



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Realities, Impacts & the Rise of Digital Abuse

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Scope

This report, together with the attached guidelines for the private sector, forms part of an initiative by The Malta Chamber titled “Strengthening Employer Responses to Digital GBV.” The initiative is funded by the Commission on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence through the ‘Together We Empower – A Future without Violence’ programme. It aims to combat the rising threat of digital gender-based violence, including deepfake abuse, in Malta’s labour market. Led by The Malta Chamber Foundation, the initiative adopts a whole-of-society approach, engaging employers, government, and civil society.



Through dialogue, practical guidance, and awareness campaigns, the project aims to empower businesses to support employees affected by online violence, enhance workplace safety, and contribute to national efforts against online abuse, promoting a more inclusive and resilient professional environment.

Digital gender-based violence, including deepfake harassment, is rapidly increasing and disproportionately affects women, damaging professional lives, mental health, and participation in the workforce.

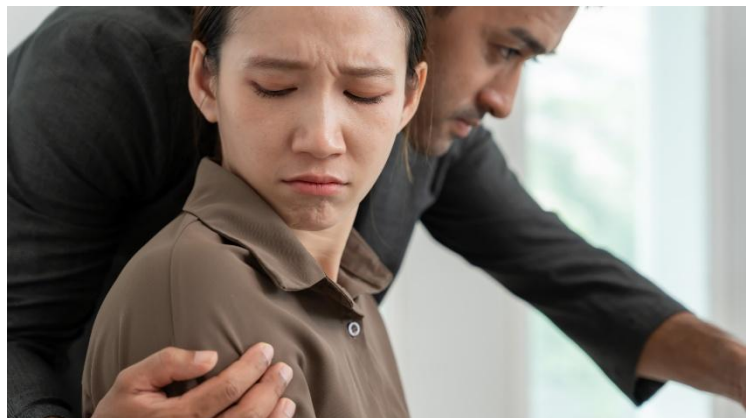
This report seeks to provide an understanding of the challenges and realities related to gender-based violence by reviewing the latest reports and studies that explain the effects of such acts, especially in the workplace and the impact they have on victims’ professional careers. This will be done through extensive reading of the available literature covering different aspects (no new data or research is included in this report). This understanding is essential both to communicate the message about the need to address gender-based violence and to provide an evidence-based background on which these guidelines are drafted. This exercise is being carried out by The Malta Chamber to provide local enterprises with an understanding of and guidelines on how they can support employees who are victims of gender-based violence, whether the perpetrator is a colleague or someone outside the workplace. The guidelines will also highlight the support services available in Malta that can help enterprises support their employees.

Understanding Gender-Based Violence

This section presents a collection of recent research and reviews on the multifaceted issue of gender-based violence (GBV). It seeks to synthesise key findings from diverse sources to illustrate the prevalence and impact of GBV. It aims to provide insights into how GBV shapes health, economic, and social outcomes, and to offer comparative perspectives on interventions and challenges across various settings.

Gender-based violence is a pervasive public health concern that affects the health and well-being of approximately one in three women globally. The effects of GBV are profound, leading to adverse health, economic, and social outcomes that exacerbate existing gender inequalities. This was the conclusion of a global scoping review of women's experiences of gender-based violence by Essue *et al*, published in 2025. The review explored how women's interconnected social identities, such as race, poverty, and immigration status, affect their access to support services for gender-based violence. Drawing on 210 papers, the authors focused on women aged 15 and older across various geopolitical contexts, with a primary focus on how intersecting axes of marginalisation influence the use of formal and informal support networks.

For many victims, violence is rooted in structural inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances, often compounded by systemic racism and classism. These experiences of violence perpetuate a cycle of marginalisation, particularly for racialised women, who may face economic vulnerability and the



societal normalisation of violence against them. The study's results indicate that women encounter significant structural and systemic barriers, categorised as availability, affordability, and acceptability. While informal supports such as family and friends are often the first point of contact, they can also act as barriers due to cultural taboos, familial pressure to maintain harmony, or the normalisation of abuse. Furthermore, a lack of financial autonomy often leaves women dependent on their abusers, making it nearly impossible to leave violent situations. Additionally, many women avoid formal services because of legitimate fears of child removal or secondary victimisation by the legal system. The study concludes that generic, one-size-fits-all models of support fail to

address these complex, intersecting realities, emphasising the urgent need for culturally competent, inclusive, and tailored interventions to achieve global gender equality goals.

