

International Youth Day – A Safe Digital Space for Youths

“The hopes of the world rest on young people. Peace, economic dynamism, social justice, tolerance – all this and more, today and tomorrow, depends on tapping into the power of youth” stated UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Global attention is turned onto youth issues on the 12th of August of each year, the International Youth Day, celebrating the potential of youths in today’s global society, in tackling challenges and bringing about opportunities. This day was first designated by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1999 and to this day, it still raises awareness on the urgent need for safe platforms for the world’s 1.8 billion youths between the ages of 10 and 24. In fact, the theme adopted by the UN for this year’s International Youth Day is “Safe Spaces for Youth”.

Safeguarding safe spaces for youth strengthens inclusion and equal opportunities for youth from diverse backgrounds since they are better able to engage and contribute freely to the community. Youth are surrounded by various types of spaces, one of which is the digital space that helps youth interact virtually across borders with everyone. The globalisation of the world has led to an unprecedented digital era, and young people in the EU are the generation most digitally skilled. Indeed, according to Eurostat, 93% of 16-24 year-olds use internet on a daily basis in the EU28 while 98% of youths in Malta do so.¹

There are two sides of the same coin in this digital world: empowerment and exploitation. On the one hand, the digital space that youths find themselves in creates new opportunities. However, it also poses risks and challenges to gender equality. Therefore, the digital arena needs to be a safe space for youths, both women and men, to come together, engage in activities, learn and contribute to social development.

The digital world offers an insurmountable amount of opportunities. These range from learning possibilities, opportunities of participation, consumption and leisure. The digital technologies provide quick and easy access to information while also supporting innovative learning processes and opening new career prospects. In fact, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies illustrate that girls and boys feel equally adequate in science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM) subjects. Nevertheless, it is mostly men that occupy these areas of work. Hence, with digitalisation girls and women may feel more encouraged to pursue and remain in such careers.

Digital technologies and social media provide wide opportunities for socialisation and friendships. In effect, 97% of women 98% of men aged 16 – 29 in Malta use the internet to participate in social networks. Social activism is another opportunity of participation that has been enhanced and used among male and female youths. Petitions and online forums to identify with like-minded people and to challenge norms as well as to discuss current events and politics are continuously being utilised. This also encourages girls and women to be more active in politics and follow a career within this sphere.

¹ Eurostat code:isoc_ci_ifp_fu

On the other hand, digital technologies have been increasingly associated with cybercrime, which is becoming an instrument of harassment, bullying, and violence, especially to women and girls. This includes body shaming and cyber bullying, as well as unwanted sexting and sextortion, among others.

Moreover, youths are also vulnerable to privacy risks as non-consensual distribution of intimate data such as messages, images and videos is likely to occur. Online hate speech also reinforces aggressive behaviour. Hate speech and other negative discourse are exacerbated in digital spaces and through artificial intelligence such narratives are perpetuated faster to wider audiences, with the possibility of further fuelling negative sentiments, at times through anonymous aggression. The digital platforms can also reinforce and perpetuate existing gender stereotypes to the detriment of both female and male youths.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) offers training to students on sexual harassment and gender stereotypes to raise more awareness on these issues and to empower students to prevent and combat such behaviour should they experience or witness harassment or discrimination. NCPE also investigates complaints of persons who believe they are victims of discrimination on the ground of age.

The potential of youths must not be undermined or thwarted but a safe digital space needs to be created and strengthened in order to break down gender barriers. In the digital sphere, critical thinking and media literacy are crucial for youth to be better able to accurately assess online information while safeguarding equal opportunities for everyone.

International Youth Day gives us all the opportunity to stop, reassess current developments and address shortcomings to ensure that youth enjoy their much needed safe spaces in our society.

For further information, contact NCPE on 2590 3850, equality@gov.mt or on Facebook.