

Dr. Merva's Speech

Thank you for inviting me to this wonderful conference. I am honored to have been asked to participate.

Today's topic is Empowering women (and men) in the Euro Mediterranean region.

Empowerment is generally understood as being realized when there is improvement in access to education, the labor market, and a real guarantee of legal and political rights allowing for the greatest expression of human dignity: being able to form and take care of a family.

Today I would like to make two basic points about empowerment.

My first point is that more than ever before in our history, we have some of the greatest opportunities for training and education that have been afforded by advances in technology and the availability of information.

60 percent of households in the EU and about 10 to 20 percent of households in the Mediterranean countries have personal computers. I would anticipate this to grow as private and public organizations continue their efforts to bring the internet and its information to the people.

Does that mean all we need is a personal computer and an internet connection to empower people?

Alas, were it so easy.

In preparing this talk, a simple google search on the word "empowerment" resulted in about 15 million hits, which should not surprise us as Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

So we have information. What we are going to need are educated citizens to assess and use that information so as to promote civilized, democratic, healthy, creative and environmental sustainable societies.

And, to do this, we are going to need great teachers. We are going to have to find, train, and value the Socrates and the Maria Montessori's in our region.

This leads us to the role of women. When I was looking at 2011 OECD data for university students and their "first job after graduation", what grabbed my attention was that regardless of the selected field of study – from the humanities, to science and health - more women than men entered "teaching" as a first job.

This gives us a wonderful chance to empower women as they are in a profession, teaching, that needs to be leading this knowledge-driven age.

So let us elevate the status of teachers. We need to address the low value society places on teachers as they shall be one of our greatest assets.

Undervaluing teaching may be due to the fact that it is dominated by females. However, it may also have much to do with the fact that markets are incapable of valuing any asset whose benefits are difficult to quantify and occur long into the future.

It is easy to measure the value of an engineer by counting the number of cars or computers produced. But, how do we measure the value of a teacher? Should we count the number of engineers they produce? The appreciation for art and culture they inspire? The wisdom and curiosity they encourage? The foundations for civil-society they may lay?

Great, well-trained teachers produce something that we cannot easily count or measure, and, as such, they are systematically undervalued – and sometimes not valued at all.

If the word “empower” gives us 15 million hits of information with a search engine, then let us allocate 15 million euro to train teachers how to teach better in this information-saturated world. Let us teach them how to take advantage of the many technological tools available today to advance student learning.

Let us empower our teachers so that they may empower their students.

This should be a fundamental goal for our society if we are going to take our “googled-information” and turn it into an educational instrument that empowers citizens to build strong and healthy societies in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Now my second point about empowerment.

True empowerment can only exist when the outcomes of that power are satisfied. High youth unemployment in the Euro-Mediterranean region presents very serious challenges towards empowerment of both women and men. This situation is further aggravated when there is limited meritocracy.

While unemployment may potentially be addressed by economic policies that focus on growth; limited or lack of meritocracy may be more problematic to address.

Lack of meritocracy effectively means that many educated and trained individuals are not able to find jobs or start professions. Avenues for jobs and career advancement are open only to those who have the right family networks or political affiliations. When merit is perceived to not matter, young people may under-invest in their own education.

In sum, empowerment without meritocracy may result in discouragement and frustration as hard work and dreams cannot be realized. “Empowerment” may be directed in ways unanticipated, and perhaps unacceptable, to civil society.

So we should be clear: empowerment must be accompanied by meritocracy such that those who make an effort to realize their potential, have a fair and reasonable opportunity to do so.

Without a functioning meritocracy, our sincere efforts to empower both men and women so as to allow for the greatest expression of human dignity: being able to work, have a healthy family and participate fully in a civil, sustainable society may not be realized.

Thank you very much for your time.

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