A 2024 systematic review of other studies by Blindow K. J. *et al* found that workplace gender-based violence, primarily sexual violence and harassment, is linked to significant adverse health outcomes. The review found a relationship between workplace sexual violence and harassment and poorer mental health, indicating that individuals exposed to harassment are at increased risk of developing psychological distress over time. This echoes earlier evidence that GBV undermines well-being far beyond the immediate context of the violence. There was also some evidence linking sexual violence and harassment to hazardous substance use. The review also suggests that the impacts of GBV may be long-lasting. Longitudinal studies indicate that adverse mental health effects can persist even after harassment has ceased, particularly when exposure has been prolonged or repeated. Persistent exposure appears to account for much of the ongoing psychological harm, highlighting the importance of preventing further victimisation, consistent with prior reviews noting the cumulative effect of multiple and intersecting harms. The authors of the review emphasise that current evidence likely underestimates the overall burden of workplace GBV. Nearly all reviewed studies focused exclusively on sexual harassment, with very limited attention to non-sexual gender-based harassment, despite evidence that these behaviours are common and may be equally harmful. Moreover, they found insufficient research to determine the effects of GBV on other occupational outcomes, such as sick leave, work performance, job retention, or career progression, reinforcing the need to address these research gaps and to examine the full scope of GBV's impact. The authors conclude that broader, more consistent investigation of all forms of GBV is needed to fully understand its health and occupational consequences and to inform effective workplace prevention and intervention strategies.

Gender-based violence is not a reality faced only by low-income or marginalised individuals. For example, a study by Nowrouzi-Kia *et al.* investigated the prevalence and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) within the academic job sector. Researchers analysed peer-reviewed literature published between January 2013 and February 2023 from different countries and found that GBV is a widespread issue in academia, with 51.4% of university staff members reporting experiences of interpersonal violence. The data show a disproportionate impact on women, who reported a prevalence rate of 59.3%. The study also highlights the prevalence of 'yellow zone' behaviours, subtle forms of harassment such as sexist comments, derogatory jokes, and hostile emails, which often fall below the threshold of policy violations but nonetheless create unsafe and exclusionary work environments. Furthermore, the transition to virtual

work has introduced new avenues for abuse, such as ‘Zoom-bombing’ and online harassment, often targeting individuals based on their gender or physical appearance.

The study found that the effects of GBV in academic settings are profound, affecting both victims’ mental health and professional trajectories. Psychologically, individuals experiencing GBV are at higher risk of depression, anxiety, and chronic health issues. Professionally, the violence leads to reduced job productivity, lower job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions. The study emphasises that academia often functions as a gendered organisation, where structural inequalities and power imbalances persist. For example, women are frequently limited in their upward mobility due to a lack of supportive policies or the presence of ‘benevolent sexism’. Additionally, hierarchical structures create environments where junior staff may fear reporting abuse by senior colleagues for fear of career retaliation.



Gender-based violence has a profound and often under-considered impact on women’s careers, with these intersecting identities further hindering opportunities for advancement and frequently pushing individuals out of their chosen professions. These were the findings of a 2025 qualitative study by Rooney, based in Ireland, which investigated the perspectives of four experienced higher education career guidance practitioners to understand how gender-based violence (GBV) affects women’s career development. The study recognises that the impact of GBV on women’s careers is compounded by the intersection of multiple social identities, such as race,

