

Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at a conference organized by the Council of Baltic Sea States, about the Universal Prohibition Corporal Punishment Conference in Stockholm, 16 November 2018

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to join you at this important regional conference.

This year's celebration of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights gives a special meaning to the work we have done in Malta earlier this year, and the work which has been done by the Council of the Baltic States regarding the Universal prohibition of corporal punishment.

2019 is an another special year, as we will be celebrating the 30th Anniversary since the most widely-ratified UN convention on the rights of the child, came into being. Therefore, let's work harder together to promote, to protect, and to prioritise the rights of each and every child.

Our work is a statement on the importance, that all of our countries are to remember that children's rights, are first and foremost, human rights.

Coming to Stockholm is an ideal location for this conference, and the presentation of the guidance papers because, as we all know, Sweden was the very first country in the world to enact a legal ban on corporal punishment in 1979. Furthermore, Sweden was also the very first country to hold a global conference on corporal punishment.

Whenever we are united, we send a strong message within our countries and to the international community, that all forms of violence against children are unacceptable.

By continuing to endeavour, with other countries, to put an end to corporal punishment, we safeguard the intrinsic human dignity and holistic wellbeing of our children and our societies.

Although it is reassuring to note that 54 countries in the world have introduced legislation that prohibits all forms of corporal punishment against children, however, this is still much far away from the Universal Objectives and targets of ending the scourge of corporal punishment.

Therefore, I would like to commend the efforts of the Council of the Baltic States, for making such a significant contribution, to strengthen the endeavours, to encourage the implementation of the necessary legislation to end corporal punishment..

With almost four decades worth of experience in this field, the Baltic countries are a perfect example to other nations, who want to make the transition in favour of a zero-tolerance policy on violence against children.

For this reason, I look forward to the wide dissemination of the Guidance Reports. Such publications are a valuable way of sharing

good practices and experiences, to inspire others to join us, in embracing a culture of zero-tolerance and policies, in the best interests of our children.

Furthermore, I am confident that the outcomes of the 'Non-Violent Childhoods' project will provide a powerful toolkit for the international community, to further instigate the effective implementation of legal bans on corporal punishment, and strongly encourage much-needed policies.

Let me use this opportunity to share with you some of our experiences in Malta, and the steps being taken to safeguard the dignity and the wellbeing of our children.

As signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Malta is committed to uphold legislation which protects children, alongside policies for social outreach, education, and an emphasis on positive parenting.

Legislation and effective strategies for the enforcement of the law are crucial. However, I believe that the most effective changes are those which also transform our cultures and our mentalities.

For this reason, I am confident that the launch of the first National Children's Policy in Malta, on Universal Children's Day last year, will do much to empower professionals and families, to provide children, especially the most vulnerable, with the necessary support.

The National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting 2016-2024 is another important measure, to educate Maltese parents about non-abusive and non-violent forms of discipline.

In this way, my government is encouraging a society that is more peaceful, more respectful, and more capable of meeting the complex needs of every child and their families.

My Foundation, which is the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has contributed to our national discourse, by being a strong advocate for children's rights, and an internationally recognised champion for child participation.

In fact, my Foundation was a major factor that motivated the High-Level Global Conference on the Universal Prohibition of Corporal Punishment, which was held in my country, this year. I would like to take the opportunity to commend Austria who had held the preceding high-level global conference in 2016.

I wish to take this opportunity to share with you the main outcomes of the Conference held in Malta, which included contributions from international delegations, alongside distinguished keynote speakers and expert panelists.

I must commend, in particular, the participation of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais.

Marta, my dear friend, your commitment to protect and defend vulnerable children is so inspiring. Marta you never stop surprising me with your infinite passion and determination. to promote, to protect, and to prioritise the rights of each and every child. I am looking forward to working closer with you to mark the 30th Anniversary of the CRC, in a meaningful way.

The outcomes, from the Malta global conference, which will be published in partnership with the Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, are scheduled to make a contribution to the next High-Level Global Conference, which will take place in Tunisia in 2020.

I would like to take the opportunity to assure Minister Labidi, the Minister for Women, Families and Children of Tunisia, of our support. I feel sure that we can count on the continued support of the European Commission and the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights.

During the roundtable discussions and panel groups, the national delegations discussed a number of key areas that require further emphasis, and an ongoing commitment, even from those countries, including Malta, who have legislated against corporal punishment.

I would like to briefly share with you the main thoughts expressed by all participants in the Malta meeting.

Capacity-building and training

- There was a focus on capacity-building, and the need for more guidance and training opportunities for professionals who work with, and for, children.
- During the deliberations, it transpired that some countries provide training for some professionals, such as supervision for psycho-social professionals and teacher support, while in other countries, it was mentioned that there are not even, trained social workers available to provide the necessary support.
- Countries who can offer good practices should share and support other countries who are still building the capacity.
- A constructive approach which was suggested, was the investment in train-the-trainer programmes, that enable communities and societies to become empowered to provide the necessary services themselves.

Providing Immediate Care

- Providing immediate care to a child who has been the victim of abuse and punishment should always take place in a child-friendly setting, which respects the voice and the experiences of the individual child.
- It was also recommended that the families in our respective countries should receive adequate care from specialised agencies, working together to meet the complex and intersectional demands of each child and their family.

