTSD).

Your invaluable work on these guidelines should inform national, European, and international strategies for detection, prevention, and also treatment.

However, I reiterate what I highlighted earlier, that this concerning issue is not to be taken from a medical perspective only, but also from a socio-economic standpoint as well.

This aspect must be emphasized and stressed with all policy makers.

I am also pleased that your position paper also highlights the importance of understanding birth through a neuro-biopsychological, and other social factors.

This knowledge is essential for early identification, prevention, and the development of personalized interventions.

Another aspect which caught my attention, when reading the position paper, is the impact of traumatic births on disadvantaged individuals, including migrants and victims of domestic violence.

I am glad that the DEVOTION COST Action has shed light on the specific challenges faced by these groups, which unfortunately, are many a time side lined and at times completely ignored.

Through research, we know that, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed further challenges of vulnerability.

As policymakers, researchers, clinicians, and advocates, we must collaborate closely to address all these issues effectively.

I firmly believe that the collaboration between academics, researchers, policymakers, politicians, and civil society organisations, is paramount for the sustainable progress of our societies.

We all have a role to play in improving the lives of individuals, communities, and societies. You as academics and researchers provide invaluable expertise and evidence-based knowledge, while

policymakers and politicians possess the power to shape policies and implement changes in the best interest of their respective societies.

I am convinced that together, we can create a synergy that drives positive holistic and meaningful change for the benefit of all humanity.

Throughout my life journey, I have witnessed the transformative power of collaboration. By working alongside each other, we can identify pressing issues, develop innovative solutions, and ensure their implementation.

The DEVOTION COST Action is a prime example of how this collaboration can yield impactful results. I commend all the members and participants for their collaboration, dedication, and hard work.

In conclusion, the seventeen key recommendations outlined in the DEVOTION position paper offer a roadmap for preventing traumatic births and CB-PTSD.

Adoption and implementation of these recommendations have the potential to improve outcomes for women, infants, health services and society.

Effective implementation of the necessary actions into healthcare services and public health initiatives, are of the essence. Routine

evaluation of these actions is as important, while measuring outcomes and impact is necessary.

This will provide us with further evidence of their efficacy and effectiveness, allowing us to refine and expand these initiatives as we go along.

I eagerly look forward to seeing policy makers to reach out to you, as researchers and academics, as I believe that when everyone comes together, the efforts of everyone will make a lasting difference in the lives of individuals and families.

I am so convinced that Together, we can create a world where every birth is a positive and empowering experience.

Thank you once again for creating this remarkable journey and for advocating and contributing, for such an important transformation in the lives of mothers and children throughout Europe, and consequently, throughout all of our communities, and societies.

I would like to end my contribution by sharing, an ancient Indian proverb, which I came across some time ago, and intrigued me. I see this Indian proverb as very relevant to our discussion. It says:

At every birth two people are born – a baby and a mother.

It is so true.

It is not only the baby that is born, but a mother is created by every birth, and therefore, the holistic neuro biopsychosocial approach, needs to take more relevance, when dealing with perinatal care services.

Thank you all so much for this invaluable work for humanity.