

Cyberbullying Conference, 21 April 2017

Let me begin by thanking Marlene Mizzi and her team, for taking the initiative on this important topic.

Undoubtedly, bullying of any sort, does endless damage to the peace of mind of so many children, young people, their families, and their communities.

We must do all that we can to address it.

We cannot be complacent or content with sporadic initiatives, to address this scourge, which is ruining and depleting the innocence and positivity of our young people.

It is therefore my pleasure to address this conference, on the important topic of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is an example of the difficulties which occur, and the turbulent frames of mind, that take over, in our homes, our schools, and our places of work.

Bullying is a direct effect when respect and harmony are lacking in our communities and across our society.

Analysing this state of affairs, when our children and young people, in particular, are struggling with the challenges of online bullying, a very basic question immediately comes to mind:

“What is going wrong in our society, and what is causing cyberbullying?”

“What is happening to create this horrible situation?”

Indicators from a report published last year by the European Commission, entitled 'Cyberbullying Among Young People', tell us that more than one in ten, 11 to 16 year-olds, are reporting that they have experienced serious bullying online.

Furthermore, a majority of those affected by bullying, some 55%, have said that it caused them to become depressed. More than one in three said, that they resorted to self-harm, and even considered suicide as a result.

Surely, we cannot be silent or complacent in the face of such suffering, which is, too often, silently endured by our children and young people.

We must take urgent and effective action.

On the other hand, while we must admit that bullying has always existed in one form or another, anonymous online bullying is a relatively new phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common.

Cyberbullying is defined as sending hurtful, threatening, or embarrassing messages to, or about, another person. It involves, at its core, the malicious misuse of electronic and digital media.

These technologies are, today, an integral part of many people's social and working lives, in particular for younger generations. However, to enjoy the positive benefits of online communication, it is necessary to prevent or, indeed, to put a stop to cyberbullying.

Mainstreaming media education and media literacy is a powerful way of preventing and potentially ending the risks of cyberbullying.

Europe has been giving visibility to these issues for over a decade now. The first European public consultation on media literacy was

held in 2006, and the first European congress on media literacy was held in 2009.

However, according to the latest report entitled “Measuring Media Literacy in the EU”, published this year by the European University Institute, only four European countries have a well developed media literacy policy, while twelve have an underdeveloped policy.

Three of them have no policy at all, and this includes Malta.

The report further shows that countries with an established media literacy policy are at lower risk of the negative effects of online harm.

The need for a Maltese media literacy policy is particularly necessary, in the light of what we know about the growing risks of cyberbullying in Malta.

Therefore, I would like to once again thank Marlene Mizzi for creating this opportunity, to give visibility to this important issue, and encouraging us to take it to the next level.

I truly believe that media literacy must become an intrinsic part of our national and European educational curricula, in line with the European Commission’s 2009 report on ‘Media Literacy in Europe’ which recommends that we must keep, and I quote, “*protecting children against harmful content and developing their awareness of online risks*”. End quote.

Children and young people must be educated in the correct use of electronic and digital media, to keep themselves safe at all times.

Digital literacy must be recognised as an essential life skill, in the twenty-first century.

Digital literacy must be a prerequisite for full participation in an active and democratic society.

Moreover, I believe that we must do more to ensure that online bullying is also acknowledged as a major offence, which must be dealt with strongly.

The laws of our country should reflect the growing concern which so many of us feel, especially parents, towards safeguarding our young citizens' best interests in this regard.

I believe that we must strengthen existing laws but also to consider a specific law, which highlights the crimes of cyberbully. Certain countries, for example Sweden, Spain and France, have already moved forward with such measures to address cyber bullying. In this way, we shall bring greater visibility to the issues at hand.

Digital crimes are a contemporary development that need an updated response.

We must send a strong statement out there, and we must act now.

There is no further time to waste. We cannot be passive, in the face of so many broken children and young people.

Furthermore, we must parallel legal measures with a more positive outlook, which reinforces the importance of a culture of respect. This is an integral part of a positive peace approach, which ensures that the wellbeing and the peace of mind of the people of our nation is truly at the heart of all our policies.

During my many conversations with children and young people, at their schools and colleges across our islands, the topic of bullying is often a key concern.

