

Violence against women: Raising hope for a reality

The roots of violence against women lie in the historical imbalance of power between men and women. Hence, inequalities in gender may increase the risk of acts of violence against women and inhibit the ability of those affected to seek protection. The prevention of violence against women is essential to further safeguard the promotion of gender equality.

Violence against women takes many forms that are interrelated and affect women from before birth to old age. The Istanbul Convention (2011) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, to which Malta is a signatory, defines violence against women as “a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

Violence against women can have a myriad of devastating consequences on victims. Women who experience violence suffer from health problems, both mentally and physically, face financial struggles and other social consequences, such as stigma and discrimination. Thus violence can have an impact on women’s overall quality of life over an entire lifetime. Moreover, violence against women can have a ripple effect on society as a whole, including family and friends of victims but particularly on children who may suffer a range of behavioural and emotional disturbances.

Zero tolerance to violence

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) promotes zero tolerance to violence on women and girls. NCPE is committed to challenge the deeply-rooted inequalities and social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities and can lead to violence against women and girls.

Particularly, NCPE works to prevent and combat sexual harassment at the workplace and in the provision of goods and services, by virtue of respective legislation. In fact, NCPE investigates complaints of persons who are sexually harassed, and from 2004 until 2013 NCPE was in receipt of 42 cases of alleged sexual harassment. In this regard, NCPE also acknowledges an element of under-reporting of sexual harassment by women and men, as confirmed by a study NCPE carried out in 2010. Hence, NCPE encourages victims of sexual harassment to report their cases so that such inequalities and violence are curbed, and gender equality is further safeguarded. NCPE thus recognises the importance of making the workplace, besides homes and public spaces, safer for women and girls and free from sexual harassment. In effect, NCPE assists organisations to draft their sexual harassment policies and awards the Equality Mark Certification to companies that safeguard gender equality at the workplace and take measures to prevent sexual harassment.

We acknowledge that the best way to end violence against women is to prevent it from happening in the first place. The role of men and boys is thus fundamental to accelerate progress in preventing and ending violence against women and girls. Prevention should start early in life, by educating and working with young boys and girls to promote respectful relationships based on gender equality. In fact, NCPE provides training in this regard, and will also be organising training sessions on violence against women and girls to multidisciplinary professionals and legal experts who may encounter victims or perpetrators of violence in their work in the coming months.

In addition, NCPE will carry out research studies on specific forms of violence against women and girls, namely: female genital mutilation (FGM) in Malta; violence on older women and men; and on violence, harassment and bullying in schools. These studies will shed more light on the violent experiences of women and girls in specific situations and will thus provide valuable findings for policy-makers and for professionals working with victims of violence.

One Billion Rising for Justice

On St Valentine's Day, Malta took part in the global campaign – *One Billion Rising for Justice* - during an event, which NCPE also participated in, coordinated by Victim Support Malta. This campaign, which in Malta was held in front of the Law Courts, Republic Street, Valletta, called on women and men everywhere to rise, release, dance and demand justice. It is a call to survivors to break the silence and release their stories – politically, spiritually, outrageously – through art, dance, marches, ritual, song, spoken word, testimonies and whatever way feels right.

Justice begins when we speak, release, and acknowledge the truth in solidarity and community. *One Billion Rising for Justice* is an invitation to break free from confinement, obligation, shame, guilt, grief, pain, humiliation, rage, and bondage.

For more information on the One Billion Rising campaign – www.onebillionrising.org

Key facts
35% of women worldwide have experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime
30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner
As many as 38% of murders of women are committed by an intimate partner

Main source: World Health Organisation – www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/