socioeconomic status, immigration background, and disability status. Research cited in the study shows that the negative effects of intimate partner violence persist long after the abuse ends, affecting every dimension of career development, including work performance, planning, professional identity, and job searches. Furthermore, single incidents of sexual violence can have enduring effects that significantly diminish a woman's lifetime earnings, thereby perpetuating long-term economic and social inequalities, especially among those positioned at multiple axes of disadvantage. The study identifies a complex dynamic in which GBV functions as both a 'driver' and an 'inhibitor' of career progression, with intersecting vulnerabilities such as minority status or socioeconomic precarity shaping these trajectories. For some victims, the workplace or university serves as a vital refuge, a space where they are not defined by their abuse and can gain the financial independence needed to leave violent situations. Conversely, the trauma of GBV can act as an 'anchor', leading to decision-making difficulties in which clients feel 'stuck' or 'cycling', with additional barriers for those facing compounded forms of discrimination. Practitioners noted that victims may hesitate to accept career opportunities abroad or in new locations due to lingering fears of their abusers, which can be exacerbated by factors like immigration status or lack of social support. Additionally, while victims are often drawn to 'helping professions' due to high levels of empathy, they face a heightened risk of re-traumatisation, vicarious trauma, and burnout, risks often intensified for those with multiple marginalised identities. The study also points to structural and institutional barriers, and victims may face 'institutional betrayal' that leads them to drop out of studies or research careers entirely, a risk disproportionately affecting those at intersections of gender, race, and class. Moreover, 'mild' forms of harm, such as sexist organisational cultures and workplace hostility, are found to be just as detrimental to a woman's occupational well-being as more severe forms of violence, particularly for those who already encounter multiple forms of exclusion.

Legislative efforts seek to address gender-based violence, and many countries include legal provisions that seek to address such violence. A study published in April 2026 by Dos Santos N. R. *et al*, which reviewed nine European countries, found that despite adopting different legal and policy approaches to addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) at work, all recognise it as a significant occupational and social issue. A notable finding in this review was the distinction between countries that primarily frame GBVH as an occupational safety and health issue (Italy, Portugal and Slovenia) and those that approach it mainly through equality and anti-discrimination legislation (Spain, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland).

Italy, Portugal, and Slovenia all illustrate a predominantly OSH-centred approach to regulating workplace gender-based violence and harassment. However, their policy frameworks and areas of emphasis reveal nuanced differences. Italy has progressively expanded its legal framework by integrating criminal legislation with occupational safety measures. Following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and ILO Convention No. 190, gender-based violence and harassment have been increasingly incorporated into OSH legislation. Recent legislative reforms in Italy require employers to implement targeted measures to prevent workplace violence and harassment and to incorporate psychosocial risks, such as discrimination, mobbing, and harassment, into risk assessments. Italy's strategy also includes establishing a national database on gender-based violence and introducing enhanced sector-specific protections for healthcare workers through a National Observatory, alongside stronger criminal sanctions and awareness initiatives. By contrast, Portugal's OSH-centred approach is characterised by an explicit prohibition of workplace harassment under labour law, with legal obligations placed on employers to implement preventive measures.

Organisations with seven or more employees are required to adopt codes of conduct and initiate disciplinary procedures when harassment is suspected. Portugal has taken further steps by strengthening whistleblower protections, expanding employer liability to encompass psychosocial harassment in digital and remote work environments, and implementing a dedicated action plan targeting violence in the health sector. Slovenia's approach integrates employment, OSH, equality, and criminal legislation to address workplace harassment, discrimination, and mobbing. Notably, Slovenia differs from Italy and Portugal by explicitly framing gender-based harassment as rooted in broader structural gender inequality, introducing workplace protections for victims of domestic violence, and recognising the significance of psychosocial risk management and the right to disconnect. This comparative perspective highlights the common OSH emphasis across the three countries, while clarifying how each nation's specific legal innovations and conceptual framing shape their respective policy responses to workplace GBVH.

Some countries adopt an equality-centred model that focuses on harassment as a form of discrimination, complemented by occupational safety obligations. For example, Spain guarantees protection against sex- and gender-based harassment through labour and equality legislation, requiring larger organisations to implement Equality Plans, prevention protocols and complaint procedures. Recent reforms also extend protection to digital harassment and LGBTQIA+ workers, although the authors note that enforcement gaps remain. Germany similarly relies on anti-discrimination legislation, supported by occupational safety, civil and criminal law. Employers must implement preventive measures such as anti-discrimination policies, staff training and

investigations, while employees are protected against retaliation and may seek compensation for psychological harm. France combines labour and criminal law with extensive employer governance obligations. Notably, it is the only country reviewed that recognises institutional moral harassment, allowing companies and organisational leaders to be held criminally liable for harmful organisational practices. Employers are also required to establish complaint mechanisms, conduct investigations and protect complainants from retaliation.



