

# Malta renews its Strategy on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence

ESPN Flash Report 2021/43

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*In June 2021, the Maltese government adopted a renewed strategy against gender-based violence and domestic violence. Care and support services for victims have long existed, and the purpose of this important initiative is to be more effective in addressing this issue through better financing of existing support, development of a more holistic approach and quicker prosecution of aggressors.*



## Description

In June 2021, by means of a proposal by the *Commission on Domestic Violence*, the Maltese government adopted a renewed strategy in this area. *Appoġġ*, the state Agency of first call for victims, reports that between 2016 and 2019, the number of persons accessing its services rose from 799 (incidents) to 1,870. During the same period, the police recorded a rise from 1,379 to 1,532 cases while NGOs such as *Victim Support Malta*, *Dar Qalb ta' Gesu*, and the state-run service *Għabex*, also reported an increasing number of cases. The Emergency Health Services also dealt with twice the number of domestic violence cases during the same period (Commission on Domestic Violence, 2020 Annual Report). Audrey Friggieri, the Maltese Commissioner on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Domestic Violence (DV), specifically wrote in one of the local newspapers about the WHO report addressing the increase of DV during the COVID-19 pandemic. In her contribution, she stated that the *Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS)* was faced with a 19.38% increase in the number of individuals making use of DV services between January and April 2020, compared to the same period in the year before (Friggieri, 2020). All this accumulated evidence made clear that public action in this field needed to be renewed and reinforced in order to be more effective.

The 2021 strategy updates the 2018-2020 one and aims to improve the implementation of the legal regime, already considered as weak in a 2014 study (Borg, 2014). The new strategy is

designed to strengthen and build upon the existing structures, applying the principles promoted by *the Istanbul Convention* on preventing and combating violence against women and DV, so that cases are dealt with in a consistent and holistic way. When launching the strategy, Edward Zammit Lewis, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Governance, called DV a “plague on civilised society”. He insisted that it is “the fruit of a certain kind of ignorance and stigma that still, unfortunately, lingers in society, so we really want to emphasise awareness and continuous educational campaigns to get the message across” (DOI, 2020).

The two main objectives of the renewed strategy are to increase awareness and to ensure a quicker turnaround on prosecutions. The strategy is based on four main pillars, each supported by specific action plans:

- *integrated policies and data collection*: to ensure that legislation sufficiently safeguards victims, and that data on the incidence of violence are collected so that victims can be provided with immediate and comprehensive support;
- *prevention*: to increase public awareness initiatives aimed at men and boys, in order to mobilise them to take an active part in combating DV;
- *protection and support*: to ascertain that victims receive adequate and timely information on available support services that guarantee the rights of the victims at all stages of the investigation and judicial proceedings;
- *prosecution*: to equip the police with the knowledge and powers to

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respond promptly and appropriately, and to reduce the risk of secondary victimisation by protecting the rights and interests of victims.

The renewed strategy strengthens a coordinated and well-resourced multi-agency approach to increasing capacity building, aiming to facilitate the provision of immediate, comprehensive and coordinated support to victims of GBV and DV. This is an essential aspect of the objectives described above (raising awareness and faster response) and involves the strengthening of the inter-ministerial committee for the implementation of the action plans against GBV and DV. It also implies more coordination among state welfare agencies, the police, NGOs and the justice administration.

## Outlook and commentary

The renewed strategy demonstrates the commitment by Maltese social policy makers and administrators to address increase in GBV and DV.

The announcement of the renewed strategy was extensively disseminated and positively commented upon in the media. The strategy will be supported through additional resources, continuing research and training of personnel, enabling them to provide timely and effective assistance. The strategy itself contains provision for a regular audit of its effectiveness.

Measures and action plan included in the updated strategy address the concerns identified by the Council of Europe's Group of

Experts on *Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)*. These include more focused training of all those involved in caring for victims, the development of more information routes for the victims themselves as the main stakeholders, and a more gendered approach, since DV disproportionately affects women. The strengthening of the abusiveness services within the FSWS, whose objective is "to assist men who are abusive in intimate relationships, to become aware of, understand and take responsibility for their behaviour" (FSWS, 2020) goes in the right direction.

The new strategy, designed in coordination with other interested units (in state-run social policy agencies and in the private sector), should bring improvement through coordinated implementation. Media coverage should also further contribute to its success, through increased public opinion awareness of the services provided, and through a potentially deterrent effect on (potential) aggressors.

## Further reading

Eurostat Arena, J. [National domestic violence strategy to focus on strengthening awareness: violence a 'plague on civilised society' – minister](#) *Times of Malta*, 17 June 2021

Borg, A. (2014) [Malta's laws on domestic violence perpetrated against women by an intimate partner: are they up to standard?](#) University of Malta, LL.D. Dissertation, Faculty of Laws

Commission on Domestic Violence (2021a) [Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence Collection of Services](#)

Commission on Domestic Violence (2021b) [Malta's National Strategy on Gender-based Violence and Domestic Violence](#)

Commission on Domestic Violence (2021c) [2020 Annual Report](#)

Council of Europe (2020). [Sexual Harassment & Domestic Violence: GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report on Malta](#) CoE, GREVIO, 15 October 2020

DOI (2021) [Stqarrija mill-Ministeru għall-Gustizzja, l-Ugwaljanza u l-Governanza Gvern għan-nies: Imnedija l-Istrateġija Nazzjonali dwar il-Vjolenza abbażi tal-Generu u l-Vjolenza Domestika għall-2021-2022](#), 17 June 2021

Friggieri, A. [Domestic Violence during the time of Covid-19](#) Independent, 16 August 2020.

FSWS (2020) [Domestic Violence Services Malta: FSWS](#).

National Statistics Office [Domestic Violence 2016-2019. News Release 073/2021](#), 23 April 2021

The Malta Independent [Government launches second National Strategy on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence](#), 17 June 2021

WHO (2020) [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): Violence against women](#)

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