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# High risk of genital mutilation but low prosecution in Malta

By Sarah Carabott

Times of Malta (04.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2BFB3U9> - There is an imbalance between the high number of girls at risk of female genital mutilation and the low prosecution rates in Malta, according to the EU's centre on gender equality, which is calling for higher awareness.

In October it was reported that between 39 per cent to 57 per cent of girls in Malta who originate from countries that practice this severe form of violence are at risk.

This percentage is the highest among the six studied countries, which 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.

"In Malta prosecution is key. 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 Pečiūrienė, EIGE's Gender expert on gender-based violence told Times of Malta.

"However there is also lack of awareness in Malta. This is two-fold - 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, she added, were not even aware that FGM was criminalised in Malta, and that the procedure was criminalised even when committed abroad.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is highlighting its findings ahead of the international day to eliminate female genital mutilation on Tuesday.

Despite girls continuing to be at risk in the EU, research from focus group discussions showed that communities are starting to turn away from the practice as a result of integration and domestic laws.

Rebecca Muscat from the Women's Rights Foundation noted that in Malta, most interviewed Nigerians were against the practice, with many stressing that female genital mutilation was not part of their identity.

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.

During a focus group, a woman from Nigeria who lives in Malta told the researchers: 'they took everything that makes you feel like a woman.'

People who were at risk of, or had had FGM practiced on them, were reluctant to speak up. In some cultures, the practice was kept secret, while the illegality of FGM might have been a deterrent, she noted.

Others believed they would be judged while some felt shame about either having gone ahead, or not, with the practice, Dr Muscat said.

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, she added.

Addressing the same press event, Equality Minister Helena Dalli said that through the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, Malta had strengthened the legal framework against the practice.

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 added.

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