The Netherlands, Sweden and Finland place particular emphasis on prevention and organisational culture. The Netherlands requires employers to assess psychosocial risks, and from 2026 organisations with ten or more employees must implement formal codes of conduct addressing harassment, bullying and discrimination. Sweden integrates anti-discrimination legislation with detailed work environment regulations, requiring employers to manage organisational and psychosocial risks, establish complaint procedures and provide victim support. Finland adopts a similarly integrated approach, combining occupational safety legislation with equality law. Employers must investigate complaints promptly, implement corrective measures and work closely with occupational health services to identify psychosocial risks. Finland also incorporates violence prevention into nursing education, reflecting a broader commitment to prevention beyond legislation alone.

The comparative analysis of legal frameworks across European countries underscores the critical role of both OSH-centred and equality-centred approaches in shaping prevention and response to workplace gender-based violence and harassment. While distinct in focus, each model contributes valuable practices, including proactive employer responsibilities and greater recognition of psychosocial risks. Nevertheless, a persistent legislative gap remains in addressing emerging threats such as digital harassment and technology-facilitated violence. The authors' recommendations highlight the need to shift from reactive to truly preventive frameworks, advocating the integration of digital risk management, enhanced coordination, and ongoing monitoring to ensure sustained progress. Taken together, these insights reinforce that a multidimensional, adaptive, and inclusive approach is essential for effectively addressing the evolving landscape of gender-based violence in the workplace.

While this section primarily presents findings from published research and systematic reviews, the recurring themes highlight the complexity and urgency of addressing gender-based violence across multiple fronts. The evidence demonstrates the need for intersectional, culturally sensitive strategies and underscores the importance of both preventive and responsive measures. By synthesising these studies, the article aims to inform ongoing discussion and policy development and to encourage further research and action in the pursuit of gender equity and safer environments for all.

Dangers of Deepfake

Deepfake is a sophisticated technology that creates highly realistic manipulated videos or images. By swapping faces or altering appearances, deepfakes can convincingly imitate real people, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine and fake content. It is estimated that over 95% of deepfake videos online are non-consensual sexual content, and 99% of victims of sexual deepfakes are women. While different studies report varying figures, the data indicate that nudity websites receive hundreds of millions of visits every year. This content is not created by cinematic professionals, since anyone can, using such sites, create deepfake videos in as little as 30 minutes, with higher-quality deepfake videos in a matter of a few hours (depending on the length of the video and computing power). Long before artificial intelligence existed, the portrayal of women in art, literature, advertising, and media was rooted in social expectations rather than in their own identities. Their value was often linked to beauty, sexuality, or obedience. The proliferation of media did not change this attitude, and the image of women used for publicity and now on social media to attract more attention and popularity is increasingly focused on the depiction of ideal beauty, attitude, and sexuality. Technology is a continuation of centuries-old social attitudes in which women's bodies, images, and reputations have been treated as objects for public consumption, control, and judgement. Artificial intelligence did not invent the exploitation of women: it automated it.

What we have today is a technology, now in the hands of everyone, that can ruin the professional careers of women and the entire world of young women. Take, for example, one of the earliest deepfake cases, in the Spanish town of Almendralejo, where more than 20 local girls, aged 11 to 17, had fully clothed photos of themselves from social media doctored with AI to produce fake naked images. Even if deepfake images are fake, they are so realistic that the effects can be devastating and humiliating, leaving victims with reputational and social damage, emotional trauma, and an escalation of abuse in the real world, where too often victims are ridiculed in their day-to-day lives.

