

PRESS STATEMENT:

Promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women

Violence against women has been making headlines in both the social and traditional media worldwide to raise awareness on this scourge in our society.

The United Nations General Assembly, in its 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, declared that such violence is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men. Violence against women is a violation of the human rights of women and a major obstacle towards gender equality. More recently this statement was reiterated in the *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* that Malta ratified in 2014. In the still dominant patriarchal society some men believe that they have a right to rule, control and be obeyed particularly by their partners and woe betide women who dare to make a stand against such control.

Moreover, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) report that delves into the extent of different forms of violence against women in the EU 28 Member States found that Malta in 2012 ranked 1st from among the EU28 in the disclosure of acts of violence while it ranked in the 24th place in the severity subdomain that seeks to capture the intensity of violence experienced by women.

Another survey published in 2014 by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that in Malta 5% of women interviewed have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their current partner since the age of 15, another 28% by their previous partner and 15% who experienced such violence from a non-partner. Regarding sexual harassment, the FRA survey shows that one in every five women respondents (20%) who participated in the survey experienced sexual harassment in the 12 months before the interview, while 19% of the Maltese respondents went through unwelcome touching, hugging or kissing since the age of 15. Moreover, 8% of the respondents from Malta have gone through cyberharassment since the age of 15.

In order to address this problem, earlier this month, the Bill on gender-based violence and domestic violence started being discussed in Parliament in order to recast the Domestic Violence Act and amend national legislation to be in line with the Istanbul Convention.

This is a timely development when various activities are being carried out to mark the 16 Days of Activism to raise further awareness on violence against women. Since 1991 these activities have been internationally organised between 25th November – the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women – and 10th December – Human Rights Day. The theme for this year is *'Leave no one behind: end violence against women and girls'*, reinforcing the commitment to a world free from violence for all women and girls around the world, while reaching the most underserved and marginalised.

Violence against women occurs mainly in the domestic sphere. However, the workplace is not immune to such behaviour. Developments in the USA and in the UK exposing men in high positions in the film industry and political sphere, have thrown significant light on what women have to face to earn a living and show why they rarely come forward to report.

Gender discrimination at the workplace falls squarely within the remit of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) that whilst promoting equality between women and men, is committed to a zero tolerance approach to violence against women and to challenge the deeply-rooted inequalities and social norms that perpetuate gender discrimination which can lead to violence against women.

In particular, NCPE works to prevent and combat sexual harassment at the workplace and in the provision of goods and services, by virtue of respective legislation. Investigations are carried out on receipt of complaints by persons who deem that they are sexually harassed. Moreover, victims are encouraged to report their cases so that such inequalities and violence are curbed and gender equality is further safeguarded.

Furthermore, NCPE assists organisations to draft their sexual harassment and equality policies and awards the Equality Mark Certification to companies that safeguard gender equality and make the workplace a safe for all employees.

Violence against women can effectively be eliminated when its cause, as clearly stated by the Istanbul Convention, is recognised and addressed. It is when the historical unequal power relations between women and men are challenged by ensuring more gender equal societies that we can move closer to respectful interaction between women and men.

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