Empowerment and Education

- Complementary to the training of professionals, child empowerment, through education, is a must, to ensure that children know that corporal punishment is never acceptable.

- Our children cannot wait, and while parents need to be helped and empowered to make the right choices, children need to know that they have the right and the ability to report corporal punishment and to discuss their feelings and experiences.
- In this context, I would like to quote one of the Conference participants, who said that, “discipline means to teach, but this has come to mean something negative. We need to teach children to solve problems, and to know that violence does not solve any problems.”
- The need for awareness-raising initiatives, access to information, and effective social mobilisation, were other important points raised by the conference participants.

Positive Parenting

- Parents need to be offered alternatives to corporal punishment, and underlying mentalities and cultural norms need to be challenged and transformed.

The need for Strategy, Legislation and Policies

- The necessary change in mentality and culture should take place by embracing a bottom-up approach to develop the necessary strategy, which should include awareness, education and training, as well as a top-down approach, to put in place effective legislation and policies.
- We need to work in synergy, on a national level, on a regional level and on an international level. Another important point which was mentioned during the conference was the benefits of cross ministerial action plans, on a national level.

A Culture Change

- Another recommendation was about the importance of the right language that should be used, against corporal punishment, which should reflect also, the local cultural context.
- However, the delegations acknowledged that, while effective legislation is a necessary foundation, it is simply not enough. It

is not the end of the journey, but part of a longer process that involves policy changes and cultural transformations.

Data and Research

- A cause for concern which was aired during the conference, was the insufficient data on this topic. Therefore, it was also recommended that collecting data and research is of utmost urgency and importance.
- There is the need for continuous assessment, improved teamwork, longitudinal research, the promotion of cost-effectiveness, and the provision of global tools to achieve our goals.

Child Participation

- It is our duty as adults and authorities to empower our children to tell their own stories in their own way, as children are the

experts on childhood, and their voices must be heard by our politicians, legislators, policy-makers and activists.

- Only then can a top down approach be successful in developing the right strategy, legislation and policy.

Prevention

- Participants emphasized the absolute importance of prioritising prevention against corporal punishment.
- Our authorities must budget for prevention, learning to see it as an essential investment in the holistic wellbeing of our children and our societies as a whole.

Best interest of the child

- Finally, all participants of the Malta meeting posed this important question.
- As community leaders and decision takers, are we putting our children first, in all of the processes that we are implementing?

I am truly proud of the space we created at the global conference in Malta for dialogue and to promote practical and policy-focused deliberations.

I am also very glad that this regional conference, like the Malta Global Conference, is providing a space for us to listen to the voices of children themselves.

During the Global Conference in Malta, members of the Children's Council; the Young People's Council; and the Children's Consultation Group, within my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, shared their views and concerns. They definitely enriched us with their contributions.

The participating children had a number of meetings where they discussed the subject of corporal punishment, and shared their concerns, that corporal punishment leads children to think of violence as acceptable.

The children also mentioned the importance of positive parenting. They said that loving and respectful parents were essential to break the vicious cycle, which is fuelled by violence.

The children of my Foundation also shared their concerns for disadvantaged children, who are in a position of increased danger, such as children with disabilities, learning difficulties, and even children in migration.

The participation of these children and young people gave further visibility to the importance of a zero-tolerance approach, which condemns all forms of violence against children.

For this reason, I encourage all of us here today to ensure that the input of children is taken on board, during all of our national, regional, and international deliberations in this sector.

The Malta Global Conference concluded its work by the signing of a Declaration by many of the national delegations, to prohibit corporal punishment in all its forms. This gesture of goodwill strengthened our united position, and further highlighted this issue on a global platform.

However, I believe that we must do more, to motivate those countries which still, unfortunately, have not implemented the necessary legislation and policies, to join our important cause.

In fact, ending all forms of violence against children is a fundamental prerequisite, to effectively achieve the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

In particular, SDG Number 16 Target 2, mandates our countries to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children.

We must take effective action, to give visibility to the research which tells us that corporal punishment has adverse and long-term effects, not only on children but also on our families, communities, and societies.

We must promote strong and supportive policies for positive parenting, to ensure that caregivers exercise discipline in dignified, respectful, and non-violent ways.

Finally, we must continue to raise awareness about the rights of each and every child, first and foremost, amongst our children themselves.

Let me reiterate my firmly held belief that children are the experts on childhood, and their voices must be heard by our politicians, policy-makers, community leaders, and activists.

I strongly urge the international community to take effective and urgent action, to ensure that violence against children is no longer considered “normal”, or part of the status quo.

On concluding, I would like to state that if we are truly committed in our efforts to build peace among our nations, we must surely begin by making peace in our homes, in our schools and in our communities.

Violence against children can have no part in a global culture that affirms the values of dignity, of justice, and of peace.

Let's ensure that we can celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the CRC next year, in the most convincing of ways. We need endeavour harder to stand up for our children, and to ensure that our children are given the much-needed space, to become effective valued contributors to human dignity and universal human rights.

Thank you for your attention.