A study by Twomey *et al* investigates the lived experiences of high-profile individuals targeted by deepfake technology. The researchers focus on nine Western celebrities (eight women and one non-binary individual) who are directly targeted by this technology without their consent or awareness. In this study, deepfake technology is presented not just as a tool but as an infrastructure of abuse. It has evolved from earlier practices such as 'photoshopping' celebrities into pornographic scenes, now utilising deep learning software to interpolate a target's face into adult videos. These videos are often

disseminated through marketplaces and sub-forums (on platforms like Reddit) characterised by “networked misogyny”. The effects on victims are described as profound psychological and reputational trauma. Celebrities frame the experience as non-consensual manipulation of identity, frequently using terms like “theft” to describe how their faces were stolen for sexual gratification. A recurring theme is the construction of deepfake abuse as a form of non-consensual online sex work that others profit from at the victim's expense. Victims describe the visceral distress of seeing these images, comparing the feeling to sexual assault, molestation, and rape. The realism of the imagery often causes victims to question their own memories, wondering, ‘Did I do that?’ Beyond internal trauma, victims face targeted harassment, such as abusers sending the deepfake videos directly to their private messages to ensure they are seen.

The study identifies significant infrastructural and social obstacles to seeking recourse. Socially, victims encounter victim-blaming myths such as ‘you’re part of the internet, what do you expect?’ or the idea that they ‘sexualised themselves’ and are thus ‘fair game’. Online platforms often place the onus on victims to report and remove content. This process is described as a ‘wall’, as anonymity and the internet’s transnational nature make legal prosecution nearly impossible. Furthermore, content removal has become a for-profit industry, forcing victims to pay companies to clean their digital reputations, a service that must be repeatedly purchased as new content emerges. The study concludes that deepfake abuse is an infrastructural injustice that current legal and technological systems fail to address. A major finding is the “double-edged sword” of advocacy: victims feel a reluctant obligation to speak out to help others and push for legislation, but doing so generates more Search Engine Optimisation traffic that attaches their name to the deepfakes in perpetuity.





On 14 July 2026, the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry organised a roundtable discussion on deepfake technologies and gender-based violence as part of its initiative. The roundtable addressed topics such as the State's positive obligation to protect, the challenges posed by misinformation, gaps in current national legislation that do not adequately address deepfakes, the ease with which deepfakes can be created, and the effects on victims, including shame and self-blame. It brought together key stakeholders from business, government, civil society, and technical fields to establish a structured, evidence-based platform for dialogue, promote national legislation on deepfakes, and

encourage coordinated sectoral responses. The event featured presentations from Judge Lorraine Schembri Orland, Dr Antonio Ghio, Dr Sophie Nighintagle, Ms Naja Bentzen, and Rachel Bondi Attard, who shed light on the realities of deepfakes.

Maltese Judge at the European Court of Human Rights, Lorraine Schembri Orland, referred to several cases decided by the Court, including *Opuz v. Turkey* (2009), *Valiulienė v. Lithuania* (2013), *Talpis v. Italy* (2017), and *Volodina v. Russia* (2019), which provide jurisprudence on the State's positive obligation to protect. Ms Naja Bentzen, Disinformation Analyst and Author of the policy brief 'Women in the age of AI-enabled disinformation', highlighted that women are facing growing pressures online: geopolitical



and ideological backlashes against women's rights are further accelerated by generative AI-facilitated gendered disinformation. However, this artificially enhanced resurfacing of misogynist tropes from the past is not inevitable: it can be tackled with well-balanced (tech) regulation, strengthened enforcement, and a whole-of-society approach to boosting information integrity and democratic resilience.

During the event, Dr Antonio Ghio, Partner at Fenech & Fenech Advocates, explained that while Maltese law criminalises the dissemination of sexual content without consent, it does not yet adequately address the creation and dissemination of sexually generated deepfakes and the harm they cause to victims. He said, “other countries have amended their laws to address and criminalise such acts.” While it is important not to rush at the expense of a well-designed law, Malta urgently needs to address this issue, especially through the proper transposition of EU Directive 2025/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and by examining how other countries are amending their criminal laws to recognise such offences.



Dr Sophia Nightingale, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Lancaster University, concluded the event by showing how the sophistication and accessibility of generative AI now allow almost anyone to create convincing fake images, audio, and video. Nefarious uses of this technology to generate non-consensual intimate imagery are on the rise. She said, “the impacts on those targeted can be devastating through the ongoing psychological, emotional, and physical harms caused.”

