

Towards Robust Human Rights and Equality Framework

The Malta Girl Guides feedback

Background

The mission of the Malta Girl Guides (hereinafter called “MGG”) is to enable girls and young women to develop a sound character and discover their potential through an interactive programme, giving them a positive sense of direction and a world of opportunities as responsible citizens. As an active NGO which deals with girls and women issues, it reiterates that girls and young women are the agents of progress and play a vital role in the global development. The adopted non-formal education (NFE) approach which is the source of the Guiding programme is an essential empowerment tool for girls during their childhood and adolescence in the form of an organised educational activity outside the established formal system which complements knowledge and skills provided by formal education.

Although the MGG recognise the steps undertaken by European and national bodies on active participation and social inclusion, it is felt that there is still significant room for improvement, especially regarding the implementation of existing EU and national legislative measures. The promotion and protection of, and respect for, the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women, including the right to development, which are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, should be mainstreamed into all government policies and programmes¹. All measures taken should ensure that every person is entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development and that equal attention and urgent consideration should be given to the implementation, promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Maximise investments in gender equality in the labour force

Although the trend is that more women are entering the labour market, the employment rate of women in Malta is still one of the lowest when compared to other EU Member States. While this can reflect individual preferences, it still leads to diminished career opportunities, lower pay and lower prospective pensions, underutilisation of human capital and thus, lower economic growth and prosperity. The MGG are highly concerned that women are more likely than men to be in precarious, vulnerable, sex-stereotyped, and lower paying forms of employment due to gender pay gap;² more likely to be without an income of their own; employed without being registered as employed with the ETC; bear the burden of unpaid family care work; and have less access to full employment, decent work, social protection and pension rights which increases their risk of poverty in old age. The MGG hereby encourage the government to boost women to stay in or to

¹ The mainstreaming would be in line with the EU Gender Action Plan 2010 – 2015 and a follow up to the Beijing Platform for Action.

² http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics (accessed on 21.03.2014).

return to work, to introduce tax incentives, to promote lifelong learning, to introduce better social protection for self-employed women.

Although the MGG welcomes the fact that free and/or affordable and quality child and elderly care facilities have been introduced, they are concerned about the lack of initiatives to reconcile private life care and professional life (eg. flexi-time work³ giving leeway from the traditional 40 hour week, telework, part-time work, job sharing, time-off for breast-feeding, advance notice of shift schedules, revising parental leave regulations to extend this right and to encourage more fathers to use it⁴). A family-friendly labour market structure implies that both flexibility in working time arrangements and gender equality are identified as preconditions of economic recovery. Flexibility is also required by mothers who decide to further their education

Stimulate youth employment

Whilst Europe is currently debating the effects of youth unemployment as a result of the financial crisis which hit the continent, the MGG call on the local government to prioritise the creation of stable jobs and a skilled workforce by increased investment including from the private and the public sector through EU-funded programmes⁵ that foster youth entrepreneurship and provide capacity building to young people through job trainings, using formal and non-formal curricula, education, vocational and employment counselling, quality paid internships, offer social protection, mentoring and expertise sharing so that young people, in particular marginalized groups, get the necessary information and skills to access decent work opportunities and be lifted out of poverty and social exclusion. These measures should smoothen the transition between school and work, reduce early school-leaving, enhance job mobility and give young people the opportunity to work and train abroad through the EURES and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships. The government must reduce non-wage labour costs to boost recruitment prospects amongst young people, use targeted and well-designed wage and recruitment subsidies to encourage employers to create new opportunities for young people, make more start-up services available⁶, and promote youth work for better work opportunities through accreditation of voluntary work for employment.

³ Flexible working time schedules are rather widespread in Denmark and Sweden with at least 60% of men and women having access to flexible working time schedules. Also Germany, Finland and Norway score relatively high with a little more than half of all employees working with some kind of flexibility in their working hours. Low scores are concentrated in the southern EU Member States and in the new Member States of Eastern Europe. (Flexible working time arrangements and gender equality: A comparative review of 30 European countries pg 8) European Commission 2013.

⁴ Paternity Leave- Equality should apply across board independently of whether parents are united in matrimony or not. At the moment, fathers who acknowledge their paternity but are not married to the mother are not entitled to paternity leave conversely to fathers who are married. Nor are such fathers entitled to the tax benefits married fathers are at present entitled to.

⁵ The EU youth guarantee scheme guarantees work opportunity within 4 months of leaving school or losing a job, under-25s receive a quality offer of employment, continuing education, an apprenticeship or traineeship.

⁶ Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee (OJ C 120, 26.4.2013, p. 1–6).

