

“IL-BULLY..... JIEN JEW INT?!”

Mental Health Association Gozo ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2022

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08:30am – 01:30pm

Queen Mary, University of London, Malta Campus Triq I-Arcisqof Pietru Pace, Victoria, Gozo

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Good morning to you all.

I would like to start my contribution to this annual conference by commending the great efforts of the Mental Health Association Gozo. It has been a great pleasure to see this annual conference grow into a much-awaited for event, for many stakeholders in the mental health field.

It has been a pleasure and an honour to be invited to address this event, year after year.

I must also convey my deepest appreciation, to Pauline Camilleri and Jeanette Falzon for their hard work, and their tireless endeavours in the area of mental health in Gozo, both as professionals in the field, and also for their many initiatives through their voluntary work within the Mental Health Association Gozo.

Dear Pauline and Jeanette, it has been a privilege to work with you and to see the impact of our meaningful and now longstanding collaboration between our two organisations, namely: The Malta Trust Foundation and the Mental Health Association Gozo.

The theme chosen for this year’s conference is intriguing. ***Il-Bully: Int jew Jien?***

Bullying is a fundamental rights issue.

The fifth article of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifically states that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Bullying is certainly all of these, and more.

- Bullying goes against the right to be safeguarded from physical injuries and emotional distress. It violates the right of a person's self-worth, dignity, and wellbeing.
- Bullying goes against the right to healthy mental, physical, spiritual, moral, sexual, and social development.
- Bullying goes against the right to be treated equally, free from discriminatory comments, labelling and stereotyping, the right to freedom of expression and involvement, and the right to privacy.

Moreover, when the person concerned is a child, bullying infringes on children human rights. Bullying violates the right:

- to receive an education without feeling threatened or afraid
- to a safe and supportive educational environment, free from violence and aggression, both on an emotional and physical level
- to adequate access to recreation and play

Research shows that bullying affects children and teenagers for generations. The impact of bullying on mental health, extends beyond the victim, as it also transcends to bystanders, and to the bullies themselves.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports that globally, almost one-third of young teens worldwide experience bullying.

A recent survey, by the Victim Support Unit in Malta, reported that 9% of children aged 8-12, do not feel safe at school. Further research highlighted that nearly one in five (19.1%) students reported being seriously bullied at school.

Statistics from the Anti-Bullying Unit, within the Department of Education, shows that, in 2019, over 500 cases of bullying in schools were referred to the authorities and another 366 cases of bullying were reported last year.

To position our discussion today I would like to highlight some other notable statistics:

- last year's 366 referrals for bullying, 130 came from primary schools. Most were reported from government schools (134), with only two reports from Church schools and none from independent schools.
- Another 123 cases were reported in government middle schools (children between the ages of 11 and 13), with three from Church schools and one from an independent school.
- There were 113 cases from secondary schools, with 97 from government schools, five from Church schools and one from an independent school.
- Over 1,200 sessions were held between a professional and a student who suffered from bullying.

We usually define bullying as the use of force, coercion, hurtful teasing or threatening, or aggressively abusing, dominating, or intimidating another person, in what is ultimately an imbalance of power.

In this context I ask:

- Why would a person want to exert power over another, instead of striving to live in peaceful existence with one another?
- Who is exactly the bully?
- What makes a bully?
- Have we ever found ourselves a victim of bullying?
- Have we ever been the bully?
- Can we identify bullying in the context of children in the family, in the community?
- Is the increase in bullying due to the many socio-economic changes and challenges, which have impacted on the traditional stability and values of the family?
- Have we moved to another extreme?
- Have we created a generation of individualistic children and young people?
- Have we completely lost the sense of community?
- In our quest to teach our children to be more assertive and more empowered, have we become more aggressive and violent instead?

No one is born a bully.

A person becomes a bully through life circumstances.

If our type of society is creating bullies, then I believe that we, as a society can address the issues that are creating bullies.

I believe that with love, patience, and genuine concern towards the wellbeing of all, we can also assist the bully.

As a society, -we have a responsibility towards the victim but also towards the bully.

We need to realise that bullying and violence does not only concern the victim but it impacts the whole of society.