Through this initiative, The Malta Chamber sought to foster a meaningful discussion and collaboration among key national stakeholders on the challenge posed by deepfakes and gender-based violence. Unfortunately, this technology is easily accessible, and the creation of deepfake sexualised images can have a profound effect on victims. The invited guest speakers addressed both legal and social realities, and the event also provided attendees with the opportunity to learn about the latest studies on the subject.

Europe-Wide Problem

A 2024 report titled EU Gender-Based Violence Survey, published by Eurostat, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the European Institute for Gender Equality, shows that in the EU, 30.8% of women have experienced sexual harassment at work at some point in their lives, and 4.3% experienced it in the past 12 months. These figures refer to women who were employed or self-employed during the survey or previously. Among women aged 18–29, 41.6% reported experiencing sexual harassment at work. The survey's results are based on women in employment or self-employment at the time of the survey or who had been employed previously.

The likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment decreases with age, dropping to 19.9% among women aged 65–74, many of whom are likely retired and recount past experiences, potentially from a long time ago. Conversely, for women in younger age groups, sexual harassment may be an ongoing concern. Awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment has also evolved over time, affecting how women recognise and report these experiences in surveys.

These figures suggest that most incidents involve male perpetrators. Specifically, 15.8% of women in the EU-27 experienced harassment by a coworker, 7.4% by a boss or supervisor, and 9.3% by another man in the workplace, such as a client or customer.



Malta

In the European Institute for Gender Equality's 2024 Gender Equality Index report, Tackling violence against women, tackling gender inequalities, in Malta, 24 % of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. Some 64 % of women have experienced health consequences of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15. Around 17 % of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence by any perpetrator in the past 12 months have not told anyone.

A 2020 NSO survey offers valuable insights into gender-based violence, including workplace incidents. The study found that 18.4% of individuals who had worked at any point encountered sexual harassment on the job. The majority of these victims, over two-thirds, were women. The most common form was inappropriate staring or leering, reported by 12.2% of workers, followed by unwanted sexual jokes and remarks at 10.2%. 4.8% reported experiencing unsolicited physical contact.

More than 25% of individuals who experienced sexual harassment reported that such incidents occurred at their workplace during the survey period. Most female victims (92.3%) reported having male perpetrators at least once, while 36.4% of male victims encountered female perpetrators. Sexual harassment largely originated from coworkers, though superiors and non-employees were also identified as significant perpetrators.



Over half of the respondents (51.6%) believed sexual harassment at work is rare or does not occur at all, whereas 18.3% thought it is quite or very common. Only 22.9% of women who had ever worked considered sexual harassment to be common, compared to 14.5% of men. More than one-third of those employed at the time lacked awareness of available help channels for harassment issues. Among current workers, 63.1% knew who to contact regarding harassment reports, and 36.7% had access to harassment training sessions.

Among individuals with an intimate partner at any point in their lives, 21.3% experienced at least one incident of psychological violence—18.2% of males and 24.6% of females. The occurrence of inter-partner psychological violence slightly decreased with age, from 24.6% in the 18-29 age group to 19.4% among those aged 45-74. Physical violence encompasses acts such as pushing, shoving, slapping, beating, burning, or being attacked with a weapon, including chemicals. Sexual violence includes attempted rape, rape through force, intoxication, fear, or blackmail to coerce intercourse with a third party. Overall, 10.4% of individuals with an intimate partner experienced at least one episode of physical threats, physical violence, or sexual violence, with 9.8% experiencing physical violence and 2.9% sexual violence. Males reporting physical or sexual violence were 6.3%, compared to 14.6% of females. Specifically, 6.0% of males and 13.8% of females experienced physical violence, including threats, from any partner. About 5% of those with an intimate partner had experienced psychological violence from their current partner, with females (5.1%) reporting higher rates than males (4.2%). Psychological violence from at least one former partner affected 17.2% of individuals, again with higher rates among women (19.9%) compared to men (14.7%).

