

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

The World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, observed on 15th June, provides an opportunity for communities globally to raise awareness and help victims recognise elder abuse, encourage its reporting and promote avenues for seeking help.

One in four older persons with high care needs experiences abuse in Europe but real numbers may be much higher.¹ In effect, elder abuse is an underestimated reality since older persons are afraid to report the abuse that they are experiencing.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) 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 an older person”. Abuse can take different forms; it includes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial and material abuse, abandonment, neglect and serious loss of dignity and respect.²

Many strategies³ such as awareness campaigns, screening of potential victims and abusers, intergenerational programmes in education, support interventions by care workers, safe-houses and emergency shelters in the community amongst others, have been implemented to prevent and combat this ill-treatment. Elder abuse is expected to escalate as the ageing population is swiftly increasing. It has been estimated that by the year 2050 these potential victims are to increase to 320 million globally.²

Currently, such abuse is amplified in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many countries, including Malta, have taken various measures to ensure access to essential services for people in vulnerable situations particularly older persons. As European Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, said “during the Covid-19 crisis the European Commission is committed to ensure that the rights of older Europeans are respected: no place for ageism in the EU, no-one should be deprioritised from receiving care solely on the basis of age, no-one should be left behind”.⁴

¹ <https://www.age-platform.eu/press-releases/ageism-and-elder-abuse-two-faces-same-coin>

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/elder-abuse>

³ https://www.who.int/health-topics/elder-abuse#tab=tab_2

⁴ <https://www.age-platform.eu/policy-work/news/eu-commissioner-equality-reaffirms-older-persons-rights-time-covid-19>

During quarantine older persons face an increased risk of violence, abuse and neglect by family members and caregivers.⁵ Measures taken during the pandemic could leave victims of elder abuse in further isolation without access to assistance and support services. This may make it even more difficult for older persons to seek help or report abuse. Moreover, as older persons in residential care homes tend to be dependent on the care of others, they are already vulnerable to neglect and abuse whilst physical isolation from friends and family may put them at an additional risk.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) works to safeguard equality on the ground of age and to combat ageism and related discrimination. In fact, NCPE investigates complaints of persons who deem they are victims of discrimination on the ground of age in employment, banks and financial institutions, as well as education as per NCPE's remit. In addition, training and awareness raising campaigns are carried out in order to promote the essential role of older women and men in society.

Indeed, in 2015 NCPE carried out a study 'Violence on Older Women and Men – A Qualitative Perspective'.⁶ In this study, neglect was mentioned by all interviewed respondents as one of the main forms of elder abuse. This type of abuse is most commonly associated with the elder victim's relatives, however, community and residential home carers were also mentioned as possible perpetrators of neglect.

Most of the interviewed victims never reported the abuse mainly due to lack of confidence and empowerment to take the necessary action. Other reasons for under-reporting include fear of homelessness, to safeguard the children, no money, no confidence in the system, and the victims' love for their perpetrator.

As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon says *"The distressing crime of elder abuse often occurs in quiet, private settings... Let us strengthen our resolve to end this problem as part of our broader efforts to create a life of dignity for all"*.⁷

⁵ <https://www.age-platform.eu/press-releases/covid-19-reveals-violations-older-people%E2%80%99s-human-rights-new-age-report-says>

⁶ https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Forms%20of%20Violence/Report%20-%20Violence%20Elderly.pdf

⁷ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sgsm16838.doc.htm>



National Commission for the Promotion of Equality

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