

## Female Genital Mutilation: An extreme form of gender discrimination

Over 200 million girls and women alive today have experienced female genital mutilation (FGM) mostly throughout 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. FGM is the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. In order to strengthen awareness on this extreme form of violence against women and girls, the United Nations dedicated 6<sup>th</sup> of February as the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) to commemorate the sufferings of these women and girls.

Due to the phenomenon of migration, Europe, including Malta, is also experiencing an influx of these victims and potential victims. In fact, there has been a significant increase of female applicants seeking asylum in the European Union from FGM-practising countries of origin, such as Somali, Mali, Iraq and Syria.

FGM is carried out for a number of cultural and traditional reasons. It is linked to the woman's purity for marriage and also to aesthetics and control of desire. Nevertheless, FGM has no health benefits and it can lead to immediate and long-term health problems and complications as well as psychological consequences.

FGM reflects deep-rooted inequalities between women and men, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women. It is grounded in various factors inherent in patriarchal families and communities whereby women and their 'honour' are valued as the objects and properties of men.

In fact, FGM is internationally recognised as a violation of human rights of both girls and women. In fact, the Istanbul Convention –which Malta ratified in 2014 – condemns such practice. It states that, "*culture, custom, religion, tradition [...] shall not be regarded as justification for such acts*". The *Gender-based violence and domestic violence* Bill being discussed in Parliament fully integrates and implements the provisions of the Istanbul Convention in national law and ensures that adequate, sufficient protection is available to victims of violence to make sure that justice is done with regard to perpetrators of such violence.

Legal provisions in the Criminal Code make FGM illegal in Malta and persons who, for non-medical reasons, perform an operation or carry out any intervention on a woman's genitalia that damages the genitalia or inflicts upon them permanent changes, are liable to imprisonment.

The covert nature of the practice leads to lack of awareness and incomplete statistics. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) are conducting a study to estimate the number of girls at risk of female genital mutilation in Malta and other European countries. The study will thus enhance the capacity of Member States to better understand and thus enhance the prevention of female genital mutilation in order to protect girls at risk. Potential victims can become actual victims should they

return to their home country and undergo this procedure, or with 'doctors' performing the surgery in their country of residence.

A study by the National Commission for the Promotion for Equality (NCPE) in 2015 demonstrates that Malta, like other EU countries, faces a number of challenges in curbing and eradicating FGM. This research highlights the need of further awareness and training for multidisciplinary professionals as fundamental for the benefit of victims and potential victims of FGM.

The achievement of gender equality is only possible when violence against women, including FGM, is eradicated. FGM is an extreme form of gender discrimination against women that sustains deeply entrenched gender inequalities in society. Every woman and girl has a right to be respected, not violated. Focusing on human rights and on gender equality contributes to eliminate FGM, and thus safeguards the rights of women and girls to health, security and physical integrity, their right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and ultimately their right to life and their personal well-being.