Victims of physical or sexual violence by intimate partners showed slight differences across age groups, with rates of 11.4% for ages 18-29, 10.5% for 30-44, and 9.8% for 45-74. According to Chart 9, slap, hit, or strangle was the most common physical violence, affecting 7.4% of those with an intimate partner. Other prevalent acts included pushing (6.3%) and physical threats meant to intimidate (5.3%). Additionally, 2.1% reported burns or attacks with weapons, including chemicals. Rape or forced sex with an intimate partner was reported by 2.7%. Respondents could report multiple types of violence. The data showed that women were the majority of those experiencing such violence. Among those hurt by a former partner, 53.0% sustained physical injuries, and 51.4% believed their lives were endangered during at least one incident. Over 74% discussed their experiences with close persons, 41.1% contacted health or social services, and 32.1% reported incidents to the police.

The same study shows that 17% of people aged 18 to 74 experienced at least one incident of non-partner violence since age 15. Males reported higher rates than females, at 18.6% versus 15.1%. The highest incidence since age 15 was among the youngest group (18–29 years), with nearly one in five individuals. Data indicate that perpetrators included both relatives and non-relatives. However, the majority of episodes involved non-relatives, at 17.0% for males and 12.2% for females. When considering the perpetrator's sex, 15.2% of individuals experienced at least one episode involving a male perpetrator: 17.5% of males and 12.6% of females. Additionally, 3.1% experienced episodes involving a female perpetrator.

The research study titled Victim Support Online - Improving Support Structures for Victims of Gender Based Violence GB-VSO published in June 2019, explored the prevalence and effects of Gender-Based Violence within Maltese workplaces as part of an EU co-funded project to improve victim support structures. The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods. From March to May 2019, an online survey was sent to over 1,500 entities across private, public, and NGO sectors. After social media promotion, it received 102 responses. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with 10 professionals from healthcare, academia, and social welfare sectors were conducted to gain insights from experienced individuals.

The research highlighted that GBV remains a significant, often hidden, issue in the workplace. While 16% of survey respondents reported experiencing GBV, all ten interviewees were aware of such incidents. Reported cases involved managers, employees, and clients, and took the form of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment or abuse. Crucially, the study identified a 'dark figure of crime', in which victims often suffer in silence or quit their jobs rather than report incidents. While 58% of respondents claimed accountability procedures were in place, 36% identified major gaps, including a lack of HR training and institutional responses that occasionally shame victims. Furthermore, training was severely lacking; only 22% of survey respondents and none of the interviewees knew of anyone who had received formal GBV training at work.



The report included several recommendations to strengthen workplace support, such as specialised training for employers and employees to clarify what behaviours constitute GBV, particularly within Malta's diverse workplace cultures. It also calls for establishing confidential and anonymous reporting systems alongside 'zero tolerance' policies that are applied in

practice, not just on paper. Another important recommendation was to provide victims with access to independent third-party professionals, such as psychologists and legal aid, to ensure unbiased support and avoid overloading HR departments. Finally, the report called for conducting more extensive, work-specific studies to establish the full magnitude of GBV across the Maltese Islands.

Recently, the Maltese legislator and other public entities stepped up efforts through legislation, policy and support services to address and assist with gender-based violence. This was also recognised in the 2020 GREVIO baseline evaluation report on Malta, which stated that

“Under the Equal Treatment in Employment regulations (subsidiary legislation 453.9), employers are under the obligation to take effective measures to prevent all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex, in particular harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace, when offering access to employment, vocational training and promotion. To incentivise employers’ respect of gender equality, the NCPE awards companies an Equality Mark Certification when employers give priority to gender equality. One of the criteria on the basis of which the certification is granted is whether the company has put in place a sexual harassment policy.³⁰ To benefit from such certification, the interested company must be audited by the NCPE. The NCPE further assists the company by providing training on gender equality and sexual harassment and through a model sexual harassment policy, made available on the NCPE’s website. The Equality Mark Certification is valid for two years and recertification is valid for three years. Companies that obtain this certification can display a logo and are given publicity. Complaints in relation to sexual harassment in the workplace can be lodged before the industrial tribunal, whereas any complaint regarding discrimination at the workplace on grounds of gender can be lodged before the NCPE.”

