

International Day of Women and Girls in Science – 11th February 2021

At present, less than 30% of researchers worldwide are women. Moreover, according to the UNESCO data, only around 30% of all female students select Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields in higher education¹, while the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report maintains that the attainment of women in STEM, in Malta, is below 9%.²

In this context, in order to achieve full and equal access to and participation in science for women and girls, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/70/212 declaring 11th February as the International Day of Women and Girls in Science.³

To commemorate this day, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) interviewed two professional women long established in the field namely Ing Helga Pizzuto, Chairperson of the Malta Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority (MCCAA) and Ms Anna Spiteri, Founder & Managing Director at Integrated Resources Management Co Ltd. Both women broke traditional gender stereotypes and opted for professions that are generally associated with men. Their experiences shed light on how gender should not limit one's interests and potential.

Along the years, women have shown that they are just as capable as men to be great scientists and researchers. Both women mentioned several instances when they experienced significant personal satisfaction throughout their career. Ing Pizzuto recounted that she had experiences in different technical sectors, all of which had their satisfying moments. In the early days of her career Ing Pizzuto led an engineering team in a tech manufacturing company and, she *“was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with first-rate engineers from Europe and the US.”* Many years later she led the transition from national analogue to digital television *“and during the same period, with the invaluable support of another female engineer, designed and oversaw the reassignment of spectrum for the nationwide mobile networks.”* These were two very memorable projects of national importance which she was very privileged to lead.

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/women-and-girls-in-science-day>

² http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

³ Ibid

Additionally, in 2006, she was elected president of the Chamber of Engineers *“having broken the so-called glass ceiling to become the first female to hold this prestigious post”* and, in 2011, she was elected president of the Federation of Professional Bodies.

On the other hand, Ms Spiteri said that when she *“presented a paper at an international conference on earth heritage conservation at Malvern in UK...and then there was a selection of four people to sit on an international panel to set up an Earth Heritage International Foundation and I was chosen. It was three men and myself and I worked on this panel for several years until the whole set up was handed over to UNESCO.”*

The lack of women working in STEM fields is influenced by the cultural stereotypes in our society that serve as a major obstacle for women pursuing careers in science and research, not to mention the workplace environment. In fact, Ms Spiteri said that one time when she asked her boss to also consider her for a promotion, he replied, that he sees her as *“doing the curtains of the office”*. She could not develop her potential and abilities if she stayed waiting for opportunities to be given to her, so created her own opportunities. Indeed, by 1995, Ms Spiteri was no longer employed, and by 1996 she got her first EU research project with partners from Ireland, UK, France, Lebanon and Turkey, *“from then on we never looked back, having now been in 16 international projects and having conducted scientific research in Europe, Middle East, North Africa, Peru, Brazil, etc”*

Moreover, Ing Pizzuto emphasised that her *“biggest hurdle was juggling family time with a demanding career”*. In fact, she believes that this remains a key obstacle for many women today.

When asked why women are needed in science and research, both women stressed that women provide a completely different perspective from that of men. *“If more women enter the science and engineering streams such that there is a full gender balance, the scientific workforce would not only grow significantly but would be further strengthened by the improved skill mix”* added Ing Pizzuto.

Pushing yourself forward in a largely male environment, whether while studying or at work requires determination. It is for this reason that we need to encourage girls and women to

follow their aspirations and abilities and make informed choices regarding their studies and careers in STEM. It is always important for society to continue working to challenge and eliminate gender stereotypes and empower young girls in the classroom and young women at the workplace to increase their participations in these fields.

Indeed, both women stated that schools and other education systems play a key role in determining girls' interest in STEM fields and in providing equal opportunities to access and benefit from quality STEM education. Teachers, assessment methods and tools, learning contents, materials, and equipment are all critical to ensuring girls' interest in STEM subjects and, eventually, in STEM careers.

As António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, said *"To rise to the challenges of the 21st century, we need to harness our full potential. That requires dismantling gender stereotypes. On this International Day of Women and Girls in Science, let's pledge to end the gender imbalance in science."*⁴

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2295 7850 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.

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⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/women-and-girls-in-science-day/>