



**L-Università ta' Malta**  
Faculty for Social Wellbeing

## Protecting our Children Exploring and Preventing Child Abuse

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## Foreward

### **Children deserve to live**

Probably this will sound very much a cliché, but children do deserve to live the best quality of life. A society, I believe, is measured by our ability as a community to take care of this population, to provide for them, to give them agency and space to grow, to develop their critical skills, so that at the end of the day they have a better understanding of the World. Unfortunately, some or many children, in this journey of life, hit a bump. Some bumps are critical experiences that if society does not provide enough support and services that compliment that pain will lead to a slippery slope. This study ably led by Dr Roberta Attard and the team of Research Support Officers, namely Graziella Vella, Olga Formosa, Annabel Cuff provides us with a dire reality that our society is caught in. The pain that we seem to inflict on children at times is unthinkable and irrational, whether done consciously or not. We hope that this project funded by the Bank of Valletta will help us gather a clearer understanding of what is happening, and this will provide an opportunity for policy makers to act accordingly. The Faculty for Social Wellbeing feels privileged to have taken in on its shoulders to lead this important research.

*Prof. Andrew Azzopardi*

Clear as crystal in my mind, although many years have since passed, is the distressed face of a very dishevelled six-year-old child looking up at me, my first client from the time I was working as a Child Protection social worker. “What can I do to help you?” I had asked him, as we sat together trying to make sense of the train wreck that was his life. To which question he had replied “Please make it stop”.

Despite the increased awareness through educational campaigns and school-based interventions, continued efforts to make resources and services more readily available and more limelight given to children’s rights, from the study carried out by this research team, very evidently all these years later the neglect and abuse of children hasn’t stopped in our Maltese and Gozitan societies. By using different research methods with the various stakeholders, this study’s purpose was to place the scourge of abuse and neglect perpetuated in our community under academic scrutiny in order to unpack the various contextually-based elements particular to our nation that perhaps have rendered it particularly difficult to address. In this respect, who better to listen to than those most affected by abuse and neglect and the persons witnessing their plight, those who plan, implement and run services to assist our community in arriving at a place of increased wellbeing.

As therapeutic professionals we have the privilege of accompanying persons out of a place of suffering, loneliness, silence, hopelessness and despair but this comes with a great responsibility – that of finding ways of both preventing and effectively addressing where prevention fails abuse and neglect with all members of society but especially with the persons who will be taking care of as yet unborn children, the community and the nation when we are no longer able to. Children may be our future but we are their present and their future is dependent on what we do with it for them. May this research study, an exemplary example of worthwhile collaboration between the world of socially conscious academia and community invested finance, be a milestone in the fight against the abuse and neglect of children in the Maltese Islands so that one day it may stop.

*Dr Roberta Attard*

The impact and trauma caused to a child as a result of any type of child abuse is difficult to explain and define. The many factors, variables, different environments and relationships where child abuse may take place makes the actual impact on the child as difficult to understand. This study, carried out by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing has attempted to understand and explain the different types of abuse, shed light on understanding who the perpetrators, abusers, may be, and investigate the Maltese scenario with respect to cases of abuse and tools available to prevent child abuse. Along the process, the research team has spoken in detail to professionals who come in contact with convicted perpetrators, to understand the scenario, the reasons and the perpetrators' own backgrounds, because even a perpetrator has their own story, and that story may be one of abuse as well. The research team has also spoken to professionals who come in contact with children in order to discuss online risks for children, an ever-increasing and dangerous area considering children today spend so much time online, often without supervision or near adults who do not have the knowledge how to use certain devices and/or applications. Most importantly, we spoke to children themselves, to make sense as to what children understand with online usage and how aware they are of the risks which may be encountered online. An online questionnaire has also been made available to understand various experiences of various people, now adults, who have experienced abuse as a child. What emerges is a picture of suffering, mostly in silence, as a result of lack of support, fear of not being believed in, particularly by those family members who should support them, or lack of knowledge as to what constitutes abuse or not. The outcomes of this research project have thus allowed us to trace a picture of the current scenario and what actions should take place to allow for education, awareness and support and to prevent any child from going through the traumatic, life changing experience which is child abuse.

*Ms Graziella Vella & Ms Olga Formosa*



## Executive Summary

Abuse on children can manifest itself in various forms. All forms, however, ultimately involve the maltreatment of minors and often carry with them complex roots and profound ramifications. For a long time, children were not given the right to make their voice heard. Nevertheless, in time, societies and countries, including the Maltese Islands, came to value the rights of children, and have started a move towards a more child-centred system that seeks to safeguard their wellbeing and protect their rights. This movement for instance, is evidenced through the local introduction and development of child protection legislation and structures, such as the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA) and Malta's Safeguarding Commission. Notwithstanding these developments, local figures of abuse on children draw a landscape where more work still clearly remains to be done.

- Data from local Court's criminal records for instance expose overall waves of increases in the incidence of offences of child abuse over the last decade.
- Data from Child Protection Services (CPS), too exposes a sharp increase between 2020 and 2021, possibly related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse, is often found to be the most frequently occurring type of abuse, irrespective of the child's gender, albeit respondents often experience various forms of abuse (CPS data; Marchand-Agius, 2022).

Moreover, as concerning as these figures might be, the phenomenon of child abuse is often found in literature and across participating professionals, as still often being under-reported, meaning that the true picture might be even more critical than what we are currently aware of.

Through a mixed research design, comprising a series of interviews with professionals, a nationally representative questionnaire and a focus group with children themselves, this study sought to bring insight on the complexities of the phenomenon of child abuse and its effects on Maltese society. This with the aim of understanding and thereby seeking to confront any lacunae within this particular context in order to promoting effective and accessible channels of support and prevention. These are a few of the findings exposed by this study:

- Participating adults who had experienced abuse in their childhood, exposed realities of abuse often involving a combination of different types of abuse, with physical, emotional and sexual abuse observed to be the combination experienced most frequently. It goes without saying that all types of abuse pose trauma and long-lasting

effects on the lives of children and later in life as adults, however multi-type child abuse creates an even greater risk of long-term trauma (Mangion & Buttigieg, 2014).

- Mothers and fathers were found to be the most commonly reported perpetrators in the case of physical and emotional abuse, followed by siblings, and other relatives. Educators were the third most commonly reported group of perpetrators for physical abuse.
- On the other hand, when it comes to child sexual abuse, strangers, other relatives and partners, with the latter suggesting a stronger prevalence in adolescence, were the most commonly mentioned perpetrators. These findings are sadly often also reflected in literature (e.g., Hassan et al, 2015).
- Notwithstanding the considerable impact of child abuse, reporting and seeking support by those experiencing it is often problematic. Amongst participants, only 27% reported seeking support for the child abuse experienced, with 30% of those seeking support admitting to not finding the support received to be helpful.
- Nevertheless, respondents highlighted that they wished they were supported to stop the abuse and take action, that they were understood and listened to, and that they would have received guidance when they needed it most.
- Amongst others, the need for social workers and social services to be more present was pointed out, as well as the need for additional support in schools in order to be able to speak out and seek support.
- Finally, the need for more serious legal consequences for abusers and more protection by police was highlighted, pointing out that those reporting abuse should be protected and that their reports should be immediately addressed.

Discussions with local professionals working with perpetrators of child abuse shed some light on the nature and volume of clients that these encounter in their professional capacity. These discussions also brought about valuable insight on improvements that can ameliorate the current service provision:

- Overall, professionals noted that only a few magistrates mandate a treatment programme or therapy as part of a perpetrator's rehabilitation, thus failing to give support and an adequate chance of rehabilitation.
- A lacuna in the provision of a structured treatment programme or protocol at a national level was also observed, together with a significant lack of coordination across services for perpetrators.



- Other aspects of the current landscape of services highlighted by participants were shortcomings in the professional monitoring of perpetrators' progress throughout their sentence unless this is specifically assigned by court, as well as the need for stricter inclusion of perpetrators on the POMA register and a wider application of it by organisations that employ people who will come in contact with children.

The voices of child participants were also listened to as part of this research study through a focus group. In particular, children were invited to share their views and experiences about the use of the internet. The views of professionals regarding this topic were also collated through a series of interviews:

- Not surprisingly, all the child participants expressed they access the online world daily and from most locations through the use of a multitude of devices, most frequently a mobile phone.
- Professional participants expressed how children online tend to engage in behaviours they would not otherwise perform in the physical world as a result of the sense of invisibility and anonymity created by the screen. While acknowledging the positive aspects of online opportunities for young people therefore, they expressed concern over the possible shedding of inhibitions and over-exposure that these may be susceptible to.
- Cyberbullying for instance, was observed to be the most predominant issue encountered by local children online across professional participants as well as child participants.
- Behaviours such as the use of offensive or hurtful language were in fact brought up by both groups, as was the incidence of exposure to unsuitable content, with findings suggesting that the occurrence of these online issues might be more frequent amongst children than adults actually think they are.
- In this instance too, child participants highlighted the importance of prompt action when abuse is reported.
- The group of children and professional participants alike both highlighted the importance of parents dedicating quality time to their children. Criticising the use of parental controls for internet access as something that, according to the group of children, most parents were not familiar enough with to use adequately, the general consensus amongst the group shifted the onus of online safety to the development of good quality relationships with children rather than the manual use of technology to monitor their online usage.

The findings from this research study shed light on possible improvements that can ameliorate the current scenario when it comes to safeguarding children. The study in fact concludes with a list of recommendations that address this. These include, amongst others, recommendations for policy, such as improved identification of the factors that increase vulnerability to child abuse and neglect within our communities, realistically and effectively identifying barriers to seeking help across services, collaborative and coordinated multi-agency response to child abuse and neglect, the application of a child-centred approach in all settings involving children and young people, training in a trauma-informed approach for persons working with children and young persons, practical parenting programmes for vulnerable mothers of pre-school children and those attending early years education, and education through non-blaming and non-shaming media campaigns aimed at parents and carers with vulnerability factors for abusive behaviour. Recommendations for further research are also laid out, such as enrich findings from the current study with views obtained directly from perpetrators of child abuse themselves, research with mothers and fathers who emotionally abuse their children and who are at risk of doing so in order to investigate and prevent the intergenerational transmission of this type of child abuse, research on the experience of shame in situations of abuse and how this construct impinges on help-seeking behaviour and prognosis, and further quantitative investigation on the views of the Maltese population on child abuse and neglect and how these opinions and perceptions influence the reporting of child abuse and intervention. Ultimately, timely and effective action and assistance to those persons who have experienced abuse and neglect is what is needed above all.

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## 1. Introduction

*"The true character of a society is revealed in how it treats its children".*

(Nelson Mandela)

The phenomenon of child abuse can manifest itself in various forms. Ultimately, all of these involve the maltreatment of minors and often carry complex origins and profound consequences. Emotional abuse for instance, involves patterns of psychological maltreatment, such as verbal abuse, recurring criticism, bullying or manipulation (Gavin, 2011); physical forms of abuse involve maltreatment that includes direct physical force (Christian & Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2015); sexual abuse involves different forms of sexually abusive behaviour directed at children, such as assault, rape, or incest (Murray et al., 2014); neglect, be it physical or emotional, refers to children whose caregiver/s fail to provide adequate care towards their basic needs, including nutrition, hygiene, shelter, education and medical care (Mulder et al., 2018). On the other hand, more recently birthed forms of child abuse involve the transfer of similar and novel forms of abuse taking place online, such as cyberbullying, which involves deliberate bullying through electronic means, such as e-mail and instant messages (David & Schmidt, 2016). All of these, and other forms of abuse on children, carry the severe risk of physical, emotional and mental health consequences that can extend into adulthood (e.g., Dias et al., 2014; Duong & Bradshaw, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2015; Kimber et al., 2017). It will come as no surprise that such abuse also occurs to children living in the Maltese Islands.

Outlining the reasons for which child abuse occurs is a topic often addressed amongst researchers (e.g., Santhosh, 2016; Thomas et al., 2013) although definite conclusions are seldom reached due to the complexity of the issue. Abundant researchers for instance, have sought to identify risk factors and vulnerability to perpetration (e.g., Kåven et al., 2019). Across research, perpetrators of child abuse are often found to be a heterogeneous group (Farmer et al., 2016), although common characteristics are nevertheless observed. The larger part of perpetrators, for instance, are frequently found to be of male gender (Dube et al., 2005; Snyder, 2000) and in several cases, hold a previously established relationship of trust with the child and their family (Craven et al., 2006; Snyder, 2000). In the case of child sexual abuse within families, perpetrators are most often found to be the biological father, followed by siblings (Koçtürk &

Yüksel, 2019), with other researchers adding that these perpetrators are at times also children or adolescents themselves (Malvaso et al., 2019). On small, yet substantial occasions, perpetrators of child sexual abuse are also observed to be females (Gerke et al., 2021). Literature in fact, reveals that females, including mothers, can also be perpetrators in cases of child maltreatment even beyond child sexual abuse (Brown & Kloess, 2020; Grayston and De Luca, 1999; McLeod, 2015; Williams & Bieri, 2015; Yampolskaya et al., 2009), although research specifically addressing this area is still limited. Researchers such as Wiehe (2003), observed that perpetrators of child abuse may overall be more self-centred and narcissistic, and may present with lower levels of self-confidence, impulse control, and empathy.

The long-term consequences of different forms of abuse in childhood can be varied and in themselves, may at times also contribute to what some refer to as a “cycle of violence” (Underwood, 2015). Associations between child sexual abuse and increased abusive behaviour in adulthood have often been reported in research (Briere & Elliott, 2003; Craissati et al., 2002). Jespersen et al. (2009) for instance, reported that perpetrators of sexual abuse on children were more likely than non-sex offenders to have been victims of sexual abuse in childhood themselves. Researchers in fact, often discuss the ‘sexually abused-sexual abuser hypothesis’, which proposes that those persons, especially males, who experience sexual abuse in their childhood are at increased risk of engaging in sexually abusive behaviour in their later years (Glasser et al., 2001; Ogloff et al., 2012), suggesting that sexual offenders “may be among those most in need of trauma-informed models of treatment” (Levenson & Socia, 2016, p. 1883), although this hypothesis is also at times questioned by some researchers (Lambie & Johnston, 2016; Leach et al., 2016).

In a similar stance, some researchers suggest that abusive and neglectful parenting may pose an increased risk for child maltreatment in later years, a theory referred to as the ‘intergenerational transmission hypothesis’ (Bartlett et al., 2017). Others however contend that this is not necessarily the case (St-Laurent et al., 2019) and that protective factors such as access to social support and resilience can reduce this risk for consequent infant maltreatment (Dym Bartlett & Eastbrooks, 2015). Evidently, the intricate nature of child abuse means that several factors come into play when attempting to understand its elaborate occurrence. Previous experiences of maltreatment, socioeconomic status, levels of education (Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019), personality traits (Wiehe, 2003), and a series of other factors against a backdrop of psychological, developmental, and circumstantial dynamics (Farmer et al., 2016) juxtapose when it comes to understanding the complexities of this concerning phenomenon.



The abuse of children, be it physical, emotional, sexual or of any other form, is amongst the foremost concerns across European nations and countries worldwide, including Malta. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020; and, Hillis et al., 2016), on an international scale, a child out of every two is subjected to some form of abuse every year, with world-wide statistics also noting an increase in rates of intra-family violence and online abuse linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures (Petrowski et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers often report that a number of incidents of child abuse go unreported, suggesting that figures could be even higher than those recorded (Finkelhor, 2009; Lippert et al., 2009). In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defined child abuse as a violation of a child's human rights. Consequently, it brought forward the responsibility and commitment of nations to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child" (p. 5). Meanwhile, the United Nation (UN)'s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), also specifically addresses child abuse in its Target 16.2 where it sets to "end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children" (p. 25).

In addition to the immediate impact that child abuse poses on the child concerned, its long-term consequences are well documented amongst researchers (e.g., Hébert et al., 2017; Meinck et al., 2016; Normal et al., 2012; Tejada & Linder, 2018; Yüksela & Koçtürkb, 2020). In 1993, the Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect claimed that "the long-term consequences of child maltreatment appear to be more damaging to victims and their families, and more costly for society, than the immediate or acute injuries themselves" (p. 39). These potentially profound consequences are often found in research to include to pervasive mental health concerns such as anxiety disorders, behavioural disorders, depression, substance misuse, harm to self, and post-traumatic stress disorder, amongst others (Afifi, 2012, Greenfield et al., 2011). Since then, recent decades have seen expanding public awareness campaigns accompanied by legislative structures aimed at addressing the safeguarding of the rights of children. These efforts to address the maltreatment of children have brought about an increasing momentum towards keeping our children safe. In parallel, research has also brought valuable knowledge concerning the confronting of the phenomenon of child abuse. This knowledge base, of course, is far from complete however it lays the foundations for mitigation and intervention approaches that can aid towards this cause, providing an opportunity to address, and ideally prevent its occurrence. Ultimately of course, it is not one

isolated trigger that unleashes the incidence of child abuse within a child's network. And there is equally not one Intervention strategy that will alleviate or resolve its dynamics.

In 2014, Dias et al. reported that the knowledge surrounding the incidence and impact of child abuse across South European countries was still limited. In parallel, Puras (2011) highlighted that notwithstanding the efforts emerging across several European nations, serious advancements were still necessary in order for effective preventative strategies to be developed. Expanding our knowledge surrounding experiences of child maltreatment can therefore continue to enrich our understanding and guide towards the development of appropriate services to cater for those facing these challenging situations and to improve prevention. In this way, this research seeks to develop our understanding of the factors at play when a person is subjected to experiences of child abuse, while also looking into novel threats that children are being exposed to such as online abuse.

This research study reviews aspects of child abuse such as the value of awareness and information in mitigating its occurrence, it seeks to bring insight on the nature and incidence of these experiences by listening directly to the voices of those concerned, and it examines the role of parental and caregiver knowledge, together with a review of the successes and spaces for improvement of intervention strategies applied. Towards this aim, the views of persons who experienced abuse in their childhood are presented in the coming chapters. Equally, the perspectives of professionals regarding interventions with perpetrators of child abuse as well as regarding children's experiences online will also be examined. In addition to these, the findings emerging from a focus group carried out directly with children as key stakeholders in this discussion, will also be brought to light. Bringing further insight about the phenomenon of child abuse in the local scenario through this research approach, this research finally seeks to propose recommendations for improvement in terms of protective factors, and support services to those involved in these experiences.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Defining Child Abuse

*Every child has the right to live free from violence, exploitation and abuse.*

(UNICEF, n.d.a [online])

Abuse is defined by UNICEF (2016 [online]) as “interpersonal violence”, and is considered to be any type of behaviour designed to control another human being through “fear, humiliation, or verbal or physical assaults” (Gavin, 2011, pp. 504).

Abuse, or violence, against children takes different forms. According to UNICEF (n.d.d), most abuse takes place hidden from the public eye, and thus, such abuse is often difficult to verify and particularly harmful, often leaving abusers, or perpetrators, free to perform repeated acts of abuse on the child. Abuse happens to children of all genders and ages, in various settings at different levels of society (UNICEF, n.d.d).

According to The World Health Organisation, child abuse or maltreatment includes abuse or neglect of any person below the age of 18 years, involving the maltreatment through physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect, and includes, all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, child sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power” (2017a [online])

### 2.2. Types of Abuse

For the scope of this report, the following categories will be used to classify child abuse. This section will define the five most commonly experienced types of child abuse, together with a sixth type, the multi-type form of child abuse, the impacts caused on the child in the short and long term and some further information to help understand each type of abuse.

The types of child abuse that will be considered in this report are:

- Physical Abuse;
- Emotional Abuse;
- Neglect;
- Child Sexual Abuse (CSA);
- Online Abuse;
- Multi-Type Child Abuse.

### 2.2.1. Physical Abuse

*Physical abuse arises when a child is subjected to physical injury involving non-accidental intent and unreasonable force.*

(Attard Montalto and Mangion, 2007, pp. 8)

Physical abuse happens when the child is deliberately harmed and includes scratches, bruises, cuts, bites, burns or broken bones, swelling, vomiting, results of shaking, as well as immersion traumas, with the latter often being blamed upon a sibling (Attard Montalto and Mangion, 2007, Department of Education, UK, 2018, Dias et al, 2015, Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020 and Safeguarding Commission, 2019). Physical abuse also includes corporal punishment, which is said to include spanking, spanking with an object as well as slapping, physical force resulting in harm caused to a child, or the possibility of the child being harmed (Zolotor et al, 2008).

