

NATIONAL

High number of girls in Malta at risk from FGM

SARAH CARABOTT

Malta needs to step up awareness about female genital mutilation (FGM) because while it has a high number of girls at risk, prosecution rates are low, according to the European Union's centre on gender equality.

Between 39 and 57 per cent of girls in Malta originate from countries that practise this severe form of violence are at risk, according to research by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

This percentage is the highest among the six studied countries, which also include Belgium, Greece, France, Italy and Cyprus.

In Malta's case, girls at risk mostly originate from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

"Migrants not aware of where they could seek help"

"While FGM is criminalised and all laws are in place, there have only been a few prosecution cases, meaning that there is a lot of work to be done when it comes to investigating such cases," Jurgita Pečiuriene, EIGE's gender expert on gender-based violence told the *Times of Malta*.

"However, there is also lack of awareness in Malta – the general Maltese population is not aware of what FGM is, while migrants told us they were not aware of where they could seek help and whom to approach."

Some were not even aware that FGM was criminalised in Malta, and that the procedure was criminalised even when committed abroad.

EIGE is highlighting its findings on the international day to eliminate FGM.

In Malta, most interviewed Nigerians were against the practice, with many stressing that female genital mutilation was not part of their



Between 39 and 57 per cent of girls in Malta, who originate from countries that practise female genital mutilation, are at risk.

identity, Rebecca Muscat from the Women's Rights Foundation noted yesterday.

The participants emphasised that education and awareness-raising on laws against FGM and accompanying health risks were essential for change. This included engaging men, as they were widely regarded as the final decision-makers in FGM-related matters.

More should be done to engage with communities, raise awareness about the practice and the law, provide psycho-social support to those affected by FGM, train stakeholders to

identify whether a girl was at risk and create a data system to monitor birth and prosecution rates, Dr Muscat said.

Addressing the same press event, Equality Minister Helena Dalli said that the law criminalising the practice, as well as those failing to report potential or known cases of female genital mutilation to the authorities has been in force since 2014.

Still, there was a lot to be done, and EIGE's data and research will prove useful in this regard, she said.

Parent attacks school student

A teenager's father attacked a student at Pembroke secondary school, injuring two educators and once again bringing to the fore the problem of security in Malta's schools.

The violent incident, which drew condemnation from two unions and Education Ministry, was sparked when two teen students – a Maltese in form 3 and a Libyan in form 5 – got into a fight yesterday morning.

The school authorities called in the parents over the incident but the younger student's father arrived at the school first, accompanied by two other men. The father asked his son to show them who the other student was and the three men went to attack him as staff members intervened.

The two staff members, understood to be an assistant head and a learning support educator, were hurt as they tried to break up the fight.

"The ministry had failed multiple times to protect education sector workers"

By the time police officers arrived, the father and his two accomplices had left the premises.

A teacher who spoke on the condition of anonymity yesterday blamed the incident on bubbling tensions between students from the two countries.

"It's getting out of control," the teacher said.

The Malta Union of Teachers condemned the incident, stating it was having to say the "same things over and over", with instances like this proving the union right.

The MUT said it was currently in contact with the respective authorities and would continue to look into the issue at this school and assist members accordingly.

It reiterated its appeal "for the umpteenth time" to the government to equip schools with adequate security measures to ensure that similar incidents were avoided.

The Union of Professional Educators also slammed the education authorities, saying their "lack of foresight" had led to such situations.

The ministry had failed "multiple times" to protect education sector workers despite several pleas, the UPE said.

In a separate statement, the Education Ministry said that the government would be fast-tracking the introduction of harsher penalties for violence in schools. Those proposals would see fines in such cases reach €5,000.

Church fund to tackle inequality

IVAN MARTIN

A new Church fund will help tackle the growing economic inequality on the island, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Galea Curmi said yesterday.

The Voluntary Solidarity Fund was officially launched by the Church yesterday, with the aim of addressing the "socio-economic decay" that has started to take hold in Malta between the haves and the have-nots.

"The aim here is not to compete"

Former Central Bank governor Josef Bonnici, who will oversee the new fund, told reporters that as the island's economy developed further, the disparity between the successful and those struggling to make ends meet would continue to grow.



Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Galea Curmi addressing the press yesterday.

The fund, he said, would not give hand-outs to those on the lower end of the ladder, but would instead be focused on helping get people back on their feet by investing in them.

"Our approach is going to be based on the principle of teaching

a man to fish rather than giving that man a fish," he said.

The fund will offer financial assistance in the form of interest-free loans for people aspiring to set up their own business, or looking to undertake training or further their education, he said.

The Archdiocese of Malta made the first contribution to the fund with a €5,000 donation, and a new board will start reviewing applications for assistance as they come rolling in.

Mgr Galea Curmi told the press conference how the solidarity initiative would not be taking the place of any existing Church organisations such as Caritas, but would work in tandem with them, complementing their work.

"We hope, through this fund, to help people get back into a more productive and dignified life. The aim here is not to compete."

The fund is part of an international initiative based on a call by Pope Francis for solidarity to be put into practice.

Malta is one of a number of countries running a pilot project solidarity fund, which is being coordinated by a new entity headquartered in London.

Malta's Voluntary Solidarity Fund was presented to the Vatican last year and approved during a conference there.