

**Keynote Speech delivered by HE Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca,  
President of Malta, at the Women4Mediterranean Conference -  
Plenary Session 1, 'Mediterranean Women Leading for Change',  
October 2018**

**Your Excellency, Nasser Kamel, Secretary General, Union for  
the Mediterranean**

**Distinguished panelists,**

**Dear friends,**

**I feel honored to have been invited as a women of the  
Mediterranean to contribute to this plenary session, which will  
explore the contributions of Mediterranean women, as the  
present and future leaders of positive change in our region.**

**As the President of Malta, I have had first-hand experiences of  
the specific challenges being faced by the women and the girls  
of our region.**

**Through my experiences, I can confirm that many of the  
challenges we face as women, are due to the multi-layered  
factors of social, economic, and cultural discrimination,  
injustices, and inequalities.**

While we must certainly speak about these challenges, I would like, before I delve further into my contribution, to remember that women have, throughout our history, stood out as inspiring contributors to the prosperity and the progress of the Mediterranean Region.

Let me take this opportunity to honour some of these women by name, starting with Hypatia of Alexandria.

Her life was ended in the year 415, as a victim of femicide, but she is still our first model of scientific freedom and discovery, to this day.

Let me mention Verdimura, a scholar from Sicily, who graduated as the world's first female medical doctor in 1376.

Let me mention Artemisia Gentileschi, one of the most celebrated and progressive painters of the seventeenth century.

Gentileschi not only achieved excellence as an artist, but also participated in the prosecution of her rapist, at a time when women were often excluded and ignored.

Let me mention Madame Curie, the first woman and the only woman, who was awarded twice, the Nobel prize for her scientific research.

And let me also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the late Fatema Mernissi, the celebrated Moroccan scholar and feminist who died three years ago.

Mernissi inspiringly said, and I quote “the real mistake of women was to let the memoir, the collective, the history, the space of producing history, fall into the hands of men alone.”

We must rectify this mistake, by making use of spaces, like this conference, to regain and to celebrate our own history, as the proud women of the Mediterranean.

The resilience, the courage, and the determination of all of these women, and so many more, is part of our Mediterranean DNA.

The legacy of our foremothers is an essential part of the rich heritage of the Mediterranean Region, which must inspire us, to continue to pursue a world of equality and equity, for the benefit of both present and future generations.

For this reason, I believe we must continue acknowledging the vital role that women play, to nurture the positive changes that are taking place across our region.

Despite progress in the legislative sector of many of our Mediterranean countries, it is an unfortunate reality that behaviours, attitudes, traditions, and customs take much longer to be transformed.

Therefore, we need to continue to create safe and respectful spaces, to actively listen to women and girls from our societies.

We must do more, to act upon their needs and their aspirations.

Our engagement is even more essential at a time when unfortunately the Mediterranean Region continues to experience conflicts, rising extremism, and diverse socio-economic and environmental challenges.

However, even when faced with social unrest, indicators show us that women are a force for positive and long-lasting change.

Research shows us that the empowerment of women, and the attainment of gender equality, are intrinsically linked with sustainable peace and inclusive prosperity within our societies.

According to research by the International Peace Institute, there is clear evidence that women have a powerful impact to resolve conflicts.

We must be catalyst to address inequalities, prejudice and discrimination which create unnecessary social tensions in our communities and in our nations.

We must, through our work for equity and equality achieve effective gender equality to build a culture of positive peace.

I dream of the day when the Mediterranean Region will be a model of equity, equality and inclusion for the rest of the world.

I so believe that our diversity is our strength.

I believe that, underlining our individual diversity, there are many common values, which we need to continuously explore and strengthen.

We need to put together a forward looking strategy and a plan of action to ensure that inclusion, equality and peace are the building blocks upon which our societies are strengthened to become resilient.

Peace can only be considered “positive”, when it is part of the social, cultural, and economic fabric of a society and it’s people, as positive peace is not simply the absence of war.

Positive peace, therefore, must be accompanied by the political will not only to find sustainable solution to existing conflicts, but also, to be an ongoing process to insure inclusion, equity and equality.

For this reason, we cannot let women continue to be absent from positions of leadership and decision-making.

Dear friends,

The empowerment of women is the foundation for the much desired stability, peace, and prosperity of our Mediterranean Region.

However, too many women do not have access to their rights, nor do we enjoy the same opportunities as our male counterparts.

It is essential that we address the traditions, customs, and stereotypes that are holding back so many girls and women from their rightful participation in economic, social, and political life.

According to the OECD, the equal contribution of women and men in the economy could increase our GDP, across the Mediterranean, by more than 25%.

Furthermore, indicators from UNIDO tell us that women in the Mediterranean region report that access to markets, ... stronger networks, .... appropriate financial services, ..... and an emphasis on women's entrepreneurship, are essential prerequisites for their economic empowerment.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right.

Gender equality is not about obscuring or distorting the differences between women and men.

Gender equality is about embracing diverse people, of all genders, and creating a context in which each and every person can pursue their legitimate aspirations, and be respected in the fullness of their human dignity.

Promoting the effective implementation of women's rights and access to all opportunities is crucial, to ensure peace, stability, and prosperity in our societies.

We definitely know, what should be done, to achieve these goals.

So much so, that the Ministers of the 43 Member States of the Union for the Mediterranean, through the Ministerial Declarations of Istanbul,..... Marrakech, ..... Paris, ..... and, most recently, Cairo, have actually created a region-wide agenda, to promote women's rights.

I am convinced that collaboration amongst national authorities, civil society organisations, and communities, is crucial, to implement this agenda.

Let me give a couple of examples of my own country where the right strategies with the right political will for women empowerment can leave effective positive results in a short period of time.



A number of initiatives taken by my government to promote the participation of Maltese women in the workforce, which include: back-to-work fiscal incentives; ... increase in maternity and adoption leave; ... tax credits for women returners; .... free child care facilities and breakfast and afterschool clubs for children ... have managed to increase participation of Maltese women in the workforce by 20% in 4 years.

Unfortunately, the lack of proper female representation in political leadership will continue to hinder further advancement for women in all sectors. It is an urgent need for women to be properly represented so as their perspectives and their aspirations are present at the highest levels of policy-making and decision-taking of our countries and our region.

Listening and responding to the concerns of women will also give our public and private sectors, an essential insight into the different experiences.

On concluding, I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panelists, about the way in which gender considerations have been embedded in the private sector and private-public partnerships, created in our countries.

I augur that this will also be a space for the sharing of good practices within and amongst civil society activists, by highlighting the positive and concrete changes, that can be made within our Mediterranean communities.

We must not be afraid to break taboos;

We must not be afraid to raise our voices;

We must not be afraid to demand that the rights and the dignity of each and every woman, in the Mediterranean is respected, and more so, is celebrated.

We should not allow any woman in our Mediterranean Region to feel alone.

I believe that this spirit of solidarity would be the most significant achievement we could hope to create, through the outreach of the Union for the Mediterranean, and our efforts during this conference.

Solidarity and networking between women, alongside men, is the only way forward for us, ... to effectively promote the role of women, as agents of economic development; ... as the builders of peace; ... and as the inspirational spokeswomen for our communities our societies and our Mediterranean region.

**Thank you.**