According to UNICEF (2016), around 6 in 10 children between the ages of 2 and 14 years, out of a figure of almost 1 billion children worldwide, are reported as being physically abused by their caregivers regularly whilst 1 in 4 adults worldwide reported experiencing some type of physical abuse as children (WHO, 2017b). UNICEF (2016) also notes that 17% of children in 58 countries worldwide who experience physical abuse often are also subjected to psychological, or emotional, abuse.

Possibly even more worrying is that according to UNICEF, approximately 3 in 10 adults worldwide believe that physical punishment is necessary as a tool to raise children, not considering this as a form of child abuse (2016). According to Zolotor et al (2008), a number of experts recommend corporal punishment to discipline children to solicit immediate compliance, albeit this being illegal in many countries. This is of course, of grave concern and, as the authors themselves note, corporal punishment has unintended consequences, which includes moral internalisation and later on aggression, possible delinquent and antisocial behaviour as well as a loss in the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child. Research shows that spanking used to discipline a child, while being a form of abuse in itself, often escalates in other forms of abuse and that the link between hitting a child with an object and abuse is very strong (Zolotor et al, 2008).

Although anyone may be at risk of physical abuse, those children who live in situations where they are at risk of poverty, live in poor housing, live in families where domestic abuse happens or who experience other forms of abuse or neglect tend to be at a higher risk. Moreover, babies and children with disabilities tend to be more likely to become victims of physical abuse, particularly since babies and children with a disability might not be able to easily express their experiences (NSPCC, n.d.e).

Ultimately, physical abuse may manifest in the child as anxiety, behavioural problems, including aggressiveness, social inhibition, delinquency, eating disorders and a number of mental health conditions. Furthermore, physical abuse also includes shaking a baby or infant, which may ultimately result in fractures and internal injuries, the possibility of long-term disability, learning problems, possible seizures or problems with speech or eventual blindness, brain damage, and ultimately the possibility of death (Department of Education, UK, 2018, Dias et al, 2015 and Zolotor et al, 2008). Norman et al (2012) highlight that the most common health related issues for victims of physical abuse are depressive symptoms and anxiety, eating disorders, behavioural conduct issues, suicidal attempts, substance abuse and sexually risky behaviour.

Furthermore, instances of NAI (Non-Accidental Injury), or the potential of such, are examined thoroughly by medical doctors, particularly when injuries reported by a child are severe, multiple, reflect unreasonable force, are incompatible with the presenting scenarios, and when

the medical professional understands that reporting or treatment seeking by the adult responsible for the care of the child is delayed. NAIs may include injuries such as burns, injuries in unusual positions, fractures and “intra-cerebral and retinal ‘shaking’ haemorrhages” (Attard Montalto and Mangion, 2007, pp. 7). Medical examination often proves to be crucial not only to physically treat the child, but also, to uncover abuse and, if abuse is proved, for court purposes.

### 2.2.2 Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is defined by the UK Department of Education as anything that,

*May involve conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may include not giving the child opportunities to express their views, deliberately silencing them or belittling them (‘making fun’ of what they say or how they communicate).*

(Department of Education, UK, 2018, pp. 107)

Emotional abuse involves regular emotional ill-treatment which ultimately results in negative effects on the emotional state and the development of the child (Dias et al, 2015). Emotional abuse is often also referred to as psychological abuse, and includes humiliation, constant criticism, isolation, intimidation, manipulation and ignoring the needs of the child (Gavin, 2011). This type of abuse also includes constant shouting at children, making fun of them, or blaming and scapegoating the child. Emotional abuse also includes ignoring the children, or being physically and emotionally absent, not allowing them to have friends and/or ongoing manipulation of the child. Child emotional abuse, together with other forms of abuse and neglect, are among the most common forms of abuse perpetrated against children worldwide (Kimber et al, 2017).

Childhood and early adolescence are considered to be the period where the greatest development of personal control happens, when children and adolescents should feel empowered to influence the events happening in their life. Thus, emotional abuse alters, or halts, such development and creates a cycle for greater susceptibility to negative experiences later in life, since emotional abuse puts the child, in the course of all their lifetime, at an

emotional disadvantage, and particularly prone to go through Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Gavin, 2011). Children who have experienced emotional abuse, may fail to thrive or suffer from developmental delay.

Emotional abuse often happens alongside physical abuse; directly or indirectly, including leaving the child with unwashed clothes or soiled nappies, resulting in rashes and infections, and a nutritional deficiency state resulting from poor nutrition (Attard and Montalto, 2017). Emotional abuse may also cause behavioural problems, such as children becoming clingy, being bullied by peers, lack confidence or self-assurance or have difficulty controlling their emotions, thus affecting the behavioural, cognitive, affective, social and physiological functioning of a child (Kimber et al, 2017; Gavin, 2011). Babies and toddlers in particular may show excessive affection and clinginess towards people whom they might not know too well, seeking emotional comfort in strangers, whereas older children may use inappropriate language, lack social skills and have almost no friends as a result of experiencing emotional abuse (NSPCC, n.d.b).

Other emotional issues for children who have experienced emotional abuse include finding it difficult to express or control emotions, eating disorders, mental health problems, and psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance and alcohol abuse, suicidal attempts and sexually risky behaviour (Safeguarding Commission, 2019; Kimber et al, 2017; Norman et al, 2012; Gavin, 2011). Children who have experienced emotional abuse often report psychological difficulties and poor health outcomes later in life including a negative perception of the self, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity and the possibility of depression (Dias et al, 2015).

Research carried out by Shapero et al (2014) shows from emotional abuse in childhood, more so than physical or child sexual abuse, results in a greater risk depressive symptoms and major depression in the face of stressful events in childhood and later life. Shapero et al (2014) also found that a number of adults seeking help for major depression often revealed some form of abuse in their childhood, with emotional abuse being the most prevalent type of abuse, followed by physical abuse. Their research demonstrates that certain life experiences which did not trigger a depressive state when experienced, are likely to trigger such a state later in life, with the correlation between stress and depression being very likely when adversity, such as emotional abuse, was present in childhood.

Emotional abuse is often carried out by the primary caregiver, who is entrusted with the love and nurturing of the child, and which is the opposite of the natural process of secure attachment as referred to by Bowlby's Attachment Theory. John Bowlby (1969) analysed the strength of the relationship between a mother and her child, a bond which is supposedly created before the child is born, and the resulting sense of attachment between the mother and her child. He postulates that, when a lack of secure attachment exists, such as in situations of abuse by the primary caregiver, this causes a major shock to the child, which later often results in a depressive state when the child experiences stress in later life (Bowlby, 1969 and cited by Shapero et al, 2014).

### 2.2.3. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

*Child Sexual Abuse happens when children are forced, persuaded or threatened to take part in sexual activities.*

(Safeguarding Commission, 2019, pp. 12)

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) refers to forcing or enticing a person under the age of 18 years to take part in sexual activities. CSA does not necessarily involve a high level of violence and may involve a child who is either aware or not aware of what is happening, that is with the act being considered as a form of abuse (Department of Education, UK, 2018).

CSA may include the child being directly forced to partake in any kind of sexual activity, or being forced to watch sexual content and material, where a child may not necessarily be aware that what they are experiencing is a form of abuse (Department of Education, UK, 2018).

Child sexual abuse may happen everywhere and across different levels of society. CSA is perpetrated mostly by those people who children trust the most. In most cases, CSA involves a power difference and a difference in intellectual capacity or maturity between the victim of the abuse and the perpetrator. In fact, CSA also happens by other people and acquaintances who first manage to obtain the child's trust in a strategic manner, through grooming and manipulation for example, and then use the child's vulnerability to sexually abuse them. Often,



children who are subjected to child sexual abuse also experience other forms of abuse (Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020; Attard and Montalto, 2007; NSPCC, n.d.f; UNICEF, n.d.c).

CSA happens to children of all genders and ages. In the case of the victims of child sexual abuse being younger children, such as children of pre-school age, such cases of child sexual abuse are even more difficult to disclose since these children may be developmentally unable to express themselves and understand these actions are a type of abuse from their perpetrators (Yüksel & Koçtürk, 2020).

Whilst all children of all genders are vulnerable to CSA, girls tend to be particularly at risk, with around 120 million girls worldwide, approximately 1 in every 10 girls, having been forced to have sexual intercourse or partake in sexual acts (WHO 2020; WHO, 2017; UNICEF, 2014). In fact, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) reports that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men have reported to have experienced child sexual abuse when they were a child. Furthermore, according to the Optimus Study, carried out in Switzerland in 2009, girls had been victims of CSA more than boys (22% compared to 8%) in their lifetime with 7% of girls interviewed, compared to 1% of boys, having experienced the most invasive form of child sexual abuse, that is, attempted or completed penetration (UNICEF, 2017; UNICEF, 2014).

As a result of child sexual abuse, children experiencing CSA may reflect inappropriate sexualised or sexually explicit behaviour, particularly inappropriate when considering the child's age and regression in their school work. Children who are sexually abused may be frightened of being alone, develop changes in their mood, change their eating habits, wet their beds even at an older age or may attempt to self-harm. Furthermore, signs of CSA may also include feelings of shame or guilt, anxiety and depression, and sleep disturbances. Children experiencing CSA may also risk contracting sexually transmitted diseases and, in the case of girls, may become pregnant (Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020; Dias et al 2015; NSPCC, n.d.f). Other long-term effects of child sexual abuse include a higher risk of further abuse in adult life, this being both sexual and in other forms (Fater & Mullaney, 2000 cited by Thomas et al, 2012).

#### 2.2.4. Neglect

Childhood neglect refers to:

*the failure to provide adequate care to fulfil the child's basic needs, such as adequate nutrition, hygiene, shelter and safety, education, medical care, and emotional needs.*

(Dias et al, 2015, pp. 768)

Neglect happens when there is a persistent failure to meet with the needs of a child, these being their basic physical and/or psychological needs (Department of Education, UK, 2018). Child neglect arises as a result of a number of risk factors happening in the child's rearing environment (Mulder et al, 2018) and unlike other forms of abuse, where acts are committed against the child, neglect mostly refers to the actual omission of acting towards the child to allow for a healthy development (Mennen et al, 2010).

There are different types of neglect that children may be subjected to. These include (i) physical neglect, which involves failure to provide a child with basic needs required, including food, ensuring the child is clean, supervised, has adequate shelter and medical treatment. Another type of neglect is (ii) educational neglect, which refers to not providing children with appropriate education opportunities or supporting the child's education. Emotional neglect (iii), entails the failure to provide the child with the nurture, attention, emotional care and stimulation needed for healthy development, whereas (iv) medical neglect happens where appropriate health care is not given to the child, either at all or in a timely way (Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020; Department of Education, UK, 2018; Stoltenborgh et al, 2013; NSPCC, n.d.c).

Signs of neglect are often expressed through poor appearance and lack of hygiene, which often involves looking or smelling dirty, being hungry or having inappropriate clothing. Neglect is also often reflected through various health and development problems including medical or dental issues, regular sickness and poor language and social skills, often involving a child feeling and looking tired. Neglect may also involve home and family issues which may include

being left alone for a long time or being forced to take on the role of the carer for other family members, sometimes also termed parentification (NSPCC, n.d.c).

Symptoms of neglect in children include a change in behaviour, which may involve becoming clingy or excessive aggression, finding it hard to concentrate and being withdrawn from their surrounding environment. Ultimately this may result in developmental difficulties, difficulty in maintaining other relationships, and a greater chance of mental health illness (NSPCC, n.d.c). Long term health conditions associated with neglected children include depressive symptoms and anxiety, suicidal attempts, drug use and/or sexually risky behaviour as well somatisation, paranoia, and hostility (Dias et al, 2015; Stoltenborgh et al, 2013; Norman et al, 2012).

Nonetheless, neglect is a type of child abuse which in itself seems to be often overlooked in scientific research (Mulder et al, 2018; Stoltenborgh et al, 2013). From the literature available, it is evident that most risks in relation to children experiencing neglect arise from the parent or guardian experiencing or having experienced some type of trauma or abuse themselves, or parents or guardians who are or have experienced mental and psychiatric issues (Mulder et al, 2018). The same research carried out by Mulder et al (2018) highlights that there is no particular difference between neglect being committed by the mother or father, or the persons emulating who the mother or father figure in the life of the child, with the effect on the child being similar no matter who carries out the neglect.

#### 2.2.5. Online Abuse

Online abuse is defined as,

*Any type of abuse that happens on the internet. It can happen across any device that's connected to the web, like computers, tablets and mobile phones.*

(NSPCC, n.d.d [online])

Online abuse may happen on any device and any platform including social media, online chats and gaming, emails and live streaming. Whilst we tend to associate online abuse with online

child sexual abuse, online abuse may involve online bullying, cyberbullying, which refers to a more relational type of online bullying, inter-child abuse, emotional abuse, grooming, sexting as well as child sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation (Davis and Schmidt, 2012; NSPCC, n.d.d).

Children use the Internet for different needs, including searching for information and studying or entertainment. Nonetheless, the most widespread use of the Internet amongst children is for socialising (Navarro et al 2013; Lwin et al, 2012). Research shows that communicating with existing friends online reinforces relationships. Yet the use of social media also poses a greater risk in terms of possible online abuse, particularly when children communicate with both people they know on an online platform or with strangers (Navarro et al, 2013). Moreover, children also tend to be more willing to disclose personal information such as their personal name, the name of their school, home address, and phone number through various online applications (Lwin et al, 2012). Online sexual offenders in fact often access children in relative anonymity and secrecy (European Commission, 2022).

According to UNICEF (2022), a child goes on the Internet for the first time every half a second. Whilst access to the Internet has a number of positive aspects, easy and uncontrolled access to the Internet also exposes a child to a number of risks, including cyberbullying, access to violent content and sexual exploitation and abuse. The WHO (2021) reports that 70% of young people have access to the Internet, whilst 800 million children worldwide have access to social media. In a study cited by Davis and Schmidt (2016), carried out in the United States in 2015, American teenagers aged between 13 to 18 years spent an average of nine hours online daily for recreational purposes, whereas those aged between eight to 12 years spent an average of six hours online daily. Furthermore, the time children spend online has doubled from 2010 to 2020 with children using smartphones regularly and visiting social media platforms daily or more.

Nonetheless, the WHO (2021) also reports that 1 out of 9 teenagers in Europe and North America have received unwanted sexual advances. Research from UNICEF (2022) also states that around 80% of children in 25 countries report feeling in danger of possible sexual exploitation or abuse when online. Whilst control by a responsible adult when using the Internet is solicited, a trusted adult may actually solicit the access of sexual or violent content by the child. Research also shows that perpetrators may connect with around 200 youths, at different stages of the grooming process, at the same time, with girls being those at a higher

risk of online grooming, particularly girls between the age of 17-18 years (UNICEF, 2014). At such a vulnerable age, where the child or adolescent is still developing, these children are particularly at risk in the unknown and often unsafe online world, particularly on social media, and especially if there is no adult monitoring (Davis and Schmidt, 2012). Overall, children are often unable to make a distinction between strangers and online friends, and thus are more at risk of online abuse. This indicates the need to advocate and inform children more about the possible risks which they might encounter online, as well as making them more aware about what constitutes online abuse.

Furthermore, the European Commission (2021) reports that in 2020, 33% of girls and 20% of boys encountered disturbing online content on a monthly basis, whilst another study, carried out in the United States in 2013, showed that at the time, girls were more than twice as likely to report having been victims of cyberbullying online abuse when compared to boys (21% and 9% respectively) (UNICEF, 2017; UNICEF, 2014).

The lack of monitoring by parents and guardians may pose danger to children who can communicate with anyone without control. The use of monitoring software, setting up of rules and boundaries with the children's parents or guardians in terms of the time spent online, the applications which may be used and the type of personal information which may be shared are all aspects which can help diminish the possibility of online abuse (Navarro et al, 2013).

As a result of experiencing online abuse, children may spend a lot more, or a lot less time, online, seem distant, upset or angry after using their technological devices, be secretive about who they were engaging with or doing online and/or have a lot of new contacts on their technological devices (Davis and Schmidt, 2012 and NSPCC, n.d.d). thus, online child abuse may result in the child being subjected to social isolation and abusive behaviour, and may generate mental illnesses (UNICEF, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further enhanced the possibility of online child abuse, given that children were spending more time online, often unsupervised, as they went through weeks of lockdown (UNICEF, 2022). One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is the shift to a greater focus and reliance on technology for work practices and education. With certain

degrees of remote working and online learning becoming part of 'normal' everyday life, there is the need to put certain measures in place to reduce the possibility of online child abuse, highlighting the increased exposure of children to use of online devices and their increased chance of being based online (Babvey et al, 2021). With schooling going online and guardians often busy themselves working from home, children were often entrusted with technological devices to spend the long days at home, becoming more prone to online abuse during the pandemic. Furthermore, the number of images online that involve child sexual abuse doubled between 2017 and 2019 and further increased with the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2022; Babvey et al, 2021).

In their research, Babvey et al (2021) analysed data sourced from Twitter users in sixteen countries and information sourced from Reddit in one country. Their research shows that violence-related subreddits<sup>1</sup> were topics with the highest growth rate during the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst Twitter data showed a considerable increase in content with abuse during the lockdown restrictions, thus highlighting the risks to which children have been exposed to, and the risks to which children are exposed to, during the pandemic.

A number of initiatives and systems have been set up to protect children from various types of online abuse. The WeProtect Initiative was set up in 2014 by UNICEF to tackle online child sexual abuse on a global scale with support from national governments, technological companies, INTERPOL, agencies from the United Nations and civil society organisations as a blueprint to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse on a local level effectively (UNICEF, 2021). Moreover, the European Commission (2022) has also set up a strategy for Better Internet for Kids (BIK+) to ensure children are protected, empowered and respected when online. This strategy includes creating more awareness campaigns for children themselves on the use of the Internet, teaching teachers on how children should use the Internet, setting up a phone number for assistance with cyberbullying and supporting the reporting of illegal and harmful content by reporting to the appropriate platforms.

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<sup>1</sup> Subreddits are defined to be subsidiary threads or categories within the Reddit website. Subreddits allow users to focus on a particular topic in posting content which gets voted up or down according to relevance and user preference (Techopedia, 2022).

Locally, in Malta, a number of support and protection systems have also been set to help protect children from online as well as other types of abuse. These will be described in the section focussing on child abuse in Malta in a later section of this chapter.

#### 2.2.6. Multi-type of Abuse

Whilst this chapter has highlighted the main types of abuse, reference has been made to the fact that children experiencing abuse often report more than one type of abuse by the same perpetrators. The health issues associated with being subjected to more than one type of child abuse varies depending on the nature of the different type of abuses experienced, though mental health issues, drug and alcohol misuse, eating disorders and criminal behaviour are amongst the most prevalent type of effects experienced by victims of multi-type of child abuse (Mangion & Buttigieg, 2014). Whilst each type of abuse may have a number of consequences on the child, further abuses result in increased severity in terms of the effects including illnesses and risky behaviour.

Youths experiencing a combination of physical abuse, CSA and neglect are reported to be the most symptomatic with regard to lasting effects and severity of consequences. Long lasting effects include precocious sexual intercourse, risky sexual behaviour, increased chances of making excessive use of various legal and illegal substances, being more prone to depression and suicidal tendencies, being more hostile and experiencing more delinquent behaviour, than their counterparts who have not experienced abuse, with most of these effects and consequences happening or taking place during adolescence.

Ultimately, multi-type child abuse is linked to a greater trauma experienced by the young persons, having long-lasting effects and consequences which tends to be overlooked by authorities and which requires interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral and inter-agency approaches to help children who have experienced multi-type child abuse (Mangion & Buttigieg, 2014).

## 2.3. The Sociological and Psychological Aspects of Child Abuse

Child abuse usually happens in places where children should be mostly protected. These include children's own homes and family settings, schools, and in their own community. Most commonly, child abuse happens in spaces which are considered, or should be considered, safe by every child, perpetrated by those with whom the child assumes they should be safe with and who they believe care for them and thus constitutes a deep betrayal of trust (UNICEF, n.d.d). It is unsurprising therefore, that abuse can leave devastating short and long term effects on the child, both in the childhood years, and later, as an adult. Consequently, there is a need to further understand the lifelong consequences experienced by children who have been victims of abuse in childhood and the impact on society (Norman et al, 2012).

