

***Press statement by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE)***

**NCPE's International Women's Day Conference 2020**

Artificial intelligence (AI) makes it possible for machines to perform human-like duties, relying heavily on natural language processing. By using such technologies, computers can be trained to accomplish specific tasks by processing large amounts of data and recognising patterns in the data. AI is becoming more frequently used in various sectors and is affecting our lives. In light of this, on the occasion of the International Women's Day, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) organised a conference on AI and gender equality to raise awareness among stakeholders and the general public on the pertinent issues in such context.

International Women's day is a celebration of the achievements of women and the work done by various stakeholders worldwide to safeguard women's rights. It is also a day when society reflects on the challenges that hinder women's full potential from being realised including discrimination and societal barriers.

This conference focused on how AI can perpetuate discrimination in spheres such as employment and service provision on the one hand, and on the other hand, how equality can be mainstreamed in AI.

In his opening speech, Minister for Justice, Equality and Governance held that equal representation of women and men in science and technology is crucial in order to sustain gender balance in Artificial Intelligence. This gender balance contributes to widen diversity in the perspectives and experiences of professionals working in this sphere, thus strengthening equality and enhancing competitiveness.

Furthermore, Parliamentary Secretary for Equality and Reforms Hon. Rosianne Cutajar underlined that AI has to respect fundamental rights, particularly equality and non-discrimination. Hon. Cutajar also mentioned that the government implemented various measures to strengthen women's economic independence. This conference was aimed to ensure that the work that has been done in this sphere is strengthened even through AI systems, particularly by enhancing equal opportunities in the recruitment process. This would also strengthen government's work in the implementation of the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

Parliamentary Secretary for Financial Services and Digital Economy Hon. Clayton Bartolo stressed that throughout the past years, the government sought to exploit the potential of AI by bringing strong commercial activity. Hon. Bartolo added that in this new era of AI technologies, the government is willing to work with both the private and public sectors for the benefit of all.

NCPE Commissioner Renee Laiviera expressed her concern that globally only 22% of AI professionals are female<sup>1</sup>. This could lead to a digital future made by men for men. In this context subjective AI systems and algorithms would hinder diversity and accessibility to all genders. Non-discrimination and unfair bias must be avoided, as it could have negative implications such as the marginalisation of vulnerable groups and the exacerbation of discrimination and prejudice. Ms Laiviera stated that this discussion is very much in line with NCPE work to eliminate discrimination and promote equality as per its remit.

Lecturer Dr Claudia Borg, from the Department of AI at the University of Malta, highlighted the technical aspect of AI. Dr Borg mentioned how algorithms could determine social outcomes, and impact the lives of women and men with different life experiences. Prof Brenda Murphy, an Associate Professor from the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Malta, stressed that in all circumstances, discrimination risks must be prevented and mitigated with special attention for groups (particularly women) who experience higher risk of discrimination or of having their rights disproportionately impacted by AI.

Mr Bernard Montebello, *Human Resources Manager* and Ms Greta Attard, *Software Developer* from Malta Digital Innovation Authority (MDIA) gave a presentation focusing on people's concerns in relation to AI and Malta's AI Vision and Strategy 2030, Malta's AI Framework and certification process, and their role vis-a-vis equality.

Following these presentations, a panel with representatives from employers' associations, trade unions, and NGOs discussed their experiences in relation to AI and how AI can have an effect on gender equality in Malta.

This conference, held to mark International Women's Day, offered an opportunity to assess and reflect on the role, experience and work of relevant stakeholders in AI, to raise awareness on gender equality and AI, and on the necessary measures to sustain an environment which is free from any form of discrimination.

**4<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

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<sup>1</sup> The Global Gender Gap Report 2018 - World Economic Forum