

Dear graduands, the University of Malta has honoured me by inviting me to give this oration, and I am particularly privileged to be delivering this to you, our graduands who as our students have shared this voyage with us during your University experience as the world went through the COVID 19 pandemic. I am certain that most of you graduating today, if not all of you, have grown immensely throughout these years, notwithstanding that at the same time some of you might have also suffered - possibly from anxiety, loneliness or isolation because of these exceptional circumstances.

When the preoccupation with parking and commuting to University was replaced with the click of a button on a zoom link, we drew a sigh of relief. However, week after week, month after month, semester after semester, I am sure many of you missed us as much as we missed you, missed life on campus and felt the need to come together again and reconnect. Because sharing spaces and looking at people in the face again is of essence.

Your resilience throughout these challenging times is laudable. You have made it. You are here today. And this is just the beginning.

It is the beginning, or possibly for some of you a continuation, because the world out there needs you. It needs your positive involvement, your utilitarian spirit, it needs you to speak the right thing and to position yourself on issues that matter. It needs individuals who harbour values of solidarity, empathy, social justice, integrity, democracy and respect. Individuals who will stand up to injustice, dishonesty, discrimination, inequality and cancellation. We desperately need a cohort of individuals, who are not just highly trained and competent professionals, that goes without saying. We need a legion of persons who recognise the far reaching effects and lasting rewards of their profession. Professionals whose driving principles do not just circumvent on personal success but on the conviction that we need to change the world we live in to a better one.

We are hardly out of a pandemic and straight into a war. We saw suffering, injustice, inequality and discrimination, and we are seeing greed, abuse and indifference. We do not have to go too far to witness these acts of inhumanity. They are at our fingertips, in comments on social media platforms, we read opinions of people who seem to have lost all humanity and decency. Some argue that we should not intervene to save the lives of people caught in conflict. That we are too small, that we cannot shoulder these responsibilities, that we should not pay from our taxes. Racism, xenophobia, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia have become mainstream discourses camouflaged by politically correct terms- shrouded by claims of freedom of speech and expression. Hate speech, intolerance and distortion of facts are continuously spewed out.

We need graduands who have the courage to set a new standard of humanity of how people relate with each other.

I cannot but refer to the contexts I have been working closely in for the last twenty years where I have engaged with the challenges faced by minority groups. The field of disability being one of them. We have really come a long way in disability rights, that is true, but the representation of persons with disability is still undermined by a charity model that degrades people. We still believe that we need to fix people so that they fit in our society, instead of accepting that society has been so far ableist and non-inclusive and that it is society that needs to change. We have internalised notions of donating money to appease our conscience and allow telethons that play on our emotions to portray persons with disability as a homogenous group of people that require our charity.

I have also been a vocal activist in the field of sexual and gender diversity, and am proud to see how our University has been amongst the most progressive of institutions. The setting up of a number of UM committees that safeguard and promote these aspects, such as the Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee, the Committee on Race and Ethnic Affairs and the Access Disability Support Committee, is witness to this. Whilst acknowledging the need to move away from a binary system and endorsing gender equality and sexual diversity, our University has produced guidelines on inclusive language and email signatures that allow for the inclusion of the pronoun of choice. The Faculty for Social Wellbeing's slogan, *A Safe Space for all* is not merely empty words. We are seeing a growing number of students on campus feel safe, safe enough to speak about and even express their sexual orientation or their gender identity and to conduct research on these topics. We are seeing a growing number of academics and members of staff who are increasingly aware of these identities and experiences, and who seek to learn more about them, so that they can be of better service and support to their students.

News in the past two months of two separate acts of Femicide have shocked our nation, or maybe not, because there have been 9 in the last five years. Antonia, Maria Carmela, Shannon, Lourdes, Maria Lourdes, Angele, Chantelle, Paulina, Rita. And it is up to each and every one of us to fight this plague – we cannot stand idle. In the FEM-UNITED Country Report on Femicide Research and Data (2021, 9), Naudi, Dimitrijevic, Farrugia and Galea assert that *“Malta’s societal character is heavily framed by patriarchy, seen clearly in the social attitudes, gender roles and the male dominated discourse in everyday life.”* We need to stand up to sexism, misogyny and violence against women, whether you are a woman, a man, whether you identify as non-binary, whether you consider yourself a feminist or not is the *raison d’être* of our faculty and I believe of the UM as a whole.

In the face of these realities, and many more I have not referred to, my message to you, our graduands is simple. We still have way to go, and I hope that all of you will go out there and make sure that no minority is undermined. That no one's rights are tarnished and that you stand up to these violations, never turning a blind eye.

Be idealists, do not let pragmatism drain your inspiration, swim against the current, kick up the system and dare stand up to injustices with your chin held high. Because today you have not just obtained a qualification. This journey you have just concluded, is just the beginning of a greater one ahead.

Just remember that the things that challenge you most, define you.

Naudi, M., Dimitrijevic, L., Farrugia, M., Galea, E. (2021). Country Report on Femicide Research and Data: MALTA. University of Malta & Women's Rights Foundation.