

## Zero Discrimination Day – 1<sup>st</sup> March

Discrimination has many forms, from racial or religious discrimination to discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, or age.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, more than half of EU citizens say discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin, skin colour or sexual orientation is widespread in their country, while almost half of the EU citizens say this on the basis of being transgender and about religion or beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

To put the spotlight on such discrimination, the United Nations (UN) first celebrated Zero Discrimination Day in 2014, after UNAIDS, a UN program on Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), launched its Zero Discrimination Campaign on World AIDS Day in December 2013.<sup>3</sup>

In the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated such discrimination and inequalities. Research shows that many women in low paid sectors or professions were being forced to quit their jobs or ask for special leave due to the closure of schools and care services, and the difficulties to cope with both care and work responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, shifting to online health services created additional barriers for persons in poverty, including older people, who may not have access to computers or internet connection.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, women and girls were at higher risk of intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence due to increased tensions in the household particularly where abuse already existed.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic has also exposed existing structural racism and inequalities in the labour market and in housing.<sup>7</sup>

A study carried out by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) found that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating already existing gender inequalities in the distribution of unpaid household and caring responsibilities. The findings indicate that there is a substantial 16% gap between female and male respondents reporting an increase in the time spent on home-schooling, 80.2% for females and 64.2% for males.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Special Eurobarometer 493 - Discrimination in the EU - May 2019

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.who.int/life-course/news/events/zero-discrimination-day/en/>

<sup>4</sup> Equinet - Discussion Paper on Women in Poverty: Breaking the Cycle

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/gender-equality-time-covid-19>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.enar-eu.org/Evidence-of-the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-racialised-communities-exposes-need-to>

<sup>8</sup> [https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Our\\_Publications\\_and\\_Resources/Research/The\\_COVID\\_19\\_pandemic\\_Research\\_on\\_the\\_distribution\\_of\\_work\\_in\\_households.pdf](https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Our_Publications_and_Resources/Research/The_COVID_19_pandemic_Research_on_the_distribution_of_work_in_households.pdf)

Over the years, many efforts have been made to safeguard equality. Indeed, equality of individuals and the right of non-discrimination is enshrined in Chapter 3 of the EU Charter of Fundamental rights. The third Chapter, ‘Equality’, contains the prohibition of all discrimination *“based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.”*<sup>9</sup>

In Malta, legislation that specifically prohibits discrimination on a number of grounds has existed since 2003. Chapter 456 and its subsidiary legislation establishes the NCPE as an equality body tasked with promoting equality in society.<sup>10</sup> It delineates both the grounds of discrimination (sex/gender and family responsibilities, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, racial or ethnic origin, and gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics), as well as the areas in which the prohibition of discrimination applies (employment, education, banks and financial institutions, the provision of goods and services).

The NCPE also works to raise awareness about rights and obligations in relation to equality. This is done through various initiatives such as research, policy review and recommendations, awareness raising campaigns, training and projects. In fact, the NCPE carried out several projects throughout the years to enhance a shared understanding of equality, non-discrimination, and diversity. For instance, ‘Think Equal’, an EU co-financed project targeting youths, professionals and academics, sought to disseminate good practices, sensitise and empower youths to live diversity.<sup>11</sup>

Currently, the NCPE is implementing an EU co-funded project entitled ‘Empowerment for Diversity’ (E4D). This project focuses on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics and gender expression and seeks to address the national societal and cultural impacts which have resulted from the recent legislative advancements through awareness-raising initiatives, capacity building and various analytical activities.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, one of the key roles of the NCPE is to investigate cases of discrimination since the equality body offers an accessible way for people to report such cases. Chapter 456 also

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<sup>9</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>

<sup>10</sup> [https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/About\\_Us/NCPE-Remit.aspx](https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/About_Us/NCPE-Remit.aspx)

<sup>11</sup> [https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects\\_and\\_Specific\\_Initiatives/Think\\_Equal.aspx](https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Think_Equal.aspx)

<sup>12</sup> [https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects\\_and\\_Specific\\_Initiatives/Empowerment-for-Diversity---E4D.aspx](https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Pages/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Empowerment-for-Diversity---E4D.aspx)

empowers the Commissioner to initiate ex officio investigations in case of discriminatory practices falling under the remit of the NCPE and occurring within the Maltese society.

Discrimination continues to undermine efforts to achieve a more just and equitable world. On Zero Discrimination Day, 1 March, we celebrate the right of everyone to live a full and productive life and live it with dignity.<sup>13</sup> This day highlights how people can become informed about and promote inclusion, compassion, peace and, above all, a movement for positive change.

*The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2295 7850 or [equality@gov.mt](mailto:equality@gov.mt) or our Facebook page.*

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unaids.org/en/zero-discrimination-day>