The overall consequences of child abuse have been reported to include difficulties in development, learning difficulties, physical and mental health issues as well as the possibility of substance misuse, aggressive and/or criminal behaviour and suicidal ideation (WHO, 2017b; Mangion & Buttigieg, 2014; UNICEF, 2014; Norman et al, 2012; UNICEF, n.d.d).

Maltreatment, or abuse by a main caregiver also leads to a higher risk of the child developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. A number of studies highlight that when the perpetrator is a parent, or guardian, the abused child has a higher risk of suffering from PTSD, more so if the child experiences emotional abuse by parents or guardians. The severity of emotional abuse being reported is often related to the most severe symptoms of PTSD symptoms and with emotional abuse carried out by parents being linked to the insufficient development of emotional regulation skills (Hoeboer et al, 2021 and Gavin, 2011).

As soon as a possible case of child abuse is identified, children who might need help and protection should be given, and deserve, high quality and effective support immediately, through a system that addresses the needs and interests of children and their families (Department of Education, UK, 2018). 'Early help', that is when help and support is provided immediately, includes an assessment of the risks of the child and the support needed, enabling the child to be supported in a professional way, through a structured support plan to ensure that the lifelong effects of such abuse are minimised (Department of Education, UK, 2018).



Fear and stigma and the surrounding culture are major components which allow for or hinder the reporting of child abuse (Norman et al, 2012). Moreover, child abuse may happen in all types of circumstances including in families with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and households where parents or guardians' different levels of education and income. Ultimately, child abuse happens in households with higher and lower levels of both education and income and thus with no distinction to the child's or their families' background (UNICEF, n.d.d). Nonetheless, research shows that child abuse tends to happen more in situations where parents or guardians experience substance abuse, have mental conditions, or where children live in conditions of poverty and domestic violence and in households where a parent or guardian has experienced child abuse themselves (Norman et al, 2012).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a statement of children's rights, regarded as the most widely-ratified international human rights treaty in history. This Convention is the basis for the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) work and includes all aspects of a child's life, notwithstanding a child's ethnicity, gender, religion, language, abilities or any other status. All the rights set out in the Convention are considered to be equally important and together ensure the wellbeing of children worldwide. Four Articles are widely considered to be "General Principles" of child protection, helping to interpret the other articles and playing an important role in ensuring that the rights for all children enshrined in the Convention are realised (UNICEF, n.d.b; UNICEF UK n.d.b).

According to the UNICEF website, the basic concept behind this convention is that,

*Children are not just objects who belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made, or adults in training. Rather, they are human beings and individuals with their own rights.*

(UNICEF, n.d.b [online]).

Historically, children have been regarded subservient to adults, as an "expendable pawn in the struggle for existence" (Bossard, 2007, pp. 243), when infanticide, abandonment and selling of children were considered normal and accepted in most societies. More recently children have been regarded as a "modifiable object" (Bossard, 2007, pp. 244) where the

education the child receives is considered as training to change the child and their society into what their educators think they should become, with their personalities thus being reconstructed. Beyond these beliefs, Bossard in his 1944 seminal article “Children Are Human Beings” (published in 2007, pp. 245) notes that,

*Children should be conceived of as human beings and respected as such: not to be exploited, not to be conditioned and controlled, not to be manipulated en masse, just to be left to be, to grow, to learn, to think, to feel, to see, to live.*

This thinking supports UNICEF’s basic understanding behind the UNCRC, whereby the child is considered as a human being in their own right, with their own desires, needs and wants, unique in their own being, who should be allowed to express themselves and be protected.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child makes specific reference to protecting children from violence, abuse and neglect, whereby it highlights to Governments to carry out all that is possible protect children from maltreatment by their parents or carers. The Convention also refers to both protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and the recovery process of children in terms of recovery from trauma and reintegration in society. The three articles in the Convention which mention the protection of children from child abuse or the consequences of abuse, are,

*Article 19 (protection from violence, abuse and neglect) Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.*

*Article 34 (sexual exploitation) Governments must protect children from all forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation.*

*Article 39 (recovery from trauma and reintegration) Children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture or who are victims of war must receive special support to help them recover their health, dignity, self-respect and social life.*

(UNICEF UK, n.d.a [online])

Similarly, the European Union (EU) Strategy on the Rights of the Child states that children should have access to information in a child-friendly way, to allow them to know what their rights are. This strategy includes in particular thematic area three, which focuses on “Combating violence against children and ensuring child protection”. The strategy states that,

*Children can be victims, witnesses, as well as perpetrators of violence, starting from their own homes, in school, in leisure and recreational activities, in the justice system, offline as well as online.*

(European Commission n.d. [online])

Child maltreatment and particularly the victims of child abuse deserve attention, help and support, whereby increased investment in preventive and treatment strategies as well as the identification of programmes to reduce child abuse are necessary (Norman et al, 2012). The UNCRC and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child are tools that try to ensure the protection of the rights of children against all forms of abuse. The protection of the rights of a child is crucial, yet that can only happen if the child has access to justice through a system which is child-friendly, including ensuring that the child has easy and supported access to make their voice heard and has access to a child-sensitive and child-focused judicial system.

## 2.4. Child Abuse in Malta

For a long time, children were not given the right to make their voice heard, even if they were direct victims of abuse of any other type of crime. Over time, societies and countries, including the Maltese Islands, came to the realisation and understanding, that whilst children are vulnerable and their wellbeing needs to be protected, they also have a right to make their voice heard and, in the specific case of abuse, to tell their story. Such realisation and acknowledgement move towards protecting the rights of a child and a more child-centred system, with a child-friendly justice system needing to be based on the understanding and recognition that children have rights (Bonett, 2020),

*Namely the right to be heard, the right to privacy and family life and the right to a fair trial.*

(Bonett, 2020, pp. 25)

The following section highlights the state of child protection in Malta including the Child Protection Act, the role of the Child Protection Directorate, the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA), the Safeguarding Commission and the Child Safety Services.

#### 2.4.1. The Child Protection Act and the Child Protection Directorate

The Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act aims to “safeguard, protect and give priority to the best interest” to the care of children and minors in the least possible time (Government of Malta, 2019, pp. 1). The Act looks at safeguarding minors (article 3), from “significant harm”, which for the purpose of the Act is defined so as to include,

*Abuse, neglect, harassment, ill treatment, exploitation, abandonment, exposure, trafficking, fear of violence and female genital mutilation.*

(Government of Malta, 2019, pp. 8)

The Child Protection Act included the setup of the Child Protection Directorate (CPD), within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS). The main role of the CPD is to protect minors at risk and investigate any possible harm or risk of harm being caused to a born or unborn child through possible cases of abuse or neglect (Marchand-Agius, 2022; Government of Malta, 2019).

The directorate includes a multi-disciplinary team to investigate and assess children and their families in understanding the situation and drawing up an emergency and long-term intervention plan, ultimately working with a zero-tolerance policy towards any kind of child abuse and neglect. The wellbeing of the child is central to this process and the main aim is to remove the children from any potentially dangerous situation. These cases are usually referred to the Directorate from various sources, including schools, the Police and other professionals, and through calls received from the National Supportline 179 (Foundation for Social Welfare Services, n.d.a). The National Supportline and other tools available locally to report child abuse will be described in a subsequent section of this chapter.

An addition to the Child Protection Act in 2021 highlights that any professional is required by law to report, under professional secrecy, any suspicion of child abuse happening, with the said professional being liable to imprisonment or fines should such professional fail to report a possible case of child abuse (Government of Malta, 2021). Subsequently 'Guidelines for Professionals' were formulated, aimed at supporting professionals in understanding and determining if there is the need for a child protection inquiry based on the available information, allowing them to make informed decisions and ensuring that no risks are taken with regards to the safeguarding of children (Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020).

#### 2.4.2. The Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA)

The Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA) was set up in 2012 "to provide for the registration of sexual offenders and other offenders who commit offences of serious violence" (Government of Malta, 2012, pp. 1). The POMA is a register which includes the names of people who have been convicted for sexual offences together with the relevant details associated with their respective cases. Besides people convicted of sexual offences, directly involving children, or adults, the POMA register was originally also aimed to include people convicted of other types of child abuse and other criminal offences involving children.

*A person is listed in the POMA register when the person,*

*(a) is convicted of a scheduled offence: Provided that the Court may, if it deems it appropriate, decide not to subject a person to the notification requirements if, in its opinion, the case so merits;*

*(b) is found not guilty of such an offence by reason of insanity;*

*(c) is convicted of an offence not listed in Schedule I<sup>2</sup> but the Court is of the opinion that the person convicted constitutes a threat or a danger to the education, care, custody, welfare or upbringing of minors and orders the registration of that person in the Register.*

(Government of Malta, 2012, pp. 4)

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 9, Criminal Code, including prostitution, sexual offences, harassment and sexual related charges, abduction, defilement and neglect on minors; Chapter 31, Medical and Kindred Professions Ordinance; Chapter 63, White Slave (Suppression) Ordinance; Chapter 101, Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (Government of Malta, 2012)

Thus, according to the law, it is at the discretion of the Magistrate or Judge to determine whether a person is inscribed or not within the POMA registry. Moreover, whilst the POMA Act refers to a number of laws under which if an offender is found guilty they may be inscribed in the POMA, including sexual offence and abuse and neglect, there is no reference to the same occurring if an offender is found guilty of physical or emotional abuse towards a child, thus, despite the considerable research on the subject, some of which has been referred to in previously in this report, there exists a marked discrepancy in the consideration of the different types of abuse within the POMA Act which necessitates attention and amendment to further protect the interests and safety of children from perpetrators.

Anyone registered under the POMA is not eligible for employment, or any other position in an institution, establishment or organisation which provides a service or activity which involves minors (Government of Malta, 2012; Government of Malta, 1854). As a result of the POMA, employers, particularly those with activities or services including education, care, custody, welfare, and upbringing, are requested to check whether a person whom they wish to employ is registered on the POMA (Safeguarding Commission, 2019; The Malta Independent, 2012).

#### 2.4.3. The Safeguarding Commission

*Safeguarding is not a box that needs to be ticked but is a mind-set that all Church personnel need to have.*

(Safeguarding Commission, 2018, pp. 2)

The Safeguarding Commission is an entity established by the Bishops of Malta and Gozo and the Religious Major Superiors in 2015, with the aim to create a positive and effective safeguarding culture, including the prevention as well as investigation in the Church of abuse, in order to ensure that children and vulnerable adults who participate in Church activities are safe from abusive acts. The Safeguarding Commission was set up as a result of a revision of the local policy by the Catholic Church at a national level following the ‘*Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*’ and POMA (Schembri, 2021; Safeguarding Commission, 2018 and 2015).

Amongst the tasks of the Safeguarding Commission (2015) are:

- Ensure that the care offered to victims of abuse is the main task of work carried out;
- Treat perpetrators with a sense of dignity, whilst offering help;
- Develop accessible and updated policy and procedures;
- Carry out risk assessments, particularly when allegations of abuse by Church members or personnel are received;
- Liaising with civil authorities, including the Police Force and Government organisations such as Aġenzija Appoġġ;
- Identify and disseminate best practice;
- Oversee and deliver safeguarding training; and,
- Provide advice on safeguarding matters.

Once the Safeguarding Commission receives a complaint regarding a potential abuse from a member of the Church or a person who is employed by the Church, information is gathered in order to produce a risk assessment report, to understand whether the person concerned poses a risk to the children or vulnerable adults and take measures to safeguard these children or adults should the person be deemed a risk. Nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of such an assessment to understand whether this person is guilty or innocent, as it is the duty of the Commission to inform the responsible authorities when a complaint is received involving children, while it seeks the adult's approval when the person is an adult (Safeguarding Commission, 2015).

The role of the Safeguarding Commission also includes training of personnel in Church entities and the vetting of the Church personnel by filing Court applications under the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA). Church personnel includes any consecrated person, members of apostolic life and people who are employed or volunteer and work within the different institutions of the Church (Safeguarding Commission, 2019 and 2018).

As part of its role in investigating complaints connected to members of the Church, in 2018, the Safeguarding Commission in Malta received 19 allegations involving minors and 10 allegations involving vulnerable adults, whereas in 2019, the Commission received 16 new allegations involving minors and eight allegations involving vulnerable adults. In 2018, the Commission

finalised 17 assessments involving minors, six of which resulted to be substantiated cases and four of which were referred to the Police. In 2019, the Safeguarding Commission finalised eight assessments involving minors, and found two allegations involving minors to be substantiated, one case involved physical abuse whereas another case referred to child sexual abuse of a minor by a priest. The latter referred to an abuse which is said to have taken place 39 years before it was reported and the victim did not consent to proceed with reporting the case to the police (Safeguarding Commission, 2020, 2019 and 2018). The delay in reporting the abuse, and the lack of consenting to proceeding further with reporting such abuse to the Police underlines the sense of fear and trauma which victims of child abuse experience in the long term, together with a sense of fear of reporting even long after the abuse has taken place.

#### 2.4.4. Child Safety Services

Another service to protect children from child abuse in Malta is the Child Safety Services (CSS), a service within the Directorate for Educational Services which, “specialises in dealing with issues of child abuse” through the service of professionals who look at safeguarding and protecting children, including their health, development, survival and ultimately their dignity. The CSS works mainly on prevention of child abuse by offering information sessions on the different types of child abuse, detection and avoidance and the support services available with the education system and to school staff, parents and professionals working with children (K.P. Coleiro, personal communication, January 12, 2023; EduServices, 2017).

Amongst the work carried out by the CSS is also student tracing with reference to children who might need monitoring for possible cases of child abuse. During 2022, the CSS received 401 requests for student tracing. Furthermore, 173 referral cases of child abuse were received by the CSS, of which 16 cases were re-opened and 105 cases where closed (K.P. Coleiro, personal communication, January 12, 2023).



*Table 1: Child abuse case referrals received by the CSS in 2022*

<b>Type of abuse</b>	<b>Number of referrals</b>
Emotional	22
Neglect	28
Physical	39
Sexual	15
Emotional & Neglect	15
Emotional & Physical	34
Emotional & Sexual	5
Emotional, Neglect & Physical	4
Neglect & Physical	5
Neglect & Sexual	1
Emotional, Physical & Sexual	3
Emotional, Neglect & Sexual	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>

Source: K.P. Coleiro, personal communication, January 12, 2023

## 2.5. Data on Child Abuse in Malta

According to the Director for the Child Protection Services (CPS), Steve Libreri, the Child Protection Directorate (CPD) receives an average of 180 child abuse reports monthly, albeit 50% of cases reported do not require action (Libreri quoted by Balzan, 2021). Libreri notes that “child abuse very often happens secretly, in private, which doesn’t make it easy to detect. That is why we widened the scope of law” (Libreri quoted by Balzan, 2021 [online]). The law refers to the change in legislation whereby professionals working directly with children, or those who come in contact with children, are legally required to report cases of possible abuse. The change in legislation has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of cases being reported to the Directorate.

Data pertaining to criminal records where offences of child abuse could be identified for the period 2012 to 2022 from the Courts of Malta, as shown in Table 2. Data shows there was a sharp increase in figures as from 2015 with figures remaining similar until 2018, where another

sharp increase was registered. Figures returned to an approximate average, when considering data from 2015 onwards, in 2019, 2021 and 2022. A slight decrease was reported in terms of figures in 2020. This could be attributed to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which halted operations at the start of the pandemic. Nonetheless, this is a worrying figure when considering that data from the CPS, reported in the subsequent pages of this report shows an overall increase in cases reported to the CPS in both 2020 and 2021.

*Table 2: Criminal Records where offences of child abuse could be identified  
2012-2022*

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Criminal records</b>	22	18	20	61	52	43	76	45	34	52	40

Source: F. Calleja, personal communication, March 8, 2023

Data pertaining to people inscribed in the POMA registry was also sourced through publicly available data from the House of Representatives Parliamentary Questions website, as shown in Table 3. Data is cumulative since the POMA registry was enacted in 2012, with the first publicly available figures being in 2015. Since 2015 one person has been listed twice in the POMA registry for two different offences. As at 2017, there were 55 men, of whom one person is registered twice and one female listed in the POMA registry. No further information or breakdown is available since 2017 besides a total cumulative figure published almost regularly through Parliamentary Questions in the House of Representatives (Attard, 2022; Zammit Lewis, 2021 and 2020, Bonnici 2019, 2018 and 2015; Said, 2012).

*Table 3: POMA Records Cumulative Figures 2012-2022*

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
POMA Records (Cumulative figures)	0 <sup>3</sup>	No data	No data	28 <sup>4</sup>	No data	57 <sup>5</sup>	65 <sup>6</sup>	76 <sup>7</sup>	86 <sup>8</sup>	No data	104 <sup>9</sup>

Source: Attard (2022), Zammit Lewis (2021 and 2020), Bonnici (2019, 2018 and 2015), Said (2012) [online]

Tables 4 to 8 shows data available pertaining to child abuse cases in Malta. Where data is available, the first year of data being presented is 2012, reflecting the year when the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA). The main highlights of the available CPS data (Marchand-Agius, 2022) show that:

- There was an overall drop in cases reported in 2018, whilst there was a sharp increase in 2020 and 2021, probably as a result also of the lockdowns in view of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The types of cases reported to the CPS mainly involve physical and emotional abuse and neglect, with child sexual abuse being less reported. Nonetheless it should be noted that service users may experience and report more than one form of abuse;
- Figures show an almost equal spread of abuse is reported by boys and girls;
- The age groups where abuse is mostly reported covers the ages between 6 and 15 years old;
- Abuse is mostly reported to take place in the Southern harbour, Northern harbour, South-eastern and Northern districts<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> As at 25th May 2012

<sup>4</sup> Data is at 15th January 2015

<sup>5</sup> Data as at 31st December 2017

<sup>6</sup> Data as at 31st December 2018

<sup>7</sup> Data as at 31st December 2019

<sup>8</sup> Data as at 31st December 2020

<sup>9</sup> Data as at 29th November 2022

<sup>10</sup> The Southern Harbour District includes Birgu, Bormla, Fgura, Floriana, Isla, Kalkara, Luqa, Marsa, Paola, Santa Luċija, Tarxien, Valletta, Xgħajra, Żabbar; the Northern Harbour District includes Birkirkara, Gżira, Hamrun, Msida, Pembroke, Pietà, Qormi, San Ġiljan, San Ġwann, Santa Venera, Sliema, Swieqi, Ta' Xbiex; the Southeastern harbour includes Birżebbuġa, Għaxaq, Gudja, Kirkop, Marsaskala, Marsaxlokk, Mqabba, Qrendi, Safi, Żejtun, Żurrieq whereas the Northern district includes Għargħur, Mellieħa, Mġarr, Mosta, Naxxar, San Pawl il-Baħar.

*Table 4: CPS - Number of cases and individuals worked with by year*

<b>Cases/Year</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>No of cases CPD worked with</b>	1377	1135	1374	1607	1313	1166	752	1318	2115	3025
<b>No of individuals CPS worked with</b>	1333	1119	1341	1592	1284	1122	746	1308	1926	2822

Source: Marchand-Agius, 2022, pp. 7

*Table 5: CPS - Type of alleged abuse at referral by year of referral<sup>11</sup>*

<b>Type of Abuse/Year</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>Physical</b>	165	114	316	587
<b>Emotional</b>	121	85	290	475
<b>Neglect</b>	188	100	323	491
<b>Sexual</b>	53	45	100	175

Source: Marchand-Agius, 2022, pp. 8

*Table 6: CPS - Number of new & re contact cases opened by gender & year*

<b>Gender/Year</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>Male</b>	106	382	443	768
<b>Female</b>	130	360	493	735
<b>X</b>	0	0	0	2
<b>Unborn</b>	10	10	11	10
<b>Not Specified</b>	12	25	23	37

Source: Marchand-Agius, 2022, pp. 9

<sup>11</sup> Service users may experience more than one form of abuse. Therefore, summation of data with the number of cases worked on per year is not possible.