The same report set out a number of recommendations, one of which, GREVIO recommends that

“In light of the important role played by the media and the private sector in shaping and changing attitudes to the status and role of women in society and the level of acceptance of violence against women, GREVIO encourages the Maltese authorities to promote the development and monitoring of self-regulatory standards, and training in those standards, in relation to the nonstereotypical and non-sexist portrayal of women in the media, including in the context of reporting on violence they have suffered.”

In the 2024 Conclusion on the implementation of the 2020 recommendations, GREVIO highlighted the recommendations that had been or were being implemented. The Malta Chamber would like to use this opportunity to remind the national authorities of the remaining recommendations made by GREVIO in 2024, which include

1. strengthening co-operation with all non-governmental actors, including those providing specialist women's support services and ensuring their effective participation at various stages of the design of policies, legislative changes and programmes, that address violence against women, while upholding the Istanbul Convention's premise that all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, affect women disproportionately and are a form of discrimination against women;
2. putting in place a dedicated, transparent and accountable public procedure under which all NGOs which provide specialist support services to victims of violence against women and their children can compete for sustainable and long-term funding; and offering women victims of violence the possibility to self-refer without requiring a mandatory referral from *Agenzija Appogg*;
3. prioritising the implementation of the strategic goal on data collection of the 2023-2028 National Strategy on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence and ensuring the comprehensive collection of disaggregated data in relation to all forms of violence covered by the Istanbul Convention at all stages of criminal justice, disaggregated by sex, age, type of violence as well as the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim and ensuring the collection of data on protection orders issued under civil and criminal legislation, their breaches and consequences of such breaches;
4. taking a number of priority actions in the area of custody and visitation rights to ensure the safety of victims and their children, including by verifying that measures that are available to prevent victims and perpetrators from meeting during supervised visitation are implemented in practice; and ensuring that family courts take into account episodes of domestic violence effectively, in particular by fully investigating allegations of domestic violence and recognising the harmful impact on domestic violence witnessed by children and offering a legal basis to restrict visitation rights where this is warranted;
5. taking legislative and/or policy measures to bring the Maltese legal framework and practice in line with Articles 52 and 53 of the Istanbul Convention, and setting up a centralised system that can record the issue of emergency barring orders and protection orders, as well as any breaches thereof.

Recommendations for Future Studies

While numerous studies on gender-based violence in Malta have been conducted, including in the workplace, persistent challenges remain, including the use of new technologies that result in digital gender-based violence and harassment through deepfake. The Malta Chamber recommends that public and research institutions embark on research that addresses research gaps and examines in greater detail the violence experienced by specific groups of people and the types of violence that may not be prevalent enough to feature in quantitative studies but are nonetheless problematic.

1. Among our recommendations, there needs to be a better understanding of existing realities, especially given the rapid changes in the labour market's demographics and in demographics more broadly. What constitutes unacceptable behaviour varies according to people's backgrounds and age. Victims may not realise they are victims and may be subjected to psychological or even physical violence, which they consider 'normal'. The same applies to perpetrators. Moreover, we may be experiencing the normalisation of actions and behaviours triggered by online and social media exposure. While in the last decades society made big steps to educate that certain behaviour and mentality is unacceptable, this may all be thrown away due to the normalisation of deviance, a social process in which bad, unsafe, or unethical behaviour slowly becomes accepted as normal. Social media may be playing a major role in the normalisation of unacceptable actions through desensitisation, algorithmic amplification, and the removal of real-world accountability.
2. More focused research, both in terms of methods and in terms of effects on victims, needs to be conducted on deepfake technology. International research shows that, unfortunately, such actions by perpetrators are sometimes done as a joke, to laugh, but the effects on victims and their future are devastating.
3. Research should also focus on the effects of GBV on employees' wellbeing and productivity, and on the economic cost of failing to address GBV, including sick leave, lost productivity, and support. This is essential, as it not only captures the human element of GBV but also highlights the economic costs of failing to address it.

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