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Opening Remarks by H.E. Peter Thomson, International Day of Women and Girls in Science

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, thank you to Malta and the Royal Academy of Science International Trust for organizing today's forum on this, the Second Commemoration of 'International Day of Women and Girls in Science'.

I commend Malta for its strong commitment to promoting the role of women and girls in science, and for its instrumental role in the General Assembly's decision to mark the 11th of February each year as 'International Day of Women and Girls in Science'.

Such initiatives invigorate our global efforts to promote gender equality, raise awareness of the critical role that women and girls already play in science and technology. They decisively promote women and girls' equal participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of you here today would be familiar with the recent popularity of films and books that portray the true stories of the contributions that women have played in major scientific advances in human history. Contributions that have been too often overlooked.

Whether it be women mathematicians working on NASA's early space programme, or a woman cracking the Enigma cyphers and helping to end World War II, or woman playing a pivotal role in discovering the structure of DNA only to be overlooked for Nobel recognition, history is replete with examples of women's scientific contributions going unrecognized.

While it is gratifying that for some of these cases, the historical record is now being corrected through due recognition being afforded to these pioneering women scientists and mathematicians, what these late acknowledgements cannot do is unwind the intergenerational impacts that have already occurred from the side-lining of women scientists and their accomplishments from mainstream view. It is time for us to play catch-up.

When we look across our world and see that 62 million girls between the ages of six and 15 are not in school, that girls on average lag behind boys in secondary school completion rates, that women earn on average between 20 to 30 percent less than working men and shoulder the heaviest burdens when it

comes to unpaid domestic care work, and that women only account for some 30 percent of the world's researchers, it is clear that dedicated policies and programs are needed to overcome the systematic barriers that restrict women and girls from enjoying full and equal access and participation in both education and science.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

When world leaders came together to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, they provided humanity a universal masterplan to transform our world. One which – if implemented urgently, effectively and at scale – will enable us to eliminate extreme poverty, achieve gender equality, reduce inequality, live in peaceful and inclusive societies, combat climate change, protect our environment and achieve gender equality.

In adopting the 2030 Agenda, world leaders recognized the critical role of both women and girls, and science and technology, in driving implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

As global attention shifts to implementing the SDGs, it is clear that to unlock the catalytic potential of both of these areas, specific strategies are needed to empower women and girls, and give them every opportunity to succeed.

This begins with quality education.

As policymakers, it is critical that we therefore invest in educating girls and equipping them with the skills and opportunity to become the scientists, coders, tech leaders, engineers, and mathematicians of tomorrow.

Such investments must be pursued as a critical driver of sustainable development, and a human rights imperative. Only thus will we shape a sustainable future for our world.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The huge influence of the media in our modern societies cannot be understated. It helps to educate individuals, set community standards, and shape social norms and expectations.

The flip side is that media portrayals of women and girls have often served to entrench narrow gender stereotypes, and undermine perceptions of women's equal rights, capabilities, and roles in society.

As part of our efforts to achieve gender equality, drive sustainable development, and inspire girls to take up careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, it is essential that we actively look at ways to counter these depictions, and partner with the media in championing our causes.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a ‘He for She’ and grandfather to three young girls, I am committed to doing all I can to promote gender equality, to expand opportunities for women and girls in education, science and technology, and to strengthen the role of women and girls in implementing all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

As a first step, I have written to all Heads of Government urging them to include the SDGs as part of the education curricula of all schools. This will help to broaden awareness of all of 17 SDGs – including Goal 5 on gender equality. I am receiving positive responses to these letters from Heads of Government.

Last week, I met with leaders of tech companies in Silicon Valley to discuss ways we can work together to promote achievement and raise awareness of the SDGs across our world. These discussions were a prelude to the High-Level Event on Innovation and Connectivity that I will be convening on 17 May. I will also be convening a High-Level Event on Education on 22 June. Both of these events will include discussions on ways we can promote equality and inclusivity in our global efforts to drive implementation of the SDGs. I encourage all you to attend these events.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Speaking as a grandfather, like the great majority of us, I want a future for them that is safe and secure; one which enables them, to reach their full potential in life. By working to counter the impediments that exist, you are helping the next generation of women scientists, mathematicians, and leaders to confidently take up their rightful places in society. I commend you to your work.

I thank you.