

## **Empowering our future women**

‘With her: A Skilled Girl Force’ recognises that today’s girls need to be prepared to enter a world of work that is being transformed by innovation and technology. This is the theme chosen for 2018 by the United Nations for the International Day of the Girl Child celebrated on October 11 with the aim of recognising girls’ rights and the unique challenges girls face around the world.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) acknowledges that, under this theme, attaining skills for employability is key to economic empowerment, but enhancing skills is also important for the wider participation of girls, tomorrow’s women, in social, civic, and political spheres for an active and participatory citizenship without discrimination.

Educated and skilled workers are in great demand, but roughly a quarter of young people around the world – most of them girls – are currently neither employed nor in education or training. On the other hand, skills are the basis for accessing and remaining in employment as well as for career advancement. It is estimated that by 2025, 49% of all job openings in the European Union will require high qualifications compared to 11% requiring low or no qualifications.

In effect, the level of education has a significant impact on the labour market participation. Low-qualified people have fewer employment opportunities; they are also more vulnerable to precarious jobs and are twice as likely as highly qualified people to experience long-term unemployment, as demonstrated by a study of the European Institute for Gender Equality.

In such circumstances women tend to be at a disadvantage with less opportunities to be in employment resulting in longer detachment periods from the labour market. Moreover, when in employment women with low levels of qualifications are more likely to be employed in elementary occupations compared to men due to persistent occupational gender segregation in the labour market. Furthermore, research shows that women are also more likely to take up precarious jobs with short contracts, low working hours and very low pay.

In addition, very often persons with low levels of qualifications and skills are less likely to participate in lifelong learning opportunities or else to be employed in jobs that offer learning opportunities or organised training.

To address this reality, women need to be empowered from a young age to develop their skills, remain in education, and participate in lifelong learning opportunities across the life course. To this end, during the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on the upscaling of skills of women and men in the EU labour market were adopted to address the situation of women and men trapped in low income precarious work without opportunities for advancement due to lack of skills.

Therefore investing in equal opportunities for girls is vital especially in their critical formative years not only for self-fulfilment but also to contribute to the overall well-being of society. Having said that, it is an undisputed fact, that the formative years and socialisation of girls and boys are often negatively impacted by stereotypical notions related to their gender. From a very young age, even from birth, girls and boys are steered towards particular behaviour and roles which can inhibit the development and fulfilment of their potential. Such stereotypes do not only impact children's behaviour in their early years, but can have an influence on the decisions taken at a young age affecting future prospects in adulthood.

This can be easily seen in their choice of fields of study at school that are very often then reflected in the careers pursued later on in life, perpetuating gender segregation and trends in the labour market. This is quite evident from research that shows that, from the age of 15, girls are less likely than boys to aspire to become ICT professionals. Moreover, boys are more likely to opt for subjects on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) while girls prefer subjects related to education, health and welfare.

Thus, challenging gender stereotypes and addressing inequalities in areas such as access to education is crucial to protect equal opportunities for girls and boys. Empowering girls through the acquisition of skills is an investment in the next generation's workforce, entrepreneurs, leaders, academics, mentors, mothers and active contributors to social, civic, political and economic growth.

This year's theme for the International Day of the Girl Child aiming at enhancing education and skills for girls couldn't have come at a better time when the world is yearning for female leaders. Stronger empowerment for adolescent girls will lead to the breaking of the transmission of poverty, violence, exclusion, discrimination and non-representation. Empowerment through skills and education in formative years, can give girls the potential to change the world – first as today's empowered girls and secondly as tomorrow's women.