*Table 7: CPS - Number of new & re contact cases opened by age category & year*

<b>Age/Year</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>Unborn</b>	0	0	11	10
<b>Less than 1 year old</b>	8	5	59	86
<b>1-5 years old</b>	58	140	239	319
<b>6-10 years old</b>	77	226	275	429
<b>11-15 years old</b>	58	162	284	505
<b>16-17 years old</b>	16	53	83	165
<b>Older than 18 years old</b>	6	13	19	38
<b>Age not specified</b>	35	178	0	0

Source: Marchand-Agius, 2022, pp. 9

*Table 8: CPS - Number of new & re contact cases opened by district & year*

<b>District/Year</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
<b>Southern Harbour District</b>	51	167	205	392
<b>Northern Harbour District</b>	83	115	172	387
<b>Southeastern District</b>	39	135	143	299
<b>Northern District</b>	43	116	117	257
<b>Western District</b>	25	85	68	133
<b>Gozo District</b>	4	23	28	57
<b>Southeastern District</b>	2	0	6	2
<b>Homeless</b>	1	1	0	0
<b>Foreign Residence</b>	0	2	0	1
<b>Not Specified</b>	10	133	231	24

Source: Marchand-Agius, 2022, pp. 10

The figures issued by the CPS are further supported by the fact that it is reported that at least one child per week is a victim of sexual assault in Malta (Bonnici, 2019), with many cases of child abuse still not being reported, particularly by the victims themselves. From a local and cultural perspective, this is often the result of the tight-knit communities of Maltese society where abuse is often a taboo, especially if it happens through a relative or close family friend. Time is another factor which discourages children or adults who were abused as children, to come forward and report such abuse, particularly if the abuse would have happened years before. In these cases, those who would have experienced abuse and finally manage to overcome familial pressures not to report, end up being restrained because of legal issues and the time limit for reporting abuse (legal prescription), since a perpetrator may be found guilty and sentenced for a crime only within a set time limit after the abuse is said to have taken place.

*To put things into perspective, if a child was molested at 7, then he only has until he is at most 22 to come forward.*

(Bonnici, 2019 [online])

In a study carried out by Mangion and Buttigieg (2014), the most common form of child abuse was found to be emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse, with no significant gender differences being found, albeit respondents often experiencing from various forms of abuse. When looking at multi-types of abuse, CSA was reported to be the main type of abuse (35.1%) which existed in combination with three other forms of abuse, followed by neglect. 6.5% of respondents experienced all forms of maltreatment (physical, emotional, child sexual abuse and neglect), whilst 11.1% and 16.6% experienced three and two types of abuse respectively, with 27.4% experiencing only one type of abuse. The research by Mangion & Buttigieg (2014) also reflected the strong correlation between various types of abuses and mental health issues, negative behavioural issues or risk behaviour.

## 2.6. Reporting Abuse

The report 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (Department of Education, UK, 2018) notes that anyone who is in contact with children has a role to play in safeguarding and protecting them. The report defines the concept of safeguarding children through,

*Protecting children from maltreatment, preventing impairment of children's mental and physical health or development, ensuring that children grow up in circumstances*

*consistent with the provision of safe and effective care and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.*

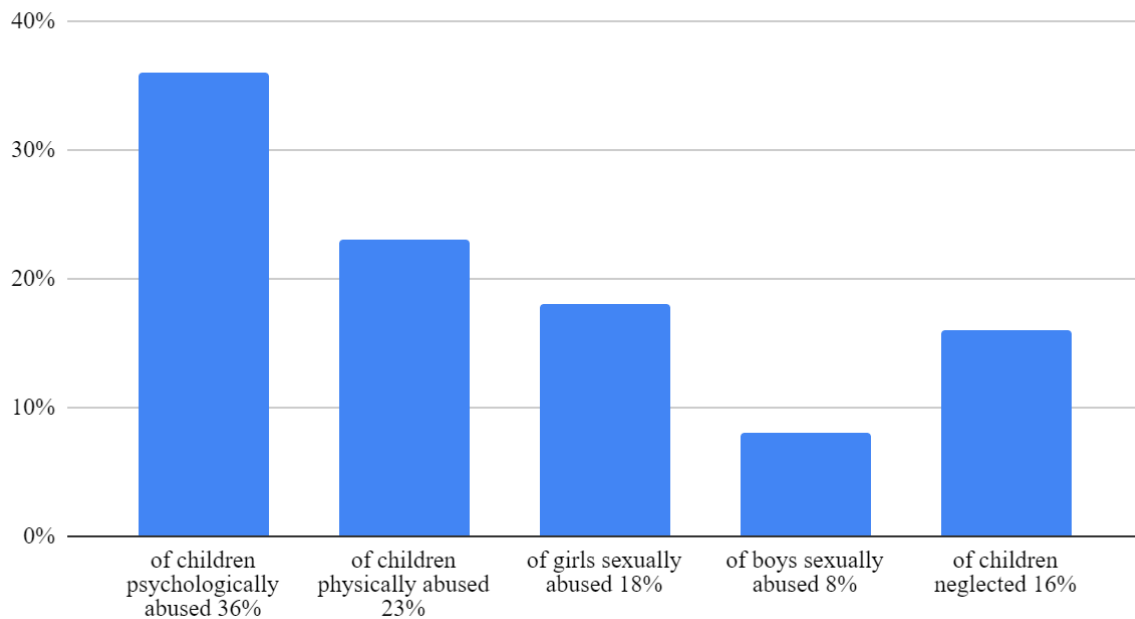
(Department of Education, UK, 2018, pp. 7)

This definition emphasises the need of adopting a child-friendly approach to safeguard children from all kinds of abuse or potential abuse which may hinder their long and short-term welfare, safety and development. Any practitioner who works with, or comes in contact with children, should be able to identify possible abusive situations and put the children's needs first by reporting possible abusive situations and taking the action needed (Government of Malta, 2021; Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020).

According to the report "Hidden in Plain Sight" (UNICEF, 2014), half of the girls interviewed for this study aged between 15 and 19 years old stated that they never reported the abuse experienced, with 7 in 10 girls interviewed also revealing that they never sought any type of help for the abuse. Statistics from the same report also show that both boys and girls tend not to report abuse.

The WHO (2017) highlights a key figure which was published in the Global Status Report on Violence Prevention (WHO, 2014). The data, collected in 133 countries, looks at and assesses various types of violence, abuse and maltreatment. The report noted that at least one quarter (25%) of all adults questioned, reported to have experienced physical abuse as children and one in five women reported being having experienced CSA. Figure 1 reflects the global lifetime prevalence of child maltreatment, showing that 36.3% experienced emotional abuse, 22.6% having experienced physical abuse at some point during childhood. 18% of girls and 7.6% of boys report a lifetime prevalence rate of child sexual abuse, whereas 16.3% report having experienced neglect.

*Figure 1: Global lifetime prevalence of child maltreatment*



Source: WHO, 2014, and cited by WHO, 2017a

It is common knowledge that even if they understand and recognise the abuse, children tend not to report such abuse. The stakes are high and there are risks in both intervention and inaction. Not taking action may mean a child is subject to further abuse, and thus experience trauma and possible lifelong consequences. The possibility of shattering a family and rupturing the child's closest relationships, leading to other types of lifelong consequences with regards to relationships with family members and the way the child views the authorities, are other possible consequences which also need to be taken into consideration (Larner et al, 1998). The ultimate aim is that no child should be exposed to the possibility of child abuse.

Attard Montalto and Mangion (2007) note how child abuse is multi-factorial and socially complex, making its elimination at source very difficult, if not impossible. Complete elimination of child abuse may prove difficult in view of various factors which are difficult to control, including the perpetrators' own background and personal stories, the cultural norms of both victim and abuser, as well as access to specific settings, places and devices by both the victim and the abuser. This does not mean child abuse may not be controlled and that the fight against eliminating child abuse is lost. Child abuse poses short and long-term impacts on the victim, and thus damage control needs to be carried out in order to limit the impact as much



as possible. This can only happen through the prevention of abuse, child education and empowerment, early detection and then through appropriate management of such impacts on the child and through various educational programmes, monitoring and enforcement to ensure that children are safe and free to enjoy their childhood in loving surroundings surrounded by people whom they can trust and by whom they are loved and cared for.

### 2.6.1. Family Ties

Besides the obvious fear of their perpetrators, victims often do not report because they are wary of possible consequences to themselves, or possibly their family unit or familial relationships, particularly when the perpetrator is a parent or family member. In a study carried out in the United States around 900 cases of various types of reported child abuse which took place between 1967 and 1971 were reviewed. Underwood (2015) reports that, thirty years later, those children who had been abused were interviewed together with their offspring, generating around 1,400 interviewees with the then adults, and their respective children. From this seminal study, it transpires that the so-called 'cycle of violence', where it is said that those children experiencing abuse might possibly become abusers themselves later in life, is not applicable to children subjected to physical abuse. However, the 'cycle of violence' may be twice as likely for those experiencing CSA and neglect, highlighting a stronger need for prevention and care and support for victims of child abuse in the long term.

A local study carried out by Dimech in 2000 also shows that victims of child abuse tend to fear reporting the abuse suffered as a result of fearing the reaction of family members and that the whole family will suffer if such abuse is reported. Shame and fear of the abuser also tend to halt a person from reporting the abuse experienced as a child, whether the child is still a child or later in life when the child becomes an adult (Calleja, 2012).

### 2.6.2. Legal Prescription

Another matter which often hinders the reporting of child abuse is prescription, which in legal terms refers to the period of time after which a crime is unenforceable. A child might not realise that they are being abused when this is happening, only to realise at a much later stage in life. A child might also be fearful to report such abuse when this happens, particularly when abuse

occurs at the hands of a family member. If the child grows up and decides to speak out and report the abuse endured years before, they often realise that there is not much which can be done, since too many years have passed and the crime would be prescribed (Bonett, 2020).

### 2.6.3. Stigma and Victimisation

Other possible impediments to the reporting of child sexual abuse are the fear victims have of stigmatisation and labelling, such as boys or young men failing to report child sexual abuse for fear of being labelled as homosexual or cultural norms such as a young boy being abused by an older female. Victims of child abuse may also experience what is described as ‘second victimisation’, that is the wish to harm and punish themselves for being abused (Hassan et al, 2015).

### 2.6.4. Cultural Contexts

UNICEF notes that there are instances when such abuse is classified as “necessary or inevitable” (UNICEF, 2017, pp. 6), where in some societies tend to ‘accept’ abuse as part of their culture, or part of the way the members of the said society were brought up themselves. This is a worrying consideration which enhances the possibility of abuse, particularly when children and later on adults, feel they have to hide and keep secret the abuse experienced. Notwithstanding the cultures of different societies and the norms which govern every culture, child abuse creates trauma to the victim which may not be healed if such abuse is deemed to be accepted and may never be reported and help sought. The need for long term educational programmes to produce change and provide support to victims, whilst respecting different contexts and cultures, is a duty towards these victims and is essential in ensuring that victims of child abuse receive all the support needed.

### 2.6.5. The Role of Professionals

It is the moral and legal duty of any professional that comes into contact with a child that is potentially being abused, to report such concerns to the relevant authorities since “child protection is the responsibility of every professional working with children”, and beyond (Borg & Barlow, 2018, pp. 446). Research shows that the main barrier to identify and report possible cases of child abuse is the lack of knowledge or experience and the sense of confidence from

the professionals. Professionals have a vital role in terms of child protection work and thus are said to require training, support systems and support from the law to protect them against legal liability (Borg & Barlow, 2018).

Borg & Barlow (2018) identified that paediatricians consider themselves to work in an unstructured system with regards to cases of child abuse. The vast majority of paediatricians who responded to Borg and Barlow's (2018) study highlighted that they never received training and that the response pathways and reporting procedures related to possible cases of child abuse were unclear to them, reflecting the need to ensure clarity and provide training to those professionals who may be the first point of contact between children experiencing abuse and the possibility of reporting their abuse. Local professionals, particularly paediatricians, are also equipped with a child protection policy and procedure booklet, whereby they are responsible for examining and investigating children in suspected cases of abuse to make an evidence-based diagnosis. This process also includes referring to a social worker or a social work agency and assessing urgency and the need to prioritise the suspected case (Borg & Barlow, 2018).

Teachers are another group who have regular, daily, contact with children and who may be in a prime position to notice and/or detect instances where a child is going through abuse. It is said that schools may sometimes be considered a haven for vulnerable, or abused children, and it is the duty of teachers and those in contact with children to monitor and notice anything which may be related to child abuse in their pupils (De Haan, 2019). It is vital that members of schools are trained and equipped with the right tools and knowledge so that they may be able to detect situations of child abuse.

Survivors of different forms of child abuse often experience a barrier in disclosing their experience, with many disclosing the experience/s only decades later. Research published by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse (Australia) (2017) highlights that children experiencing CSA take on average 23.9 years to report such abuse, with many children experiencing CSA having reported to be afraid of not being believed, being shamed or blamed themselves for such abuse (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, 2017). The role of professionals at this stage is particularly crucial, to provide a facilitating and supporting a role to allow children to disclose cases of abuse, or to support adults who have experienced abuse earlier in life to disclose these experiences. Furthermore, the report published by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to

Child Abuse (2017), also highlights that specifically within religious settings, disclosure becomes even more problematic particularly when the child forms part of a devout religious family, where a culture of secrecy and possibly of normalisation of abuse, may be present. This report also highlights that many religious leaders who became aware of a number of allegations of CSA happening in their religious community did not take action, and thus institutional and individual reputations were prioritised over the wellbeing of the children and their families.

#### 2.6.6. Helplines

Child helplines are also considered to be an essential part of the worldwide child protection system. Over the period 2003-2013, it is reported that over 126 million calls being received by child helplines worldwide, with these phone calls often being an access point where children could speak out, raise their voices and concerns and receive support, counselling, intervention and referrals. Abuse and violence were the most common motive more than 3 million children gave for reaching out to child helplines in Africa and the Americas and Caribbean region between 2017 and 2018 in 84 countries, the second most commonly mentioned motive in the Middle East and North Africa, and the third main reason cited in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. 25% of all abuse related reports reported physical abuse (25%), whilst 23% of reports referred to emotional abuse. Another 17% reported CSA with the remaining amount referring to other types or unspecified types of abuse, including neglect (Petrowski et al, 2021).

Locally, there are a number of tools which can be used to report child abuse, by children themselves or by adults suspecting cases of abuse on children. The 179 Supportline, is a 24/7 freephone which also filters calls from the EU Emotional Support Helpline 116 123 and EU Child Helpline 116 111. The 179 helpline can also be reached via email via [179.appogg@gov.mt](mailto:179.appogg@gov.mt). Furthermore, Kellimni.com is also a 24/7 support service manned by professionally trained operators as a result of a partnership between the SOS Malta, Salesians of Don Bosco, Aġenzija Appoġġ, and Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ (MCA BeSmartOnline!, 2017; Foundation for Social Welfare Services, n.d.c).

As part of the Besmartonline! Campaign, Aġenzija Appoġġ, set up a platform with the aim to allow for safer internet centres in Malta as an EU co-funded project and forms part of INSAFE

and INHOPE – the European network of Safer Internet Centres and hotlines. Besmartonline! happens as a result of a collaboration coordinated by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) including Aġenzija Appoġġ, the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes, the Office of the Commissioner for Children and the Malta Police Force - Cyber Crime Unit (MCA BeSmartOnline!, 2017).

Furthermore, a Childwebalert Hotline<sup>12</sup> service is available through Aġenzija Appoġġ, which allows the general public to report websites which contain Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) through an online, confidential and secure, reporting system, as part of the Besmartonline project. Reports may include images of children involved in sexual activity or any type of sexually-related content and support the protection of victims of child sexual abuse (Foundation for Social Welfare Services, n.d.b). Similarly, to Malta, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), a leading children's charity operating in the United Kingdom working on child protection towards preventing child abuse, offers an anonymous 'reporting an abuse' service online or via a free helpline. It is then the remit of helpline counsellors to make a referral to social services or call the police as needed (NSPCC, 2022).

#### 2.6.7. Reporting Abuse during a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought disruptions to everyday life as we knew it. Amongst the disruptions suffered are worldwide disruptions to child protection services. In most countries there was an increased effort to ensure that children's helplines remained functional, oftentimes strengthening the resources to man such helplines, at a time where children might have been in particular danger should any type of abuse or maltreatment happen behind their homes' closed doors (Petrowski et al, 2021).

The pandemic also brought a greater impact on Child Protection Services (CPS) worldwide, making it more problematic to operate whilst keeping their respective workforce safe (Katz et al, 2021). Whilst workforce safety is important, the need to adapt and ensure continuity of service, even during a pandemic, is essential to safeguard children who might be at an increased risk of being abused. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in Malaysia social workers

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<sup>12</sup> [www.childwebalert.gov.mt](http://www.childwebalert.gov.mt)

made increased use of phone and online contact to identify and assess children and families at risk and provide them with support, whilst direct contact was still maintained in cases regarded as at risk. In the Dominican Republic, hearings of cases, public messaging regarding ways to report violations of children's rights, and support for national response coordination were delivered and communicated. Many countries designated social work as an essential service to ensure child protection service delivery (Fore, 2021). However, Katz and Cohen (2021) highlight that in Israel, children found themselves at an increased risk due to social isolation and a reduction in social services, since a decision taken early on in the pandemic was made to close down social services, as social workers were defined as nonessential workers. Whilst the decision was revoked within a few weeks, it highlights how children were invisible and thus at a greater risk from their perpetrators and ultimately emphasises the need to guarantee that children's rights and their safety are always addressed.

Whilst a number of lockdowns, or semi-lockdown, measures were being enforced, including the closing of schools and various recreational venues as well as the widespread 'stay home' message, the "social safety net for violence prevention has been disrupted significantly" (Katz et al, 2021, pp. 1). Children were asked to stay home with their parents or caregivers, creating greater possibilities of abuse, or reiterated abuse, where children were unsafe. The closing of schools and other venues also meant that children experiencing abuse could not find solace, or support, in other places. Children who might have been abused in their own homes possibly found it even harder to report abuse, particularly in instances where their perpetrator was in the same house, controlling or listening to these children and possible phone calls to helplines, resulting in an increased risk of child abuse and neglect during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, by closing down certain services and institutions in a bid to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, societies made it more difficult to provide support required by children who were experienced child abuse. The pandemic highlighted that notwithstanding various dangers and needs within communities and our environment, societies need to safeguard that the needs of children are placed at the top of every country's priority, whereby albeit facing a crisis, safety and developmental aids for children are not sacrificed (Bérubé et al, 2021 and Katz et al, 2021).

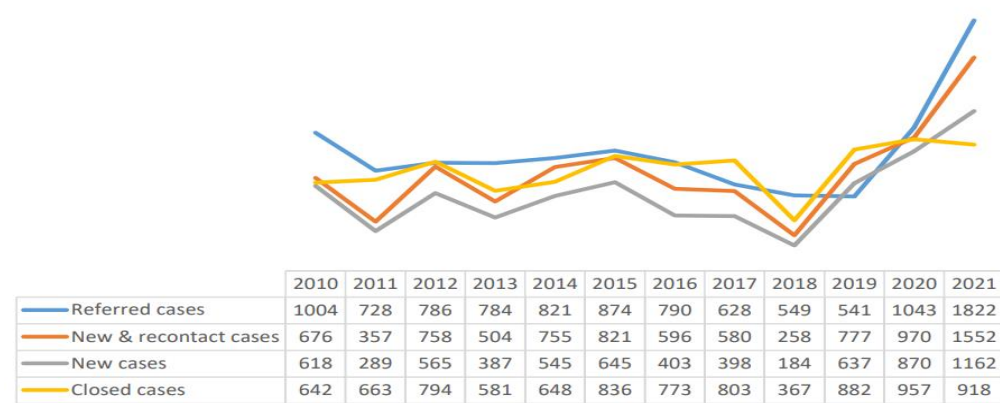
Petrwoski et al (2021) highlight that overall, the number of contacts to children's helplines during the COVID-19 pandemic have drastically increased worldwide, highlighting how these helplines were an essential lifeline for children seeking help and reporting abuse. The authors also cite a study by Lee and Ward (2020) whereby 1 in 5 surveyed parents have worryingly

reported to have used some type of physical punishment during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the lockdown period as a particularly dangerous period for children who were at increased risk of experiencing abuse from their loved ones.

