

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

Malta is ageing fast, with 18.8%¹ of the Maltese population aged 65+ in 2017, an increase of 4.9% between 2007 and 2017². With this growth in the population's age, it is becoming more relevant to raise awareness on the occurrence of abuse towards the elderly. The United Nations has dedicated a day that officially recognises the global opposition to the abuse and suffering inflicted on some of our older generations known also as the World Elder Abuse Awareness Day which is held every 15th June.

The World Health Organisation defines elder abuse as “a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to a person”.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) stands with the United Nations on this important issue. In fact its remit includes the responsibility to ensure that Maltese society is free from any form of discrimination based on age in employment, banks and financial institutions, as well as education and vocational guidance. The statistics of the Maltese population show that in Malta there is a large number of the population that is vulnerable to ageism and age discrimination. Ageism is when people are stereotyped, prejudiced or discriminated because of their age. Ageism undermines the older persons' right to live with dignity and independence, leads to discrimination in various spheres and can increase the risk of violence on people dependent on support.

In 2015 NCPE carried out a study “Violence on Older Women and Men – A Qualitative Perspective”. In this study interviews were held with stakeholders working with the elderly and 31 face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out with older victims/survivors, one of whom was a man. During the time of the interviews a few were still victims of abuse, and all of them were married.³ Although the perpetrators were mainly the husbands/partners, the victims also mentioned their children and their partners. Most of the abuse started during the ages of 20 and 30, and most of the victims have been abused for many years.

Abuse comes in different forms. The most common one is psychological/emotional abuse. In this case the victims are of both genders, unlike the other types of abuse, where the number of women is usually higher than that of men⁴. The abuse can be either verbal or non-verbal – the silent treatment. Neglect is another form of abuse whereby perpetrators refuse to fulfil any part of a person's obligations, duties or care to an elder.

One abuse, which is perhaps the most detected, is physical abuse as it leaves visible signs. On the other hand, financial/material abuse involves the misuse of finances or assets when controlled against the victims' will. Most of this abuse involves cases between spouses, such as the husband not giving money to his wife for the up-keep of the house and children's needs. However there are also cases when children collect their parents' pension which never reaches the elderly but is deposited in the children's account. It is for this reason that pensions started to be deposited directly into the elder's account.

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00028&plugin=1>

² http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_structure_and_ageing#The_share_of_elderly_people_continues_to_increase

³ NCPE, *Violence on Older Women and Men – A Qualitative Perspective*, p.22

⁴ NCPE, *Violence on Older Women and Men – A Qualitative Perspective* P.25

During the interview the participants also mentioned sexual abuse even though it was not so common. Victims experienced cases when an abusive husband demanded the wife to have sex with him even though she did not really want to.

Although studies show that the victims are mainly females, men may also be victims of abuse. Important to note, that five (5) men refused to participate in the study because they deemed it shameful. Only one (1) man accepted to be interviewed and the abuse suffered were mainly psychological abuse and neglect. Abuse on older men is not only perpetrated by wives but also by caregivers, children and other relatives.

The study found that elderly people lack trust in third parties. The majority of the victims never discussed with their family members the abuse suffered. Only a minority of respondents spoke to a family member during or after the abuse stopped. Some victims found solace in their doctor or psychiatrists, and a few confided in their confessor/priest/parish priest and found them to be of help.

Almost half of the interviewed victims never reported the abuse, which according to the stakeholders, is because the victims lack confidence and empowerment to take the necessary action. Besides, other reasons include fear of homelessness, no confidence in the system, for the sake of the children, no money, the victims still love his/her perpetrator. The issue of omertà is also a crucial factor because victims especially women feel that they are expected to be always respectful and submissive towards their husbands.

Primary prevention is of great importance to eliminate abuse as this involves the whole society working to allow people to live with dignity. Raising awareness by educating and training as well as media literacy is fundamental to prevent and combat ageism. Another measure is that of networking and social inclusion where older people have a leading role to prevent abuse. Prevention measures in institutional settings, as well as assistance to carers, provide the help and respite needed.

As FRA Director Michael O'Flaherty says *"Fundamental rights are not just for the young. They protect everyone regardless of age. We need to do a better job of protecting the older members of our communities. It's high time to translate political commitments into tangible actions. We must stand up for the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of older people."*

To get more information you can check the NCPE study available on our website:

https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Forms%20of%20Violence/Report%20-%20Violence%20Elderly.pdf

NCPE can be contacted on 25903850 or equality@gov.mt or on our Facebook page.