Maximise investment in the education sector

The MGG welcome the government's acknowledgment that learners have different learning needs through the mass introduction of the learning support assistants (LSAs) in primary and secondary schools however the LSAs need to be supported by the teacher's implementation of the Universal Design for Learning in order to reap the maximum results. B. Ed students need to be motivated and directed towards such a concept. The LSAs role is to facilitate the approach of Universal Design for Learning created by the teacher and not the other way round; i.e. trying to adapt the teacher's pedagogy to create an inclusive setting. Unless our classrooms become a place of stimulation and motivation to foster learning through an approach addressed to diverse learners, it is useless writing strategies to combat early school leavers and illiteracy. The emphasis should be on the training of teachers and the LSAs.

Moreover, as an expert NGO in NFE, the MGG urge the government to adopt a rights-based approach to education, including formal, informal and non-formal education, targeting vulnerable and marginalized groups, especially people living with disabilities in order to gain relevant skills. The MGG underline the contribution that can be made by non-formal education organisations; specifically by seeking dialogue with non-formal education organisations; supporting and utilising the skills and experience of such organisations; and strengthening the partnership between formal and non-formal education to create policies that meet the needs of girls.

Moreover, the government must keep investing in catch-up and literacy education for those who did not receive formal education, skills development and vocational training and human rights education and training, with specific attention to eliminating gender disparities at all levels of education by increasing the retention, transition and completion rates of women and girls; improving the quality of education and learning outcomes; eliminating gender stereotypes in the curriculum; mainstreaming a gender perspective into education and training programmes, including science and technology and sports and eradicating female illiteracy. Returning to University can help mothers get a higher paying job which will make it easier for them to raise a family, especially in the case of single mothers. Evening classes are the most suitable for them and these programmes should be fully or substantially funded by the government or the companies they work for. Moreover, the University nursery must extend its opening hours for student mothers with children. Likewise, normal school hours must be extended and during these extended hours, children should be assisted to do their homework, be offered healthy food⁷ and attend extra-curricular activities. This reform will boost education standards and prepare children for the world of work by getting them used to full days and also encourage working mothers to return to full-time work in between dropping off and picking up their kids. Such reform stimulates a work-life balance since parents will not take their children for private lessons and other extra-curricular activities in the evenings but enables them to enrich their family time.

⁷ In a hindsight, this reform will tackle obesity amongst Maltese children.

Ensure women and youth participation at all levels and exercise full freedom of speech

The MGG note that women continue being significantly under-represented in stereotyped jobs for men mostly in science and technology, sports, at levels of political, public and economic decision-making including in national parliaments and other governance structures as well as in boards of administration of public structures and private firms and businesses. The MGG accentuate the necessity of positive action for the promotion of gender equality as laid out in Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. Moreover, the MGG stress that the government should institutionalise mechanisms for youth leadership, in the development of policies and programmes that impact young people's lives. Additionally, the MGG urges the government to implement transparency measures in decision-making process and to fight corruption to support equal chances of participation. The government must create more open spaces to the youths and social excluded in order to give them possibilities for self-development and self-empowerment, an opportunity to exercise their freedom of speech through expressing their personal opinions and artistic works without being censored.

Improve maternal health and sexual education

Although Malta has done a significant progress in order to improve maternal health, the MGG note that there continues to be unacceptably high numbers of early pregnancies, particularly in the case of adolescent mothers, as a result of unprotected sexual relationships, complications related to HIV and AIDS, pregnancy and childbearing at a young age. The MGG, being a pro-life NGO, underline the right to life and the full protection of the human embryo. The MGG emphasise that the government should invest more in NGOs such as the MGG itself in terms of funding and resources to raise awareness on comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and family planning. It should encourage schools and NGOs to provide non-discriminatory, non-judgmental, rights-based, age appropriate, gender-sensitive health education including youth-friendly, evidence based comprehensive sexuality education that is context specific. Moreover, the MGG highlight the need of more financial and psychological support for childless couples.

It is high time that the government implements financially sustainable policies and legal frameworks that protect, promote and fulfill the reproductive and sexual rights of all young people, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identities. The MGG also note the particular vulnerability of minorities and girls and young women in situation of prostitution, sexual abuse, rape and incest to HIV infection. The government must address the challenges faced by girls and women living with HIV and AIDS, including stigma, discrimination, bullying and violence.

Due to the high influx of migrants in Malta over the last couple of years, mostly from African countries, the government must ensure correct implementation of EU asylum rules (notably the revised Qualifications Directive and the Asylum Procedures Directive) to guarantee protection of women at risk by providing

support through the European Refugee Fund and the future Asylum and Migration Fund. Moreover, the MGG urges the government to address the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) on national level by supporting activities to prevent FGM and other harmful customary or traditional practices that denigrate women, enacting laws prohibiting them, raising awareness of the problem, empowering migrant women and girls, giving psychological support to those who underwent FGM and training health professionals and those working with the victims. The MGG support the private members' bill which calls for the criminalisation of FGM in Malta.