In schools, we need to have a whole school approach to bullying, involving children and young people, their parents, school management, educators, and all members of staff.

We need to better understand the circumstances in which bullying prevails.

We need to better acknowledge the repercussions and impact of bullying.

We need to better resource our anti-bullying units.

We need above all to better establish the effective ways to prevent bullying.

In our quest to understand the causes of bullying, I ask:

How much do we know about the links between domestic violence, corporal punishment and bullying at school?

In preparation for my contribution today, I came across a number of studies correlating these issues.

Anna Baldry, from 'La Sapienza' University of Rome, in her study "Bullying in schools and exposure to domestic violence" concluded that, and I quote, "Exposure to interparental violence is associated with bullying and victimization in school, ***even after controlling for direct child abuse. Violence within the family has detrimental effects on the child's behaviour; schools, in this regard, can play a fundamental role in early detection of violent behaviour.***¹

Another study argue that domestic violence, which takes place within the home environment, and school bullying, which takes place within the compulsory education system, are intrinsically linked.

A study by Dr Paula Lozano et al from the University of Washington and Indiana University showed that children exposed to violence in the home engaged in higher levels of physical bullying than young people who were not witnesses to such behaviour.

Dr Nerissa Bauer, lead author of a similar study, also asserted that, "***children learn from seeing what their primary caregivers do.***"

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, a Foundation which I founded and still chair, is currently developing a project on Restorative

¹ "Bullying in schools and exposure to domestic violence" Anna C Baldry Department of Social Psychology, 'La Sapienza' University of Rome

Practices, aiming at creating peaceful environments of co-existence through ethical values.²

Studies at the School of Law Western Sydney University New South Wales, Australia, found that it is possible to break the cycle of domestic violence and school bullying using restorative justice.

We need to invest in our children. They can bring the much-needed change to drive a culture of positive peace in our society.

There is another aspect of bullying today, which unfortunately is silently damaging a huge percentage of our children and young people in the process. Cyberbullying has become a modern day societal scourge.

Cyberbullies torment their victims publicly, privately and/or anonymously.

Cyberbullying is of a persistent nature.

Teachers and parents may not notice cyberbullying until the problem is advanced and aggravated.

The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society has also taken up a project on Children's Online Protection with a significant number of stakeholders, ranging from children themselves to parents/guardians, to teachers to industry.

² DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SCHOOL BULLYING: AN EXAMINATION OF THE INEXTRICABLE LINK BETWEEN THE TWO AND THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE TO BREAK THE CYCLE; Hesham Alkhalayleh & David Newlyn School of Law Western Sydney University New South Wales, Australia 2015

A research study will start to be conducted soon in schools to ensure that we can map out the extent of this worrying trend in our society.

On concluding, I would like to highlight what research is clearly showing, that mainly bullied children and teens are more likely to experience depression, anxiety and sometimes long-term damage to self-esteem.

Victims often feel lonely.

Some victims may also fight back with extreme, sudden violence.

On the other hand, bullies are at higher risk for anti-social, and violent behaviour. They often have problems with school. They are more likely to abuse substances and alcohol. This can continue into adulthood, when they are more likely to abuse their partners and spouses, or their children, or to engage in criminal behaviour.

Bully-Victims, those who are both a bully and are bullied, suffer the most serious effects. They are at greater risk for mental and behavioural problems than those who are victims or bullies alone. Rates of depression, anxiety and suicide ideation and behaviours are greatest in this group.

Bystanders fall into one of two groups: those who act to stop bullying, and those who do not. The latter could be afraid of retaliation and upset because they wanted to intervene and did not. They may experience increased anxiety and depression that can affect academic performance, and increase their use of

substances, alcohol, and tobacco. Bystanders who act to stop bullying, however, have beneficial outcomes including increased self-esteem.

Research shows that there is no direct correlation between bullying and suicide, which is usually not due to a single source of trauma. But bullying can contribute to the intense feelings of helplessness and hopelessness involved in suicidal behaviours.

It is established that Bully-Victims have the highest risk for suicidal behaviour.

Finally, I would like to end of my contribution today, by referring to an inspirational quote from Yehuda Bauer, a holocaust survivor, who said, and I quote:

“Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”

I wish you a successful conference.