Bullying is stealing the peace of mind of our children and young people, and robbing them of their sense of wellbeing, and sense of safety in their homes and schools. This leaves them nowhere else to feel truly safe.

Let me also say that the importance of respectful communication in public life, among adults, is also an important topic, at the forefront of our children's minds.

Not only are our children troubled by the realities which they are facing, but they also connect their troubles, emerging from bullying, with the way in which we, as adults, address one another, which, at times, we do in the most disrespectful of ways.

Our careless behaviour and attitude is not helping the situation.

We must take careful responsibility for our words and our actions, if we want to see our young people change their macho style attitudes towards each other.

We cannot allow cyberbullying to continue being such a serious obstacle for many young people, causing long-term damage to both victims and bullies.

I encourage you to take this opportunity to work together, by creating synergies among educators, parents, and professionals, to explain to our children what cyberbullying is; why it is wrong; and what will happen if they themselves engage in cyberbullying, while also enforcing the consequences, if the rules are broken.

We must encourage children and young people to report to an adult, if they ever see cyberbullying, either as a victim or a bystander, and help stop cyberbullying by never passing it on.

Moreover, we must nurture our children to be aware of the importance of internet safety.

I believe that we must also ensure that both the victims and the perpetrators of online bullying have access to effective psycho-social care, to ensure that there is no escalation in the negative effects of cyberbullying, and to ensure that individuals feel listened to, and supported.

The First National Conference on Child Wellbeing, held in 2015 and organised by my Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, brought a powerful focus on issues of bullying, including cyberbullying, in Malta and beyond.

This conference was especially powerful and innovative because it was organised from a child's perspectives.

It became clear, through the outcomes of that conference, that more must be done to create further harmony between professionals working in diverse sectors, within our different nation and across our nations, in order to move forward with a united action plan against bullying.

I am confident that Malta's Presidency of the Council of the European Union is offering us a strong platform, from which to take proactive decisions for the benefit of children and young people all across our European family of nations.

The first National Conference on Child Wellbeing also brought to the fore the distrust that our children feel in our authorities, when reporting.

One young participant in the conference consultation said, and I quote;

“When a student talks about bullying, some teachers say ‘don’t worry’, ‘it will be fine’, ‘It will pass’ and ‘just don’t pay any attention to them’. But if a student takes the teacher’s advice, the bully will come after them more... some teachers like taking shortcuts, and I found this problem everywhere, even in secondary school.” End quote.

Children and young people also questioned the effectiveness of other adults in their lives, including the police, and adults’ ability to respond to their concerns about bullying.

For this reason, the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society also facilitated a consultation session last year, between young people and the authorities of the Malta Cybercrime Unit. This consultation session specifically targeted the issue of cyberbullying and online abuse.

One girl, present at that meeting, mentioned that although her parents brought her up to know how to approach certain challenging situations, she felt unprepared to deal with the online bullying she experienced from her peers.

She said, and I quote, *“Other young people sometimes do or say things that our parents wouldn’t be aware of or know how to deal with”*. End quote.

For this reason, our strategies to combat cyberbullying and online harassment must include the voices of children and young people. They are the best experts when it comes to their own lives, and how to deal with the issues which they face.

Let us create collaborative opportunities to nurture communication among children, their parents, and authority figures in schools and the community.

We need to build a powerful circle of trust that shall be felt across our society.

In conclusion, let me encourage each one of us to put into practice a firm commitment to maintain respectful communication with one another, both online and in person.

Let me reiterate the steps I believe we must take, that are crucial to addressing cyberbullying in Malta;

We must work together to ensure that our legislation is up-to-date, reflecting the contemporary realities faced by children and young people and their use of electronic and digital media.

We must safeguard their peace of mind, encouraging timely reporting and inspiring trust in the relevant authorities, while also inviting the active participation of young people to voice their concerns.

We must ensure that the relevant authorities and stakeholders have the necessary resources and support, to have efficient and effective responses to all kinds of bullying, in particular, cyberbullying.

We must work together, across Europe, to produce a holistic action plan that targets issues of bullying both in the short and long-term.

Finally, we must all, especially those of us in positions of authority, be an example of respect and harmony to our children and young people.

In this way, we shall build a proactive culture of solidarity and of positive peace, which shall benefit the lives of both present and

future generations of children, across our Maltese Islands and beyond.

Thank you, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of this conference.