Strengthen the evidence-base for gender equality

The government should conduct constant real-time research in order to identify and tackle efficiently current scenario, problems and needs on social inclusion process. The MGG emphasise the need to improve systematic and coordinated collection, dissemination, analysis and use of reliable, qualitative and quantitative gender statistics and data disaggregated by sex, age, disability and other relevant variables at national level. This will enhance monitoring and tracking progress for all girls and young women in their development and will also be fundamental in jurisprudence to prove their situation in discrimination cases.

End gender-based violence

The MGG welcome the fact that Malta has announced that it shall be the fourth country to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence and also the latest news that the Maltese government has set up a sexual assault response team earmarked to start operating in 2014 which shall provide timely action and early intervention. Moreover, the MGG have been overwhelmed with the news that the EU has established 2016 as the European year to end violence against women and urge the government and the civil society to actively participate in the EU activities related to the theme and to promote funding under the funding programmes DAPHNE III and PROGRESS for awareness raising campaigns. The government, together with other stakeholders, should keep guaranteeing an environment free from all forms of harmful traditional practices and psychological, physical and sexual violence, including gender based violence, violence against women, harassment, stalking⁸, bullying in the home, school, workplace and community, sexual coercion; and female genital mutilation, amongst others whilst, apart from the protection offered by the recent EU directives⁹, the government must increase the support provided for victims of violence including free counselling, services and legal redress. Moreover, it should work hand in hand with NGOs like the MGG which are working hand in hand with the World Association

⁸ So far, under Maltese law, "stalking" is provided for in terms of other generic offences thus there is lack of awareness resulting in under-reporting.

⁹ Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA (OJ L 315, 14.11.2012, p. 57–73) and Directive 2011/99/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on the European protection order (OJ L 338, 21.12.2011, p. 2–18) ensure that victims and their family members are recognised, treated with respect and receive information, proper protection, support, access to justice and they can rely on a restraining order obtained in their home country wherever they are in the EU.

of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) and the UN Women on a badge curriculum “Stop the Violence against girls and young women”. For further information about this campaign which challenges traditional attitudes of men and boys towards girls and young women, follow the link: <http://www.stoptheviolencecampaign.com/en/home>

Eradicate poverty

The MGG express further concern in regard to the increase in poverty amongst women and the growing disparity between the minimum wage earned by women workers and a living wage that provides women with decent and dignified living conditions for themselves and their families. The financial crisis has contributed significantly to their increased risk of poverty, especially in those households where women are the main and/or the only breadwinners. The MGG reiterate the concept of adequate standard of living for all girls and young women which results into decent housing, minimum income, freedom from hunger, basic health, access to water and sanitation and access to basic banking accounts. Economic hardship can mean many parents view survival as the main priority and often co-opt their children, especially girls, as additional labour resources or keep them at home to help with household chores and care. The MGG urges the government to make the best possible use of EU funding to support social inclusion¹⁰ and to be active in reforming the national structure through the Social Investment Package and the European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Protect sustainable development for future generations

Environment is a pillar of the 8-point programme of the Girl Guides. The MGG call on the government to address the climate change adaptation and disaster prevention and preparedness in case of a natural disaster which may hit the Maltese islands. This would contribute to economic growth, biodiversity protection, climate change mitigation and adaptation and food security, while improving soil quality, reducing erosion, building resilience to natural hazards and halting land take and development. Given the global importance of water and marine ecosystems the government must protect sustainable fish stocks with a view to food security, as well as reducing significant hazards such as marine litter. The government must protect the natural resources and establish open and transparent governance structures, to ensure that resources are used in a manner that benefits their citizens in an equitable and sustainable way. The way forward must be one which outlines the key steps towards sustainable development as agreed in the Rio+20 and the challenges for a future framework which can be drawn from the experience of the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and the works stemming from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

¹⁰ The Commission proposal mentions that 20% of the European Social Fund be earmarked for fighting poverty and social exclusion.

Conclusion

In the light of the above recommendations, the MGG believe it is high time that the government moves from resolutions and proposals to large scale initiatives through advocacy, lobby and tangible actions at all levels. Urgent political and concerted actions must be taken at the earliest possible. The little effort can make a big difference for all the society at large. The MGG promise to keep their commitment to give service to the community, to keep updating and adapting their educational programme according to the needs of the society and to push girls and young women to speak up and to be in the lead.

For further clarification in relation to the above, please contact Mrs Marjoe Abela, the Chief Commissioner of the Malta Girl Guides on chiefcomm@maltagirlguides.com.

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