Various other studies have taken place to understand the increase in child abuse during the pandemic as well as the incidence of reporting such abuse by victims during this particularly delicate time where new scenarios also meant different tools and manners to tackle problems compared to the so called 'normal times'. Kovler et al (2021) report that there was an increase in the number of traumatic injuries caused by physical abuse at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need to mitigate the secondary effect of other measures, such as in the case of the pandemic, the effect of social distancing and lockdowns.

Locally, as elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic, has amplified various issues related to violence and abuse, and this also includes child abuse. No specific records are available in terms of the direct impact of COVID-19 and child abuse in Malta. Nonetheless, one can note a considerable increase in the Child Protection Services (CPS) data in terms of the number of referred, new & recontact cases and new cases from 2019 to 2020 and 2021, Figure 2, highlighting a possible link in the increase of child abuse cases during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Figure 2: CPS number of referred, new & re-contact, new & closed cases by year*



Source: Marchand-Agius, 2022, pp. 8

## 2.7. The Perpetrators of Abuse

Abuse creates pain, humiliation and may ultimately cause death. Abuse takes place in different settings. Perpetrators, another term used for abusers, can be parents or guardians, relatives and family friends, educators, neighbours, as well as complete strangers or other children or youths (UNICEF, 2016 and WHO, 2006).

### 2.7.1. Type of Perpetrators

According to the NSPCC (2022), anybody can be a perpetrator, and perpetrators are not typically defined by a typical age, gender or race. The Director for Child Protection Services (CPS) in Malta, Steve Libreri (Balzan, 2021[online]), highlights that there exist three types of perpetrators, two types of which refer to parents, namely:

- *'Malicious people'*, that is, those who find abuse, including child sexual abuse, satisfying, and, "who consciously plan to hurt others because it makes them feel good" and who abuse to feel in control;
- *'Misguided parents'* who incorrectly believe that violence and corporal punishment is beneficial in raising their children and to discipline their children. This category amounts for the largest number of abusers;
- *'Instrumental parents'*, who believe being able to provide for their children's material needs compensates, or is enough for the failure to establish an emotional connection with their children.

Research shows that abuse carried out by males tends to be more aggressive and tends to cause increasing physical and emotional harm to their victims, when compared to abuse carried out by females (Hassan et al, 2015). Perpetrators tend to think about their victims in a self-serving and distorted manner, with many abusers thinking or believing that their victims may have provoked the abuse, or that the abuse was a beneficial experience for their victims, thus, somehow legitimising their abuse (Ward and Keenan, 1999).

Whilst it is difficult to trace an overall profile of perpetrators, in terms of gender and age, for most types of abuse, Thomas et al (2012) and Hassan et al (2015) note that the majority of



CSA offences are carried out by males, middle aged, with a lower socio-economic status and male relatives in general or family acquaintances. Furthermore, specifically within the context of CSA, there seems to be a general belief that all sex offenders against children are all paedophiles. Research shows that around half of the sex offenders against children are not paedophiles, or do not consider themselves as such, and rather carry out their actions in view of other motivations, albeit these motivations often not clearly understood. Some perpetrators, for example, see children as desiring to have sex with adults, thus viewing sexual contact with children as harmless (Thomas et al, 2012).

In terms of all types of abuse, research also shows that there is also an increasing number of reported female perpetrators, mostly in their forties and with a connection to the victim's family (Hassan et al, 2015). Augarde & Rydon-Grange (2022) looked at revealing literature based specifically on female sex offenders and traced and updated a profile of such offenders based on the original profile drafted by Grayston and DeLuca in 1999. According to the authors, most female perpetrators tend to be in their 20s or early 30s in age, white and with lower levels of education. The majority of them would have been abused themselves during some stage of their life, or had difficult childhood experiences, including domestic violence and neglect. Most female perpetrators tend to marry early in life, albeit intimate relationships tend to be characterised by violence or a form of abuse, and often experience a chaotic lifestyle. Specifically in the case of female perpetrators in cases of CSA, these tend to have learning difficulties, mental health issues and/or substance abuse tend to be present with sexual desire, the need to realise their own sexual needs which might have been 'hidden' in the past and emotional intimacy deficits.

Juveniles, that is those under the age of 16 years old, may also be the abusers themselves, albeit still being under age, with most abuse carried out by juveniles being of sexual and online form (Hassan et al, 2015).

Furthermore, in terms of trying to trace a profile of perpetrators, Ward and Keenan (1999) put forward five types of implicit theories that sexual offenders, and thus in terms of a profile of CSA perpetrators may have, also reflected and explained by Sidebotham (2017), these being:

- (i) when the child is seen as a sexual object, with sex being regarded by the perpetrator as unharmful for the child;
- (ii) entitlement, referring to sense of entitlement of the perpetrator towards the child, where the perpetrator sees themselves as superior, making them feel entitled to have sex with anyone, no matter who they are or their age;
- (iii) dangerous world, referring to the world as being a dangerous place, and this poses an excuse for the perpetrator to establish a sense of safety, with children being viewed as 'safe' by the perpetrator, as children are less dominant than adults;
- (iv) uncontrollability, reflects a lack of control of the perpetrator in relation to their sexual urges, and;
- (v) nature of harm, referring to the fact that sexual activity is not seen as being harmful by itself in itself.

### 2.7.2. The Perpetrator as a Victim of Child Abuse

Having been victims of abuse themselves, poor social skills, a sense and feeling of loneliness, an insecure sexual identity, impulsivity and lack of self-control, are considered to be predisposing factors for perpetrating child abuse. Perpetrators are often convinced that they are not harming their victims and report not wanting to physically harm the child, particularly in the case of physical abuse (Kåven et al, 2019).

Research also shows that perpetrators may have been victims of child abuse themselves, ending up in a cycle of abuse (Fuchs et al, 2015). In the case of emotional abuse, when the child becomes an adult, the then child might mirror the relationships developed when they were a child or increase their own sense of victimisation, thus becoming more prone to become an abuser themselves. Since children who experience emotional abuse do not have the chance to set personal standards, develop perspectives, and validate their own feelings and perceptions, this hinders their emotional development and renders them prone to becoming abusers themselves. In these cases, destructive relationships as a child and later in life feel familiar or comfortable to the victim who then is more prone to become a perpetrator (Gavin, 2011). Furthermore, research also shows that boys abused by female relatives tend

to be more likely to become abusers themselves when compared to boys abused by male relatives or people outside their family (Thomas et al, 2012).

In general, children who grow up without a secure attachment, or even worse, insecure attachment in a situation of abuse, have a higher possibility of recreating the same situation in which they have grown up when they then have their own family and children. Furthermore, as highlighted in earlier subsections of this chapter, victims of all types of child abuse have a higher tendency to report mental health issues as a result of such abuse, with these mental health conditions often proving an interference to parenting their own child. Studies show that mothers who have experienced child abuse themselves find the period when their own child starts gaining a sense of independence and exploration particularly challenging. A study conducted by Fuchs et al (2015) highlights that the timeframe when child's locomotion develops is a critical period for mothers who have been victims of abuse and recommend that this period is addressed to prevent intergenerational transmission of abuse (Fuchs et al, 2015).

This finding is further substantiated through research carried out by Bartlett et al (2017). The authors looked at quantifying the extent to which a mother who has endured abuse will then abuse her own child. Bartlett et al's (2017) study shows that mothers who had at least one report related to childhood maltreatment had a 72% possibility of maltreating their own children when compared to mothers who are not maltreated. Furthermore, Bartlett et al (2017) also found that the risk of mothers abusing their own children increased over 300% when the mothers had been abused as children themselves.

Nonetheless, it cannot be assumed that most perpetrators were themselves abused as children, particularly since children who experienced abuse could want to ensure not to expose other children to the horrors they would have been through, particularly their own, when they become adults. Thomas et al (2012) investigated the childhood experiences of perpetrators of CSA with 23 community-dwelling perpetrators, mostly being abused by adult female abusers, and adult male abusers. A sense of chronic sorrow emerged from the majority of participants, and four types of narratives developed, namely,

- (i) There Was No Love, capturing chronic loneliness and a sense of longing for parents who were not emotionally available to them;

(ii) Love Left, referring to a sense of being deeply loved whilst eventually experiencing abandonment via death or defection;

(iii) Love Was Conflated With Sex, whereby multiple experiences of early childhood sexual activity took place, often being the only form of expression of love the children were thought to experience, although they were not aware of the inappropriateness and wrongness of this, and;

(iv) a Pretty Good Childhood, often referring to a particular aspect of their family, such as an alcoholic relative, a bereavement, yet still highlighting an overall 'normal' and happy family situation as a child.

### 2.7.3. Strategies and contexts of Perpetrators

Abuse happening by parents or family members is one of the most invisible types of abuse, where abuse is often hidden within the walls of the victim's house. Nonetheless, the way perpetrators act in abusing their victims differs according to a number of reasons, including the victim's age, the setting and the relationship of the perpetrator with their victim (WHO, 2006).

Joleby et al (2021) identified two main strategies that perpetrators of online abuse exposed children to, namely pressure, including threats, bribes or nagging, and sweet-talk, including acting as a friend or expressing love. Joleby et al (2021) report that perpetrators who engaged in pressure-type of contact tend to be younger in age and engage with older children compared to perpetrators using sweet-talk. Locally, a 2000 study by Dimech (cited by Calleja, 2021) focussed on 80 people with drug problems who had experienced child abuse showed that children and adolescents experiencing abuse rarely report such abuse. This study focussed specifically on the relation between different types of children and adolescent abuse, including sexual, physical, emotional abuse and neglect, and drug addiction, with the most trusted adults being the main perpetrators.

Nonetheless, not all forms of abuse may involve deliberate strategies to attract the victims. This is particularly true in the case of neglect. The WHO (2020) highlights risk factors which may lead to child maltreatment by various people who may be close to, or come in contact

with children, in order to inform about the various factors to look out for, and how to protect children experiencing any type of abuse. Parents who have difficulty bonding with their new born child, or who have experienced maltreatment themselves when they were a child, may be more prone to maltreat their children. Parents who make use of various substances, have low self-esteem or low control of their impulses, have any type of disorders, or who may be going through a number of difficulties, including financial difficulties or who may be involved in criminal activity, may be more prone to child maltreatment.

Within the family context the risk of child abuse tends to increase if there is a history of violence within the family, and if there is a lack of family or social support from the surrounding community, leaving parents and families to feel isolated and lonely. Poverty, high levels of unemployment and poor living standards in general, as well as a lack of policies which hinder any type of maltreatment also create an environment where children are more prone to be abused (WHO, 2020 ad 2017).

In the case of CSA, perpetrators usually start by gaining the child's trust, if such trust is not already in place. According to the Lanzarote Convention (Council of Europe, n.d.), it is estimated that approximately 80% of child sexual abuse cases in Europe happen by an abuser who the child knows. Trust is often gained by perpetrators by giving out gifts, drugs, money, status and affection, in return expecting sexual activities. Once trust is in place, or after gaining control of the child through violence or blackmail, the perpetrator quickly moves to sexually abusing the child (NSPCC, n.d.a).

## 2.8. Conclusion

The scope for this literature review was to draw a comprehensive picture of child abuse, particularly in Malta. This chapter has looked at defining what constitutes child abuse and identified and explained the main types of child abuse, including the impact of abuse on children.

An understanding of the current local scenario in terms of child abuse, including institutions and other set ups and frameworks currently in place to allow for the protection of children from

abuse have also been identified, together with data available to understand further the local scenario.

This chapter has also aimed to highlight the sociological and psychological aspects of child abuse as well as the issues pertaining to reporting child abuse, that is the barriers which often hinder children, or as adults later in life, to report the abuse experienced.

Tracing a profile of perpetrators is very difficult, particularly when speaking of different forms of child abuse. This chapter has aimed to highlight research tracing a profile of the main types of perpetrators and the strategies often adopted by perpetrators as well as an understanding of the possible motivations to abuse children, including the perpetrators having been victims of child abuse themselves.

The next chapter will highlight the methodological process utilised in this research before proceeding with data analysis of data pertaining to primary research with adults who have experienced child abuse as children, professionals working with perpetrators and children and children's awareness of risks of online exposure and abuse.

### 3. Methodology

This section brings forward a discussion about the tools and methods applied in this research study in order to gather data in relation to the experiences of people who were victims of child abuse and shed further light on the dynamics surrounding this phenomenon, as well as those related to children's use of the internet, particularly within the Maltese context. These methods were undertaken with the objective of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the interplay of various factors in the experiencing of child abuse, those factors particular to prevention and intervention, both with persons abused in childhood as well as the perpetrators of such abuse and recommendations for addressing childhood abuse within the local scenario.

#### Rationale and Research Agenda

This study aims to look into the experiences of persons who were victims of child abuse and examine the factors at play in relation to these experiences. In parallel, this study also seeks to shed light on the experiences of children online, analyse the risks, strengths and other factors related to this. This project therefore sought to listen to the voices of those concerned while also gather the views of professionals involved in the area. In doing so, it also aimed to gain an understanding of the nature and value of current support services available and structures in place that address these experiences.

Experiencing child abuse can have a considerable impact on an individual, not only in their immediate stage of life but also in the longer term (Norman et al., 2012; Spataro et al., 2004). Through this study, we seek to bring insight on the complexities of the issue and their effects on Maltese society in order to understand and confront any lacunae surrounding this phenomenon within this particular context. Promoting effective and accessible channels of support and prevention can ultimately aid in safeguarding the rights and physical and mental of children within our society.

The objectives of this project are therefore to:

- (i) Explore how convicted child abusers are rehabilitated, if at all, and what treatment they are given or require;
- (ii) Examine the prevalence of abuse of children, and identify the length of time it takes on average from inception to removal from the abuse for underage children;
- (iii) Explore actions to be taken to keep children safe online and examine the nature of the online experience for children; and
- (iv) Provide policy action recommendations on the issues and concerns that emerge from the findings.

## Research Approach

The above-mentioned objectives were attained through a mixed research design, comprising:

- (i) A literature review of international and local research to understand the issues and dangers related to child abuse;
- (ii) An anonymous, online questionnaire to understand the experiences and views of people who have experienced child abuse;
- (iii) 6 one-to-one interviews with professionals who work with perpetrators in order to understand current interventions, rehabilitation pathways and support structures in place in the local scenario and from there seek their views on ameliorating these;
- (iv) An investigation into the nature of children's online experiences through 6 one-to-one interviews with professionals involved in work with children in order to shed light on children's and opportunities and threats whilst making use of the internet;
- (v) A focus group composed of 7 children of ages 11 to 19 years old in order to gather insight about their online experiences;
- (vi) An analysis of the data collected to provide recommendations for policy and practice.

Following a review of local and international findings surround the phenomenon of child abuse, the findings of this review guided the research approach adopted for this study.



## Literature Review

Systematic literature reviews provide a platform to gather literature focusing on a specific subject in a structured manner thereby bringing insight towards the topic being examined. A literature review was conducted as a first step in this study in order to frame the approach adopted and provide an understanding of current research surrounding the phenomenon of child abuse. Local and international research and publications can serve as a valuable source of information in order to better understand the nature, experiences, impact, long-term effect, factors related to perpetrators, beneficial support and intervention pathways, and other related aspects of child abuse. Related local and international research were therefore identified through the University of Malta Library portal HyDi, and Institutional Repository, OAR@UM. These included searches using key search terms such as 'abuse', 'child abuse', 'abuse in childhood', 'children online', 'different types of child abuse' 'perpetrators', 'child abuse in Malta' and other connecting bodies of literature. Meanwhile, local projects and student dissertations can serve as a valuable source of information in relation to the topic being examined. Although sample sizes tend to be small, these can give a snapshot on selected issues of concern. A number of local research projects and dissertations were therefore also identified through the University of Malta Library portal HyDi, and Institutional Repository, OAR@UM using similar key search terms. In addition to these, a review of data from locally published reports was also included in this literature review. This was done in order to collate data regarding the incidence of child abuse in the local scene and other factors surround the use of the internet by children in the local scenario. These reports include data published by the Safeguarding Commission, local legislation, Child Protection Services (e.g., CPS, 2021), the Protection of Minors Applications (POMA), the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), as well as the Ministry of Education's Child Safety Services. Reference was also made to local media reports related to the topic under study. Internationally published reports by agencies such as the European Commission, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) were also reviewed towards enriching our understanding of the phenomenon of child abuse and the aims of this study.

## Data Collection Strategy

Following ethical clearance by the Social Wellbeing Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta, the following data collection approach was employed. A multifaceted

research approach was applied for the collection of data from various sources, in order to present a richer and fuller picture, and allow for the shortfalls inherent in any one type of data to be compensated for by other means of data collection (Wilson, 2014). Data triangulation also allows for better validity and reliability of results, especially in cases where questionnaires are used but stratified sampling is not used, as in this study (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation throughout this research study.

### Informed consent, Confidentiality and Anonymity

All interview and questionnaire participants throughout the data collection exercise were required to be over 18 years of age. These adult research participants involved in this study were informed in advance about the detailed purpose and aims of the research, as well as what would be expected from them. This was presented to them in writing prior to completion of the questionnaire (see Appendices A and B) and through an information letter (Appendices C, D, E and F) in the case of interview participants. Written consent was requested from interview participants prior to participation in the interviews (Appendices G, H, I and J). Voluntary participation in the project was guaranteed. Meanwhile, interview participants could withdraw from the research at any stage until not later than one month from the date of the interview, while questionnaire participants could withdraw their participation at any point prior to submitting the questionnaire. Questionnaire participants were informed that their data would be coded for use throughout the study and that no identifying details (names, emails or IP address) would be noted, ensuring their responses could not be traced to any one person and their identity was therefore anonymous.

In the case of the focus groups, 7 children of ages 11 - 19 years old were invited to participate in the study. These were informed in advance about the purpose and aims of the research, as well as what would be expected from them. This was presented to them in writing through a child-sensitive information letter (Appendices K and L). Their written assent was also sought to participate in the focus group (Appendices M and N). Voluntary participation in the project was guaranteed, however, because these participants were minors, in parallel to this, parent/guardians were also provided in advance with detailed, written information about the purpose and aims of the research as well as what would be expected from their child's participation (see Appendices O and P). Written consent was requested from the parents/guardians of the focus group of minor participants prior to the children's participation

in the focus group (Appendices Q and R). Child focus group participants could withdraw from the research at any stage until not later than one month from the date of the focus group. Participants and their parents/guardians were informed that data collected would be coded and pseudonymised for use throughout the study and that no identifying details (names, etc.) would be noted, ensuring that their responses could not be identified.

### Quantitative Method as Part of a Mixed-Methods Design

An online questionnaire calling for the views of adults who had experienced abuse in their childhood was disseminated. This online consultation exercise was undertaken through a Google Form questionnaire through which feedback could be gathered across interested participants. The questionnaire was developed following a review of international literature on the subject. The questionnaire (Appendix A and B) was disseminated through the Faculty for Social Wellbeing's social media channels online in order to attract participation from varied corners of society and was boosted three times on this channel in order to enhance rates of participation. Participation in the questionnaire was on a voluntary basis and required approximately 20 minutes to complete. A total of 484 complete questionnaires were submitted. The questionnaire focused on gathering the views and experiences of adults who had experienced abuse in their childhood. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire electronically following a link online. No direct benefits were extended to participants who chose to complete the questionnaire, other than to help develop the knowledge base and understanding surrounding the occurrence of child abuse. Due to the sensitivity of the topic being discussed in the questionnaire, a trigger warning was included in the information provided prior to completing the questionnaire and submitting consent for participation. Moreover, a list of support services was also made available to those who participated (Appendices V and W).

Data was later reviewed and coded. Analysis was carried out via Microsoft Excel and via IBM SPSS software. Manual counting of responses was carried out in order to understand the number of and most frequent responses in terms of the types of abuse reported, the number of abusers and who were the most frequently mentioned abusers per type of abuse (physical abuse, emotional abuse and CSA). Counting was also carried out in order to understand the most frequent ages mentioned when different types of abuse took place and the timeframe when abuses were experienced (physical abuse, emotional abuse, CSA and neglect).

