

PRESS RELEASE: Networking seminar between representatives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) organisations, human rights organisations and representatives from various religions/beliefs

Dialogue between representatives of the LGBTIQ community and representatives of various religions/beliefs is an invaluable tool for a change in attitudes and strengthening diversity. This was highlighted by the participants of a Networking Seminar organised in Malta by the European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB) and the European Region of the International Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe). The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) collaborated in its organisation.

In her welcome statement, NCPE's Commissioner, Ms Renee Laiviera outlined the recent changes made to NCPE's legislation regarding gender expression and sex characteristics and also gave information on NCPE's role and remit regarding equal treatment on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and religion/ belief.

In her opening address, Minister for Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties Dr Helena Dalli, outlined the legislative developments put into force by the Government that safeguard the rights of LGBTIQ persons. Minister Dalli announced that an Action Plan on LGBTIQ will soon be launched. The issue of conversion therapy that is being offered to LGBTIQ persons needs to be addressed, said Minister Dalli, stating that the government will soon be proposing a law to ban such therapy.

Mr Mario Gerada, Drachma LGBTI, focused on the history of Drachma and the important role it plays in contributing to the discourse on sexual and spiritual integration. Mario Gerada explained how Drachma primarily functions from a Catholic tradition, however it is open to persons coming from different religious backgrounds and faith traditions, and for anyone searching for meaning in their lives. He stressed the importance of engaging with religious groups and authorities and of offering support to LGBTIQ individuals and their families. Mario Gerada also outlined the key role of Drachma parents group and the success they have had as an organisation to engage with religious organisations and particularly religious authorities.

Ms Gabi Calleja, LGBTIQ Rights Movement (MGRM), outlined the details of a survey carried out on an EU level by the Fundamental Rights Agency on the experiences of LGBT persons. Ms Calleja acknowledged that Malta has moved forward in LGBTIQ rights through the legislation that came into force during the past one and a half years. Nonetheless, Ms Calleja emphasised the important role religious leaders play in this regard as well as the need of more progress on the public perception and attitudes of issues related to LGBTIQ.

Mr Alan Murray, President of European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), highlighted that while Malta led the way with recently enacted legislation on LGBTIQ rights, education and dialogue are vital to maintaining inclusivity and building bridges between LGBTIQ persons and different religions/beliefs. People can discover common experiences: for

example the experience of both religious and LGBTIQ minorities of discrimination and hate crime – and also their common values of love, care for all, and solidarity with the excluded.

A working group organised as part of this Networking Seminar focused on the experiences of the participants, which represented different LGBTIQ NGOs, Human Rights NGOs and representatives of various religions/beliefs. A general fear in society of LGBTIQ issues stemming from a lack of dialogue and understanding was brought up as being one of the main stumbling blocks that may lead to prejudices against LGBTIQ persons and their families. Discussion also focused on the integration of an individual's own sexuality and spirituality in that it is considered as an ongoing process.

The importance of fostering dialogue from a young age was emphasised to bring about a society that cultivates and respects diversity and equality. In this context, education was the vital ingredient for all types of school.

Ms Renee Laiviera, NCPE's Commissioner, concluded by highlighting the importance of the different LGBTIQ NGOs and religions/beliefs working, supporting and sharing their experiences to enrich the work they carry out in order to create a more equal society.