

## **Girl Force: Is it Unscripted and Unstoppable Online?**

Girls have the potential to change the world, both as empowered girls of today as well as tomorrow's workers and leaders. The theme chosen by the United Nations for this year's International Day of the Girl Child '*Girl Force: Unscripted and Unstoppable*' seeks to continue equipping girls with the power, knowledge and space to further voice their passions and concerns.

Yet, there are still areas where the girl force is not always unscripted and unstoppable; one of them being the digital sphere. Digital technologies, including mobile phones, tablets, laptops and computers, are a powerful space for adolescents to socialise, communicate and interact with peers. In fact, more than 90% of teenagers (16-19 years) in most EU Member States including Malta, use the internet daily mainly to participate in social networks, play or download games, read online news or upload self-created content. Particularly, in Malta, there is a very high overall youth engagement online, with teenage girls being more likely than boys to use the internet daily.

Nonetheless, the access that girls and young women have to online information and their high use of social-media networks does not necessarily translate into active participation. In fact, a study by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) on opportunities and risks of digitalisation for youth highlights that young women across Europe tend to be less involved in following or taking part in debates than young men, and they are also less likely to post opinions on political issues or take part in online consultations or voting.

Undoubtedly gender stereotypes and norms are among the main reasons for girls' lower engagement in civic and political debates as these build expectations about girls and young women to focus mainly on their physical appearance in line with beauty ideals, and sometimes myths, that are reinforced by social media. Such ideals control the bodies and minds of these young persons to aspire to reach unachievable standards of 'beauty', often comparing themselves to peers or celebrities, and leading them to work disproportionately hard to take care of their body image and how it appears online. In fact, girls are much more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies than boys of the same age, according to the World Health Organisation. Almost one in two 15-year-old girls in EU 27 Member States thinks she is too fat compared to about one in four boys, and 26% of girls aged 15 engage in weight-reduction behaviour compared to 10% of boys.

In addition, young women are more likely than men to experience online harassment resulting in girls' lower engagement in debates on social media as a way to prevent harsh criticism and harassment. Particularly, 15-year-old girls across Europe are more likely to experience cyberbullying (12%) than boys of the same age (7%). As a result of such behaviour, girls and young women tend to restrict considerably what they express online for fear of harassment, gossip and hateful comments, while boys tend to minimise or ignore such online abuse.

Social media can also strengthen pressures mainly on teenage girls and young women as they are depicted in a sexual manner more often than boys in the media; dressed in revealing clothing, and with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness. Such over-sexualisation affects the physical and emotional health of girls and young women on a global scale

and can also facilitate the normalisation of violence against girls. The study by EIGE confirms that young people can feel the pressure to engage in sexting ie. the exchange of sexual messages and images. Yet, due to sexism faced in their daily realities, young women are more likely to suffer substantial prejudice and damage to their reputation than young men when nude photos are disseminated without consent.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) works to safeguard gender equality and provides training to different groups of women and men as well as girls and boys on gender stereotypes and their negative effects on people's lives. NCPE acknowledges that equal opportunities are to be safeguarded offline and online to ensure that girls and boys are empowered to reach their full potential without limitations irrespective of gender.

Digital platforms are an important medium for building friendships. They also provide a sterling opportunity to keep abreast with and participate in political and civic matters. Nonetheless, these platforms can strengthen the surveillance and self-monitoring of girls and young women and limit their full participation online. The International Day of the Girl Child is thus an occasion to continue working to address these challenges and provide opportunities offline and online to answer to the needs of girls enabling them to enjoy equal treatment, thus ensuring that girls are truly unscripted and unstoppable in reaching their goals in life.

*The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on 2295 7850, [www.equality.gov.mt](http://www.equality.gov.mt) and on facebook*