Pearson Chi-Square and Fisher exact tests were carried out via IBM SPSS to analyse significant associations, or lack of associations for specific variables including specific associations between the four main types of abuses, physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect and district of residence and specific associations between the four types of abuses and seeking, or not seeking support. Pearson Chi-Square and Fisher exact tests were also carried out to analyses specific associations, or lack of associations with regards to whether children who have experienced child abuse sought support with regards to their age, district of residence, level of education and type of employment. These results will be analysed and discussed in the subsequent chapters of this report.

### Qualitative Method as Part of a Mixed-Methods Design

Recruitment of participants and the qualitative interviewing process for this research was carried out. In line with the research objectives and criteria, interview participants were identified as local key figures who were known to have longstanding experience in the field of work with children and areas related to child abuse. Special attention was given to including a range of professionals from these areas of society and services in place. Thus, while the sample is homogeneous because it includes participants from an overlapping work knowledge-experience, it is also diverse because it includes experts from a number of disciplinary backgrounds. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation in the interviews (see Appendices C, D, E, F, G, H, I and J).

Recruitment of underage participants for the focus groups for this research was carried by means of an invitation for participants that was disseminated through the involvement of a gatekeeper, that is, the Office of Malta's President of Eurochild / The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society. Informed consent was obtained by parents/caregivers of participating children prior to the children's participation in the focus groups (see Appendices (M, N, O and P). Informed assent was also obtained from the underage participants themselves prior to participation in the focus group via child-sensitive information letters (Appendices I and J) and assent forms (Appendices K and L).

### *Interviews with Professionals regarding Child Abuse*

Data for this branch of the study was collected through 6 in-depth interviews that were held with professionals from areas related to child abuse and who work with perpetrators of child abuse, such as probationary services, institutional organisations representing inmates, and professional therapeutic services. The aim of the interviews was to help contribute to a better understanding of the nature of child abuse cases most present in the local scenario, the interventions and rehabilitation pathways extended to perpetrators of child abuse and the improvement of these.

In-depth qualitative interviews yielded detailed information related to the issues under investigation which was then analysed through thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Participation in the interviewing process was entirely voluntary and did not entail any known risks. Participants were informed beforehand about what their participation would involve through an information letter (Appendices C and D), and written consent was sought from them prior to the interview (Appendices G and H). This part of the data collection exercise was carried out through one-time interviews that were held online via Zoom where participants were asked to discuss their views and experiences regarding surrounding child abuse perpetrators. Participants were assured that any personally identifiable details will not be used in the study or disseminated in any way and that following the interviews, the researchers would transcribe and code the data gathered. Any data collected was in fact pseudonymised so that the identity of participants would remain confidential, unless they themselves asked to be identified.

The interviewing tool adopted for the interviews with professionals regarding child abuse was a semi-structured interview (Appendix S). This research tool which was developed by the research team following the literature review, guided interviewees through the sharing of knowledge regarding areas such as access to the services provided, the types of abuse most encountered in their professional role, the intervention and rehabilitation services extended to perpetrators and their professional views on these. During each interview attention was given to ensuring that the participants felt comfortable and secure enough to share details of their experience in the agreed interview format. The interviews were all conducted in English and/or Maltese based on participants' preferences. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis.

### *Interviews with Professionals regarding Children's Online Usage*

Another 6 in-depth interviews were carried out with key figures and professionals in relation to the use of the internet amongst children. These were carried out with professionals who worked directly with children, such as local helpline officials, representatives of local children's rights agencies, child counselling service providers and other related child protection bodies. The aim of these interviews was to gain insight on the experiences faced by children online and the knowledge, opportunities and threats related to children's use of the internet.

Participation in the interviewing process was once again entirely voluntary and did not entail any known risks. Participants were informed beforehand about what their participation would involve through an information letter (Appendices E and F), and written consent was sought from them prior to the interview (Appendices I and J). Once again, data collection was therefore carried out through one-time interviews held online via Zoom. Participants were assured that any personally identifiable details would not be used in the study or disseminated in any way and that following the interviews the researchers would transcribe and code the data gathered. Any data was pseudonymised so that the identity of participants would remain confidential, unless they themselves asked to be identified.

The interviewing tool adopted for the interviews with professionals regarding children's use of the internet was also a semi-structured interview (Appendix T). This research tool was developed by the team of researchers following the carrying out of the literature review. It was designed to walk interviewees through the discussing their views surround aspects of children's online use such as familiarity with online security and appropriate online behaviour, risks and threats that children are exposed to online, parental involvement in this, and their views on how children can be better prepared to use the internet safely. Once again, throughout interviews attention was given to ensuring that the participants were comfortable and felt secure enough to share details of their experience in the agreed interview format. The interviews were all conducted in English and/or Maltese based on participants' preferences. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent thematic analysis.

### *Focus Groups with Children regarding Online Use*

A one-time focus group was carried out with a group of 7 children. The group was composed of children aged 11 to 19. Amongst these, four were 11 year olds, whilst the others were 14, 17 and 19 respectively. The group was composed of 4 females and 3 males (three 11 year old females, one 11 year old male, a 14 year old female, and two 17 and 19 year old males). One was from Gozo, another was of Indian origin while the rest were of Maltese nationality and all resided in Malta. Amongst the group of youngsters, 1 was visually impaired whilst another was a wheelchair user. One of the children also expressed that they were adopted. This focus group was aimed at understanding the experiences of children in relation to their use of the internet. Children's participation in the focus group was on a voluntary basis, provided participants with the option of withdrawing their participation at any point and took around 1 hour to be completed. Participating children's parents/guardians were provided with an information letter, as well as a consent form prior to their child's participation (Appendices O, P, Q and R). These documents provided detailed information about what their child's participation would entail, what their rights were and sought parental/caregiver's informed consent prior to the focus group. The opportunity to have any questions or queries addressed was also provided to participants. Participating children were also provided with a child-sensitive information letter (Appendices K and L) explaining what their participation would entail and what their rights were throughout the process. Their written assent was also sought through an assent form prior to participation in the focus group (Appendices M and N). In this case too, the opportunity to address any queries with the research team was also extended.

During the focus group attention was given to provide child participants with a comfortable virtual space where they could share their experiences, while also allowing fair participation of all parties. The focus group was conducted in a combination of English and Maltese. It was carried out online by means of the Zoom platform and was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. No direct benefits were extended to participants other than contributing to the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse online. Also, while no known or anticipated risks were foreseen, a list of support services that can be made use of should this arise was made available for the focus groups participants (Appendix X and Y). A child psychologist was also in attendance in case one or more of the children experienced distress during the focus group or revealed any personal information that required immediate further processing but their services were not required.

The research tool adopted across the focus groups included a semi-structured series of questions (Appendix U). This research tool organised the focus group into aspects of children's use of the internet such as frequency, type and duration of internet use; and also examined other related factors such as motivations to the internet, willingness to disclose personal information online, the influence of incentives on disclosure, different experiences including cyberbullying or exposure to distressing material, parental involvement, and the children's view of improving safe practices while using the internet. Listening to the voices of those directly involved is critically important to understand trends and facets of these people's experiences online.

## Data analysis strategy

The data analysis followed a number of steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

- Familiarisation;
- Coding;
- Generating themes;
- Reviewing themes;
- Defining and naming themes

The data analysis process used a systematic coding strategy designed to identify and classify themes and concepts that emerged from the qualitative data collected. This rigorous process of analysis protects against researcher bias while attaining detail and consistency. Credibility is crucial to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research through a faithful representation of the data. A few credibility strategies were therefore adopted. The first concerned the use of a skilled and experienced interviewer. Secondly, a systematic set of procedures to analyse the transcript data was adopted. The process was also subjected to expert review through regular exchanges and consultations where the transcripts, along with the emerging codes, were discussed among the research team. This validation process increases the rigour of the findings of the study and strengthens the trustworthiness, accuracy and validity of the results by confirming the participants' intended meanings.



## Limitations of Research Design

While this research brings several strengths in its approach, design and analysis, there are important study limitations to note for consideration towards subsequent studies. Discussions with professionals working in the therapeutic, probationary and prison aspects of perpetrators of child abuse were carried out. Investigating perpetrators' trajectories from the perpetrator's perspective could also bring valuable insight to the findings of this study in this respect. These could examine precursors, mechanisms, inhibitors and therapeutic and support successes directly from the perspective of the perpetrators directly. Moreover, the views of law enforcement professionals such as the police force could potentially bring valuable additions towards work with perpetrators of child abuse. The latter also applies to children's experiences online. In this case, law enforcement entities such as the experiences and views of the national cybercrime unit could provide further understanding about the risks and possibilities faced by children and young people online.

## 4. Research Findings

This section lays out the landscape of the findings that arose from the research approach applied across this research study. The findings resulting from the quantitative branch of the research looking into the experiences of people who were victims of child abuse are discussed. These are then followed by the findings resulting from the qualitative part of the study through the interviews and focus groups that looked into professional work with perpetrators of child abuse, as well as the views of professionals and groups of children themselves in relation to children's use of the internet. These findings shed light onto a deeper understanding of the experiences and services extended to these individuals in the local scene.

### 4.1 Findings from the Quantitative Data – the phenomenon of child abuse

The quantitative branch of this research looked into the experiences of persons who were victims of child abuse. This was done with the aim of investigating the factors at play surrounding these traumatic experiences. In doing so, the study sought to listen to the voices of those concerned and in such a manner, bring further insight about this phenomenon and the short and long-term impact of it on those involved and society at large.

An online questionnaire was compiled and disseminated via Google forms. The questionnaire was available to the public aged 18 years and over the months of early 2023. A total of 484 responses were received. Results were analysed via Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Software. The following section will highlight the main outcomes of the questionnaire and analyse the responses obtained.

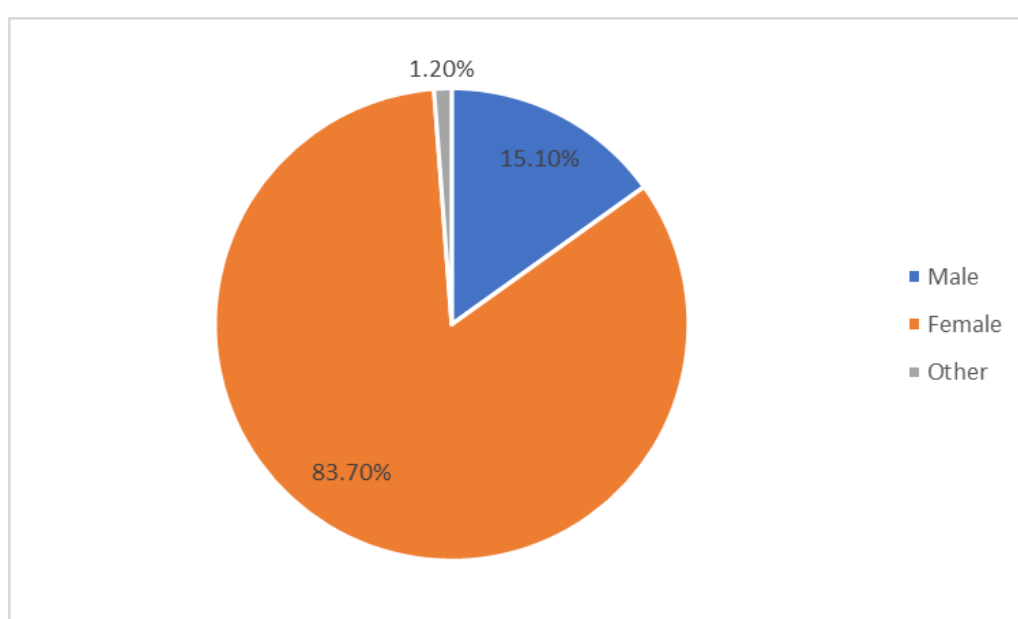
#### 4.1.1. Demographics

The following section highlights the main profile of questionnaire respondents. The majority of respondents identify as females, are aged between 25 and 44 years old and reside in the Northern Harbour region. Most respondents answering the questionnaire have a tertiary or postgraduate level of education and are employed on a full-time basis.

## Gender

Out of 484 responses obtained, a total of 83.7% of responses to the questionnaire identified as females compared to 15.1% males and 1.2% who identified as 'other'. Responses to the questionnaire highlight that respondents were disproportionately females, as highlighted in Figure 3. Females responding more readily to questionnaires when compared to males or other genders is in line with the findings of Smith (2008), who highlights that females tend to reply in greater numbers to questionnaires and surveys when compared to other genders.

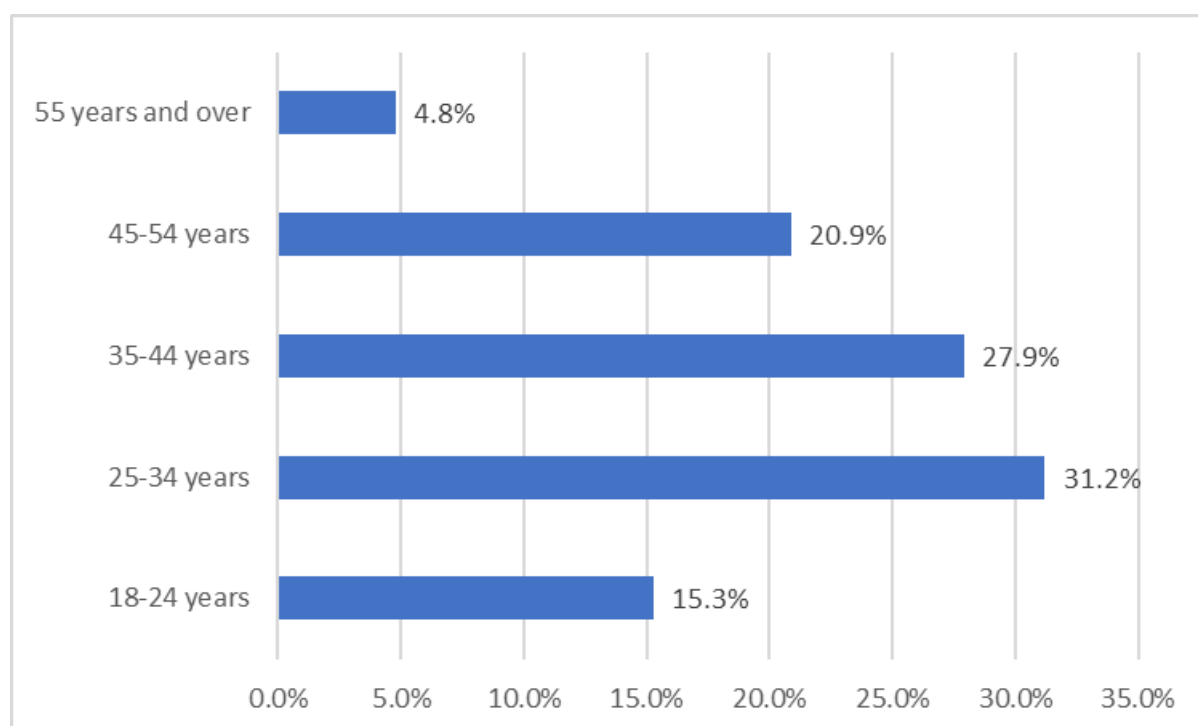
Figure 3: Gender of respondents



## Age

The most prevalent age group in responding to the questionnaire was the age group between 25 to 34 years old (31.2%) followed by the age group 35-44 years old (27.9%), as highlighted in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Age of respondents



#### *District of Residence*

Figure 5 highlights the districts of residence of respondents. The localities forming part of each district are highlighted in Table 9, as per the district classification used by the National Statistics Office (NSO) (NSO, 2023). The vast majority of respondents reside in the Northern Harbour district (28.1%), followed by the Gozo and Comino region (19%) and the Northern region (16.1%). Figure 5 also highlights a comparison between the frequency of respondents of the questionnaire per district as compared to the population distribution of the Maltese Islands, per district, as per the 2021 Census of the Maltese population (NSO, 2023). The results reflect that the number of responses are rather proportionate to the distribution of the Maltese population for two of the main districts (Northern Harbour and Northern regions) which reflect the two main regions with the highest number of residents in the Maltese Islands as per the 2011 Census data (NSO, 2023) but reflects a discrepancy between the number of responses received for the Gozo region, which was significantly higher when compared to the population distribution in Gozo and Comino as per Census data, 19% of questionnaire responses compared to 7.56% of the population in the Maltese Islands. Conversely, the number of respondents from the southern Harbour region was significantly less when compared to the percentage of the population residing in the same region as per the 2021 Census, 6% of questionnaire responses compared to 16.55% of the population (NSO, 2023).

Figure 5: Region of residence of respondents

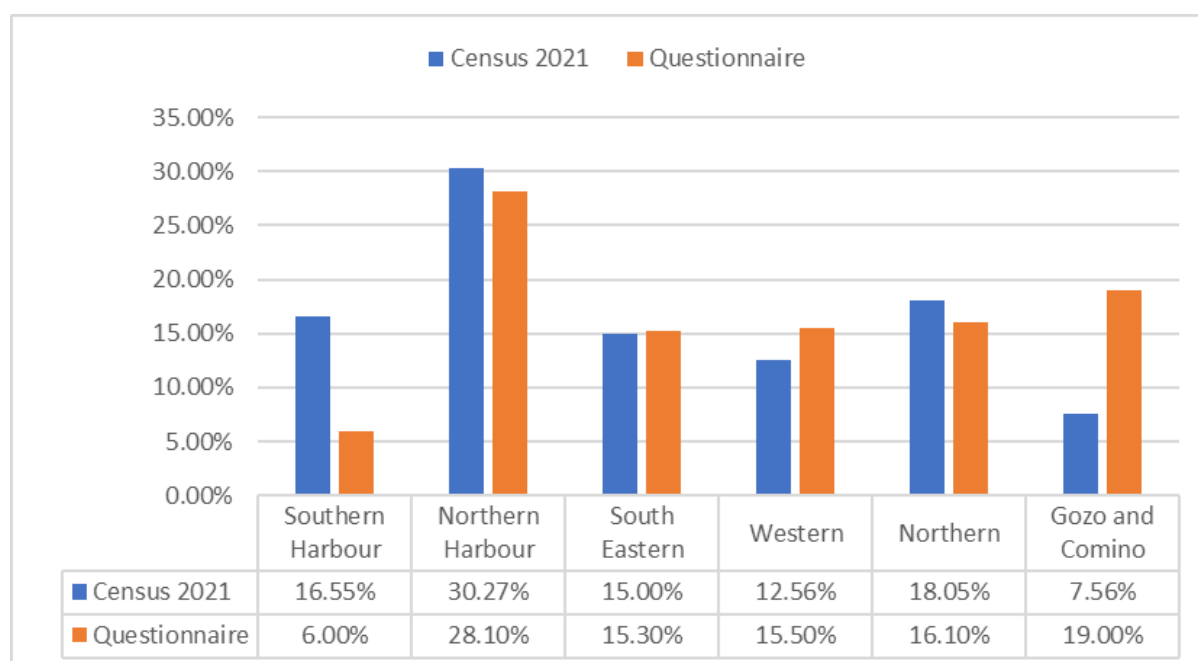


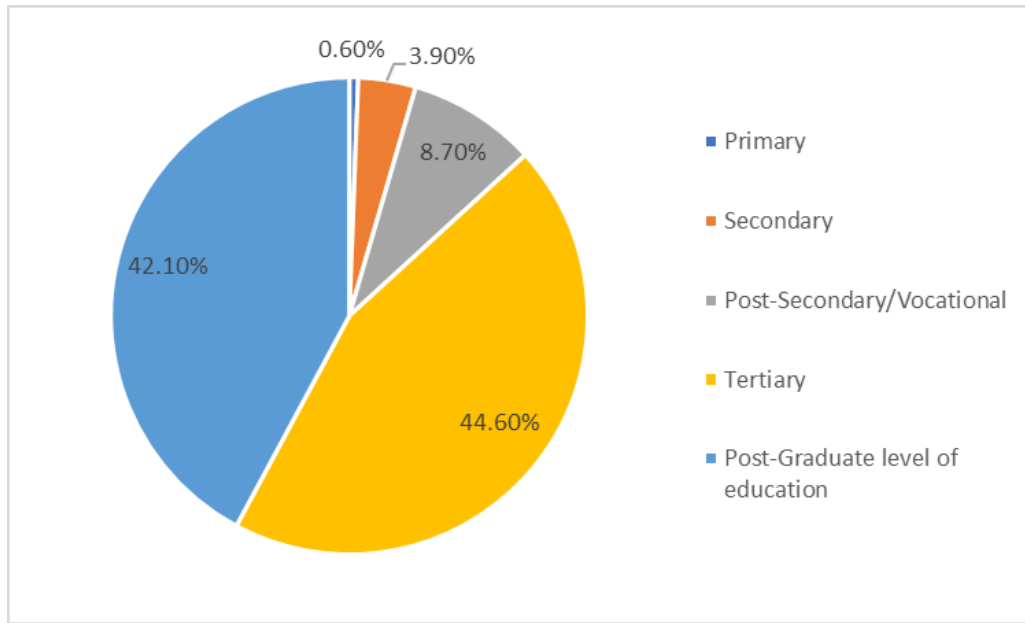
Table 9: Districts/Regions as per NSO classification (NSO, 2023)

District	Localities
Gozo and Comino Region	Għajnsielem and Comino, Il-Fontana, Il-Munxar, Il-Qala, In-Nadur, Ir-Rabat (Għawdex), Ix-Xagħra, Ix-Xewkija, Iż-Żebbuġ, L-Għarb, L-Għasri, San Lawrenz, Ta' Kerċem, Ta' Sannat.
Northern Harbour Region	Birkirkara; Gżira; Ħal Qormi; Ħamrun; Msida; Pembroke; San Ġwann; Santa Venera; St Julian's; Swieqi; Ta' Xbiex; Tal-Pietà; Tas-Sliema
Southern Harbour Region	Cospicua; Fgura; Floriana; Ħal Luqa; Ħaż-Żabbar; Kalkara; Marsa; Paola; Santa Luċija; Senglea; Ħal Tarxien; Valletta; Vittoriosa; Xgħajra
South Eastern Region	Birżebbuġa; Gudja; Ħal Għaxaq; Ħal Kirkop; Ħal Safi; Marsaskala; Marsaxlokk; Mqabba; Qrendi; Żejtun; Żurrieq
Western Region	Ħad-Dingli; Ħal Balzan; Ħal Lija; Ħ'Attard; Ħaż-Żebbuġ; Iklin; Mdina; Mtarfa; Rabat; Siġġiewi
Northern Region	Ħal Għargħur; Mellieħa; Mġarr; Mosta; Naxxar; St Paul's Bay

## Education

Figure 6 shows the level of education of respondents to the online questionnaire. The vast majority of respondents had a tertiary level of education (44.6%) followed by a postgraduate level of education (42.1%). This could be possibly attributed to the fact that the main channels of dissemination for the questionnaire were through the Faculty for Social Wellbeing Facebook Page, capturing an audience which has a higher prevalence of higher levels of education.

