

PRESS RELEASE:

NCPE International Women's Day Conference

Sexual harassment, in the context of the wide reporting of such incidents internationally, was discussed during a well attended conference organised by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) in commemoration of International Women's Day. It is estimated that 83 million to 102 million women (45 % to 55 % of women) in Europe have experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15. Nonetheless, few incidents of sexual harassment are considered worth bringing to the attention of any authority and 35% of victims of sexual harassment do not talk to anyone about their case. Hence, the theme chosen for the conference - *Il-Fastidju Sesswali: Fil-Post tax-Xogħol u Fil-Kuntast Soċjali* (Sexual Harassment: At the Workplace and in the Social Context). The objective of the conference was to raise awareness on the topic and encourage everyone in society to work towards the prevention and combating of sexual harassment throughout the social, economic and political spheres.

Recognising women's achievements throughout history as well as in recent years, despite the obstacles faced, is essential. However, addressing the remaining challenges towards gender equality is as important for the way forward. The conference deliberations demonstrated that sexual harassment is a consequence of gender inequalities manifesting itself in abuse that needs to be overcome through awareness, education, policies, measures and support structures to empower victims to come forward and seek justice.

In introducing the conference, NCPE's Commissioner, Renee Laiviera, referred to the theme chosen by the United Nations for this year's International Women's Day: *Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women's lives*. Ms Laiviera stated one aspect that is being highlighted by this theme is the isolation of rural women and, as a consequence, their vulnerable position to protect themselves from violence and abuse. She continued that although in Malta, being a small country, this isolation is not physical, there are many women who suffer abuse in isolation. This is why, she continued, today's topic poses a call to each and every one of us coming from various backgrounds and working in different spheres, to take action so that gender equality can be reached in order to break the cycle of power and control that perpetrators of sexual harassment thrive on.

The Minister for European Affairs and Equality, Hon. Helena Dalli, opened the conference by emphasising the need to disseminate further information on sexual harassment in different spheres. According to survey of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), in Malta sexual harassment is widespread with numerous cases going unreported. Minister Dalli accentuated the government's commitment and work to combat gender-based violence, including sexual harassment that in Malta is a criminal offence. Moreover, by ratifying the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (Istanbul Convention) in 2014, the state is committed to introduce new measures and laws, and has recently launched an action plan to further prevent such violence from occurring, to protect victims and potential victims and to prosecute perpetrators.

An overview of the experiences of victims of sexual harassment and on the empowerment of women to speak up about their cases were given visibility through the airing of short video clips.

Sexual harassment at the workplace delineating rights and responsibilities emanating from law was the first paper presented by Dr. Lara Dimitrijevic who also facilitated a panel discussion with representatives from the Department of Industrial and Employment Relations, trade unions and an employers' association.

The relation between sexual harassment in social spheres and power was then addressed by Dr Marceline Naudi (Senior Lecturer, Department of Gender Studies, University of Malta), also leading a panel with representatives from Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, SportMalta, the Education Department and the Maltese Confederation of Women's Organisations.

The Conference held to mark International Women's Day offered an opportunity to assess and reflect on the progress made in relation to gender equality and the remaining challenges particularly in relation to sexual harassment. Reflections on the way forward were discussed by various stakeholders and participants, alongside actions needed to be able to stop sexual harassment in Maltese society and to further empower victims to report their cases to the responsible authorities.

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