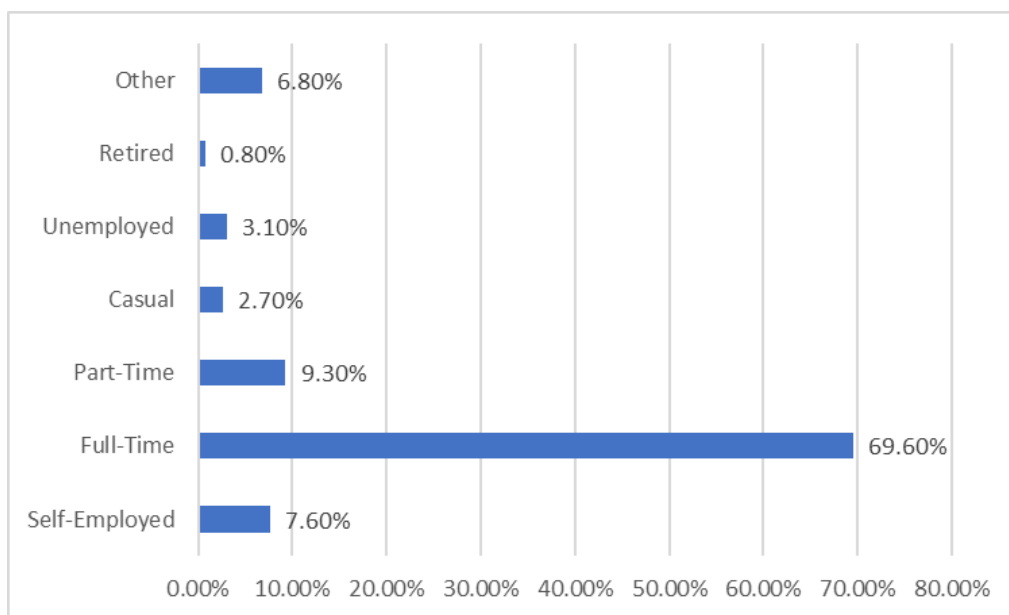
Figure 6: Level of education of respondents



### Employment

69.6% of respondents are employed in full-time employment, as shown in Figure 7. Respondents mentioning that they are in other forms of employment mentioned they are students, housewives, or both.

Figure 7: Employment status of respondents

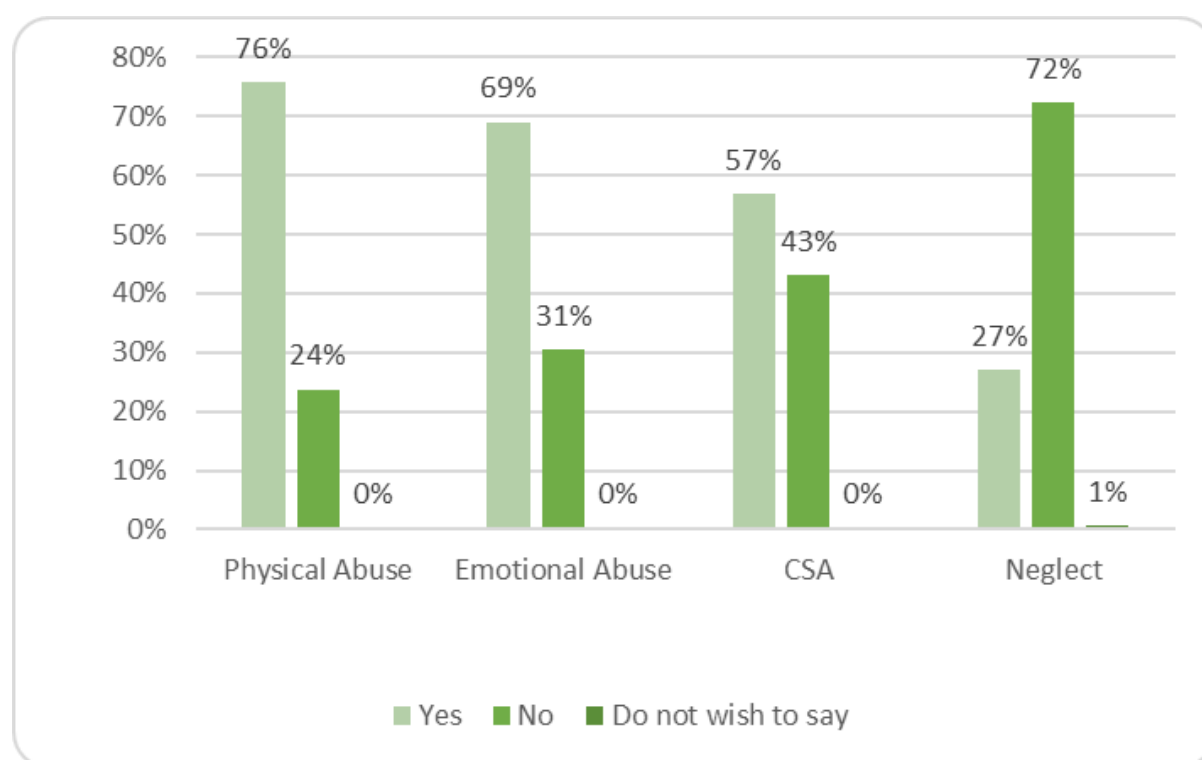


#### 4.1.2. Experiences of child abuse

##### *Types of experiences of child abuse*

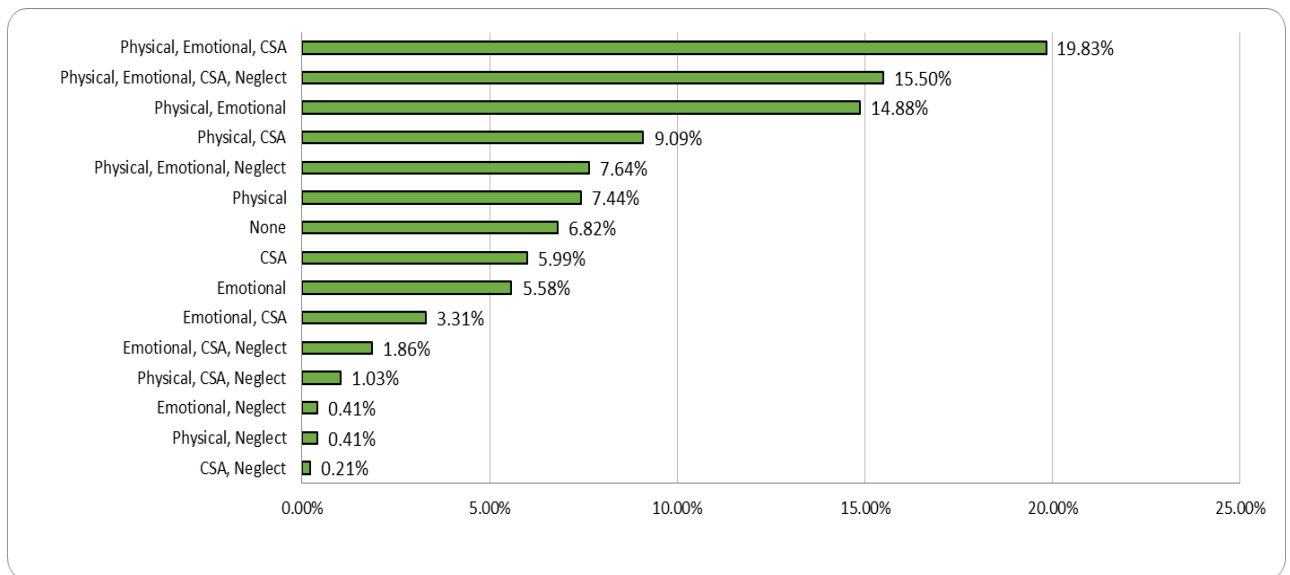
Respondents were asked to identify any abuse experienced (Figure 8). Out of the 484 respondents to the questionnaire 366 respondents (76%) identified having experienced physical abuse. 334 respondents (69%) identified experiencing emotional abuse whilst 275 respondents (57%) reported having experienced sexual abuse during their childhood. 131 respondents (27%) highlighted they experienced neglect during childhood.

*Figure 8: Experiences of child abuse*



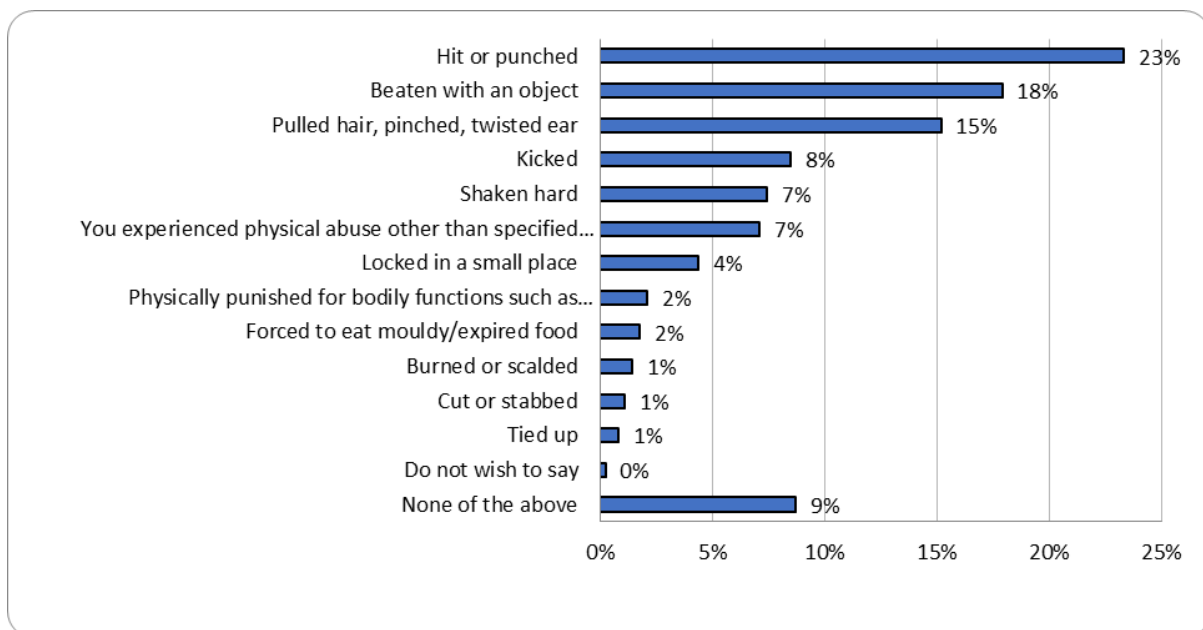
The most prevalent combination of abuses (Figure 9) experienced was physical, emotional and sexual abuse (19.8%) followed by all types of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual and neglect) (15.5%), whereas 14.88% mentioned they experienced both physical and emotional abuse. Physical abuse features as the type of abuse to be the most prevalent as highlighted by respondents.

Figure 9: Types of abuse experienced by respondents



Specifically, with regards to physical abuse (Figure 10), respondents mentioned being ‘hit or punched’ as the most common type of physical abuse (292 responses, 23%). Respondents also highlighted being ‘beaten with an object’ (224 responses, 18%), having ‘pulled hair, pinched or twisted ear’ (190 responses, 15%) or kicked (106 responses, 8%) as other common types of physical abuse experienced.

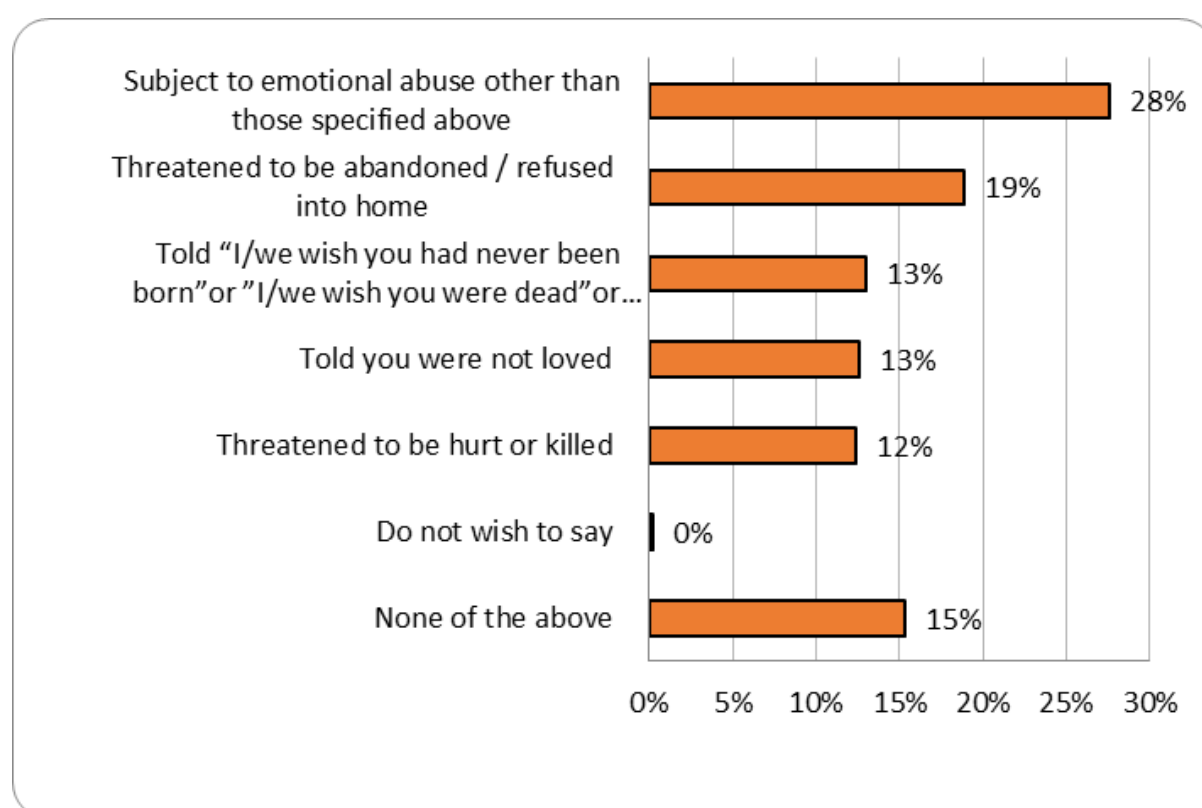
Figure 10: Types of physical abuse experienced





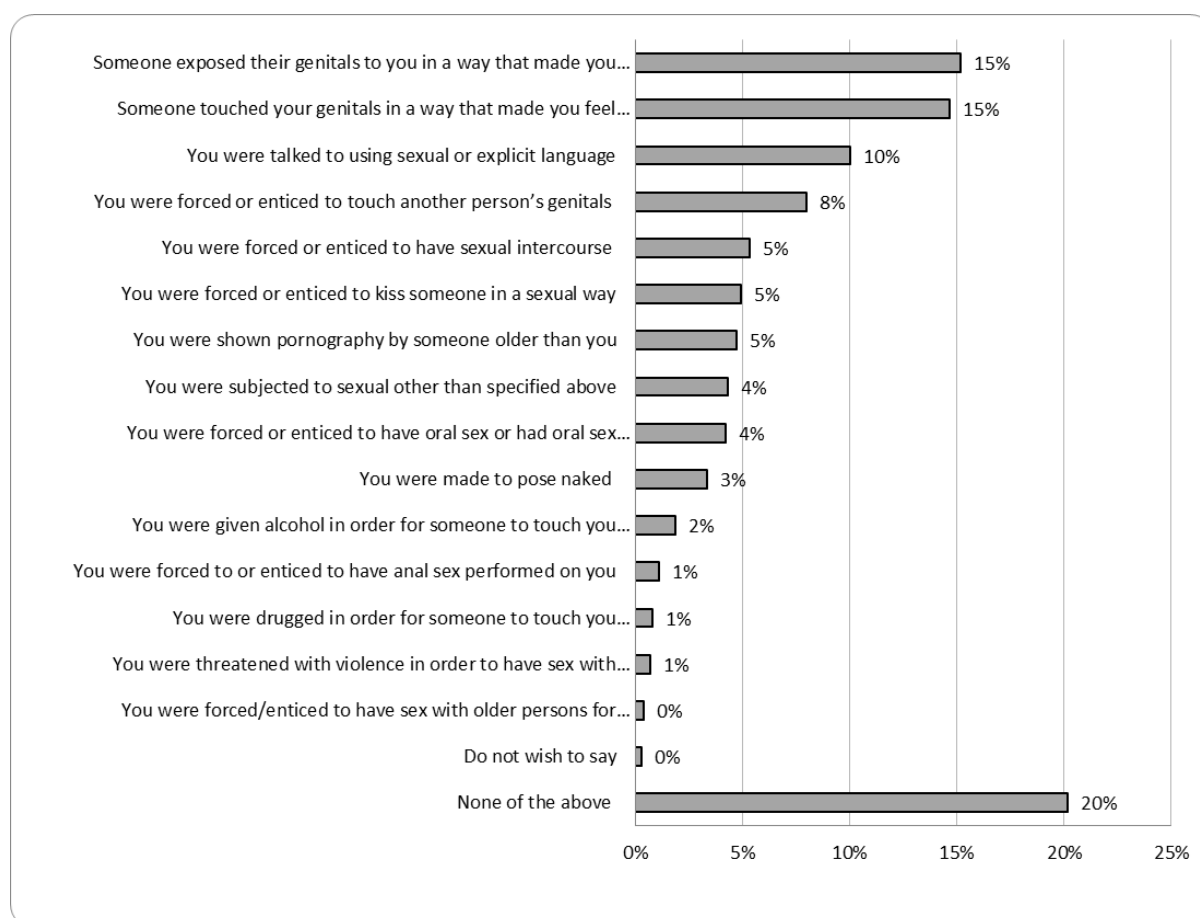
With regard to emotional abuse, respondents mentioned being ‘threatened to be abandoned or refused into home’ (180 responses, 19%) and mentioned being told “I/we wish you had never been born” or “I/we wish you were dead” or something similar’ (124 responses, 13%) most frequently. Respondents also mentioned that they were frequently ‘told you were not loved’ (120 responses, 13%) or being ‘threatened to be hurt or killed’ (118 responses, 12%). Nonetheless, it must be highlighted that 263 respondents (28%) mentioned being ‘subject to emotional abuse other than those specified above’, reflecting the complexity of identifying and classifying emotional abuse (Figure 11).

*Figure 11: Types of emotional abuse experienced*



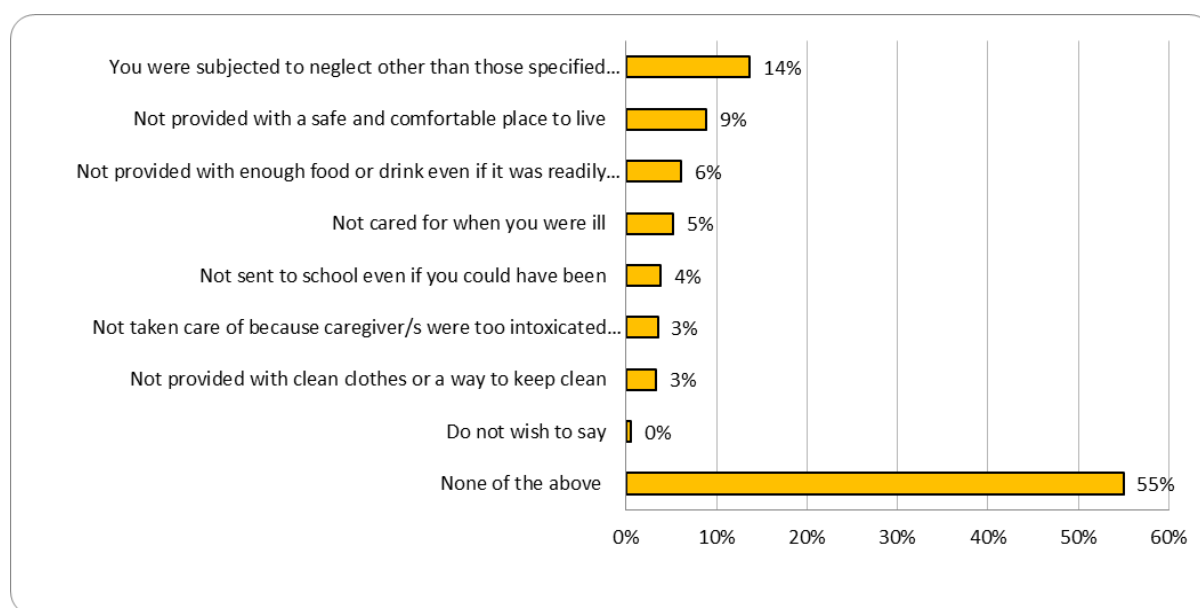
Out of the total number (1016) of individual occurrences of CSA reported by the respondents (Figure 12), 154 respondents (15%) mentioned that someone exposed their genitals to them in a way that made them distressed or uncomfortable and 149 respondents (15%) mentioned that someone touched their genitals in a way that made them feel distressed or uncomfortable, whilst 102 respondents (10%) highlighted that they were talked to using sexual or explicit language or were forced or enticed to touch another person’s genitals (81 responses, 8%).

Figure 12: Types of CSA experienced



The most prevalent type of neglect (Figure 13) experienced by respondents being reported is not being provided with a safe and comfortable place to live (56 responses, 9%), not being provided with enough food or drink even if it was readily available (38 responses, 86%) and not being cared for when they were ill (33 responses, 5%). However, 86 respondents (14%) mentioned that they experienced other types of neglect which were not mentioned in the list provided. Neglect features as the most less reported type of abuse, with a total 346 out of 484 questionnaire respondents (72%) highlighting that they did not experience neglect throughout their childhood.

Figure 13: Types of neglect experienced



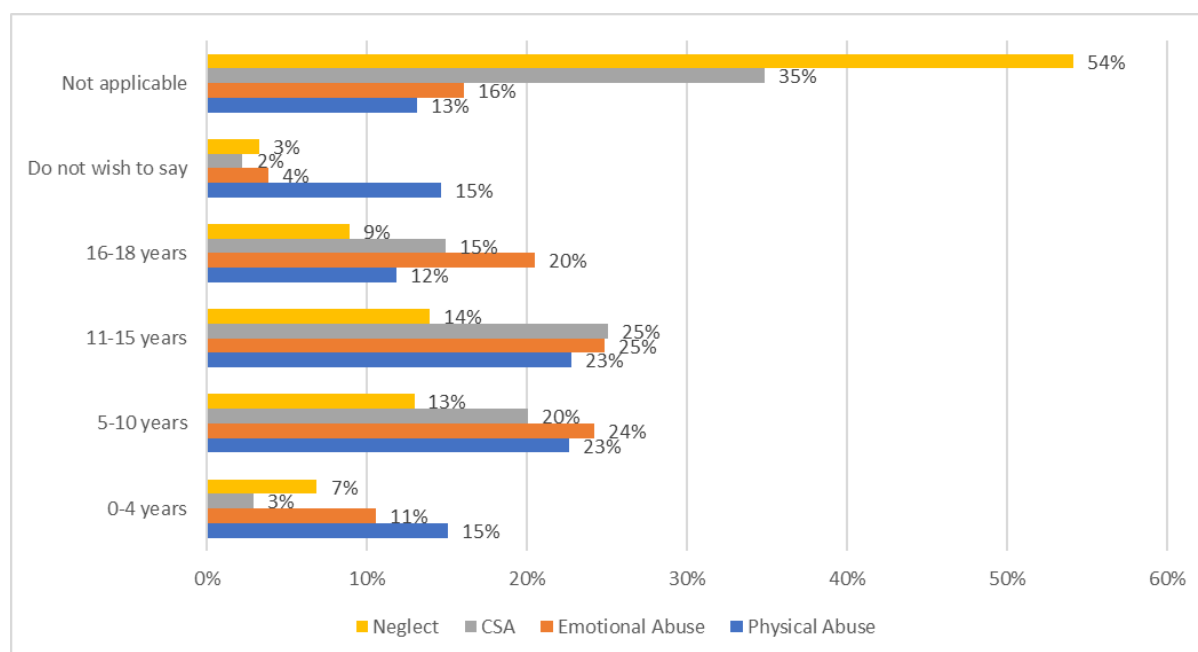
Fisher's exact test was conducted to examine the relation between experiencing physical abuse and district of residence. Fisher's exact test ( $p=0.616$ ) does not indicate a significant association between experiencing physical abuse and district of residence. The same test was also conducted to examine significant associations between emotional abuse and district of residence ( $p=0.368$ ), sexual abuse and district of residence ( $p=0.199$ ) and neglect and the district of residence ( $p=0.635$ ). These tests show that there is no significant association between any child abuse experienced and the district of residence. In conclusion therefore, statistically speaking, children living anywhere in Malta and Gozo have the same possibility of being abused.

#### *Age and period of experiencing child abuse*

Respondents were asked about the age at which they experienced different types of abuse (Figure 14). Physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect was mostly prevalent in the younger years (5 to 10 years) and early adolescence (11-15 years), whereas CSA was mostly prevalent throughout childhood and adolescence (5 to 18 years). It must be highlighted that the age group comprising early years, 0-4 years was the age group where respondents reported to have experienced lower levels of abuse. Whilst this may be the case, it must also be noted that respondents might not have clear memories of early childhood years and thus this may be reflected in the lower levels of reporting. The Pearson Chi-Square's exact test and Fisher's exact test were carried out to examine a significant association between the four types of

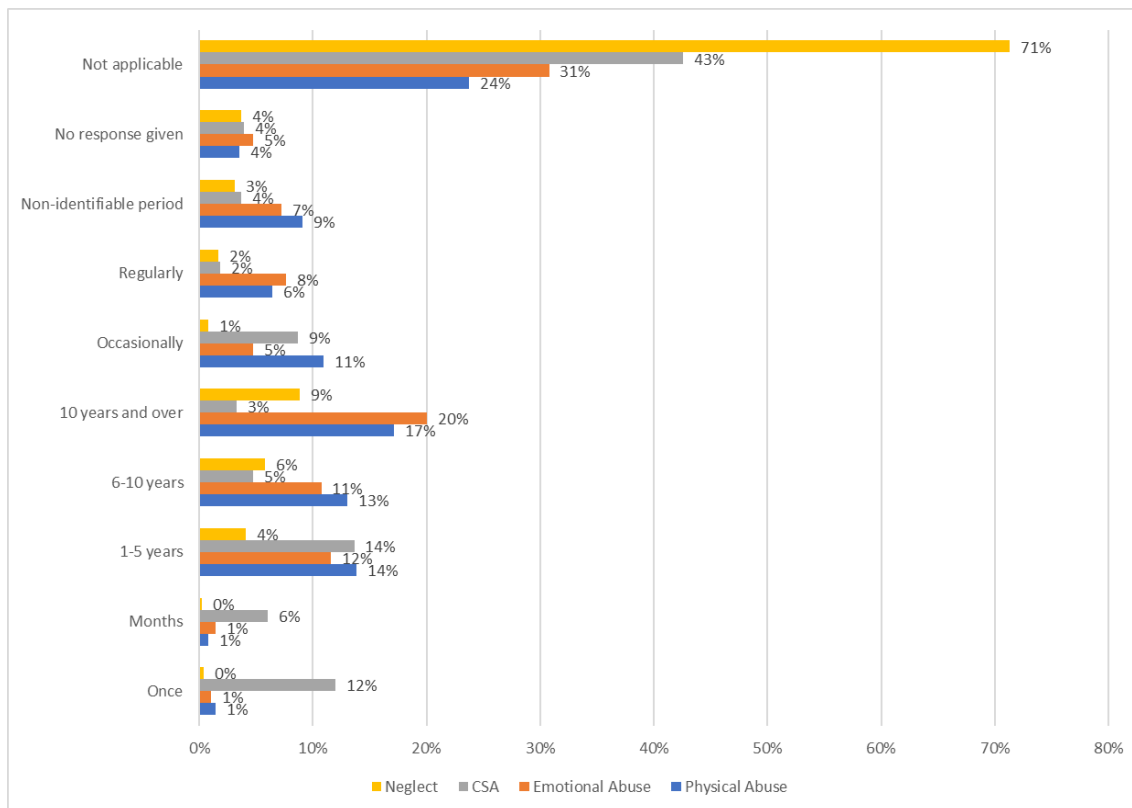
abuse being analysed in this report and age of reported abuse. However, due to insufficiency in data, the tests were inconclusive. This means that it is not possible to say with certainty that a relationship exists between the type of abuse and the age of reported abuse.

*Figure 14: Age when child abuse was experienced*



In response to the respondents highlighting the age when child abuse was experienced, the research team was also able to highlight an overall period per respondent when child abuse was experienced (Figure 15). For respondents having experienced physical, emotional abuse and neglect, the majority of the respondents replied that these abuses were experienced for 10 years or more, followed by a period between 6 and 10 years and a period ranging between 1 and 5 years. This highlights the fact that such combined abused tends to go on for a very lengthy period, often throughout all childhood and adolescence. In the case of physical abuse, most respondents highlighted that at the time when this happened, being 'hit or punched', mainly, was considered as a 'normal' way of educating a child and they were not aware this was a type of abuse, whereas respondents mentioning they were emotionally abused mostly highlighted that this happened throughout childhood and adolescence, and that emotional abuse only stopped being experienced when the child managed to cut off ties with their perpetrator. Conversely, in the case of CSA, most respondents mentioned that CSA mostly happened either for a period between 1 and 5 years, once or occasionally, highlighting a shorter time frame or an unidentifiable pattern as well as one-off abuses.

Figure 15: Period when child abuse was experienced

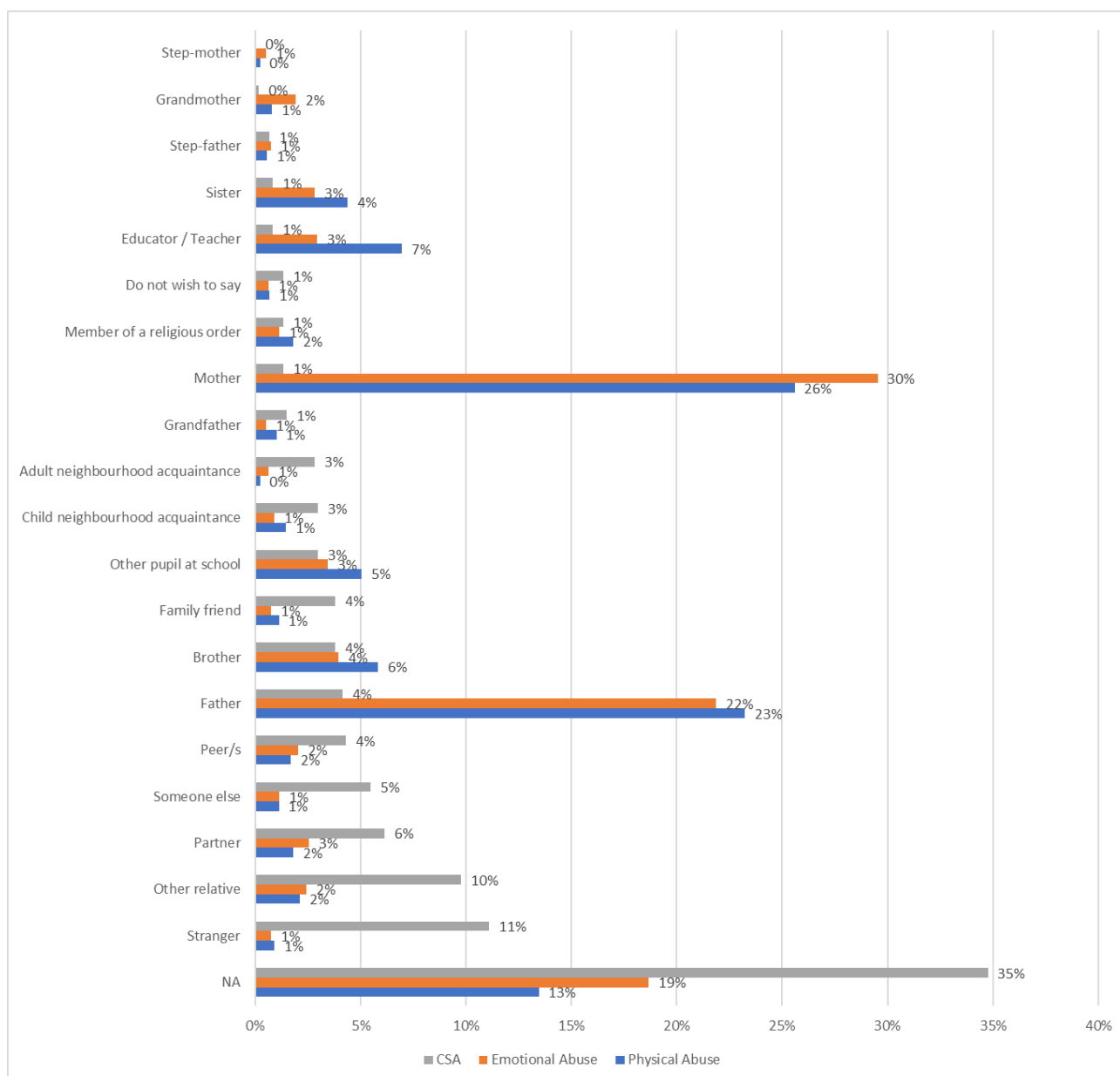


### Perpetrators and number of abusers

Respondents were asked to identify their abusers according to the type of abuse experienced (Figure 16). Parents were the most commonly reported perpetrators in the case of physical and emotional abuse, with 228 respondents (26%) mentioning mothers and 207 respondents (23%) mentioning fathers as their perpetrators for physical abuse, whilst 231 respondents (30%) mentioning their mothers and 171 respondents (22%) mentioning their fathers as their perpetrators in terms of emotional abuse. Educators and teachers were the third most commonly reported group of perpetrators for physical abuse (7%) whereas brothers were the third most commonly reported group of perpetrators in the case of emotional abuse (4%). This highlights that physical and emotional abuse is mostly prevalent in households. In the case of CSA, strangers (11%), other relatives (10%) and the respondent's partners (6%), with the latter suggesting a stronger prevalence in adolescence, were the most commonly mentioned perpetrators of CSA. Furthermore, the Pearson Chi-Square's exact test and Fisher's exact test were carried out to examine a significant association between the four types of abuse being analysed in this report and the perpetrators of each abuse. However, due to insufficiency

in data, the tests were inconclusive. This means that it is not possible to say with sufficient certainty that a relationship exists between type of abuse and the perpetrator of such abuse.

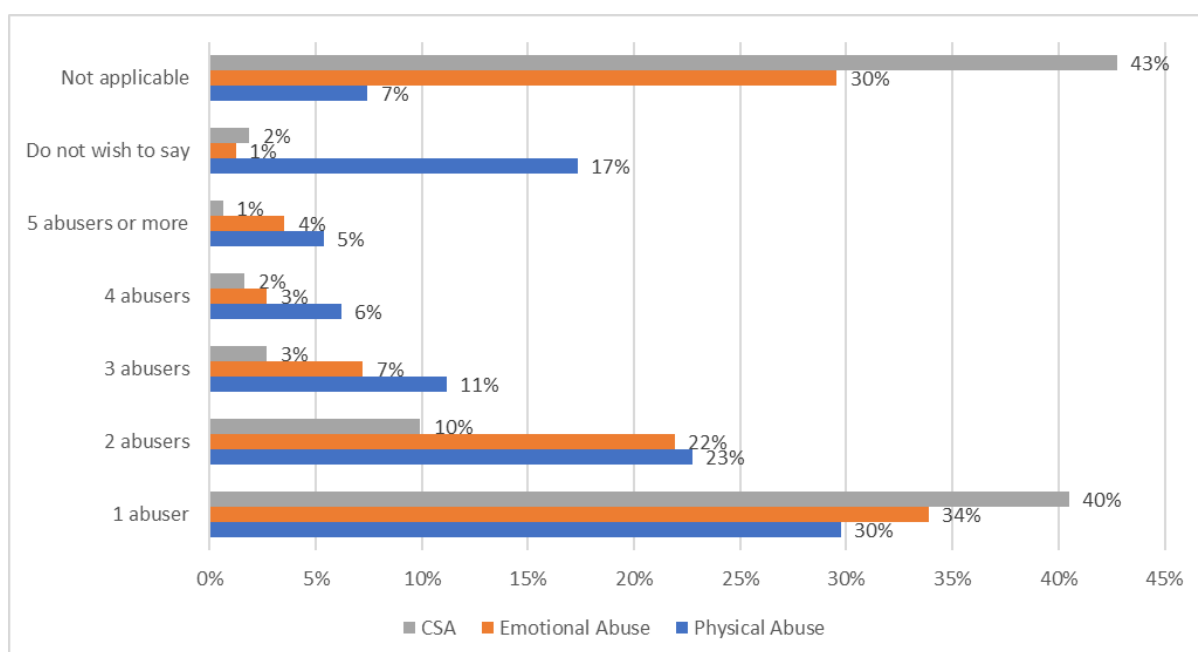
*Figure 16: Perpetrators of child abuse as outlined by survey respondents*



Respondents were also asked to highlight any person who may have abused them in order to understand if respondents were mainly abused by one or more perpetrators (Figure 17). The majority of respondents mentioned they mostly experienced abuse, whether this was physical, emotional or sexual abuse, by one perpetrator (30% for persons experiencing physical abuse, 34% in the case of emotional abuse and 40% in the case of CSA), followed by two perpetrators

for all three types of abuse (23% in the case of physical abuse, 22% in the case of emotional abuse and 10% in the case of CSA). It should be highlighted that a relatively high number of respondents chose not to reply who was the perpetrator, 'do not wish to say', particularly with regards to physical abuse (17%).

Figure 17: Number of reported abusers

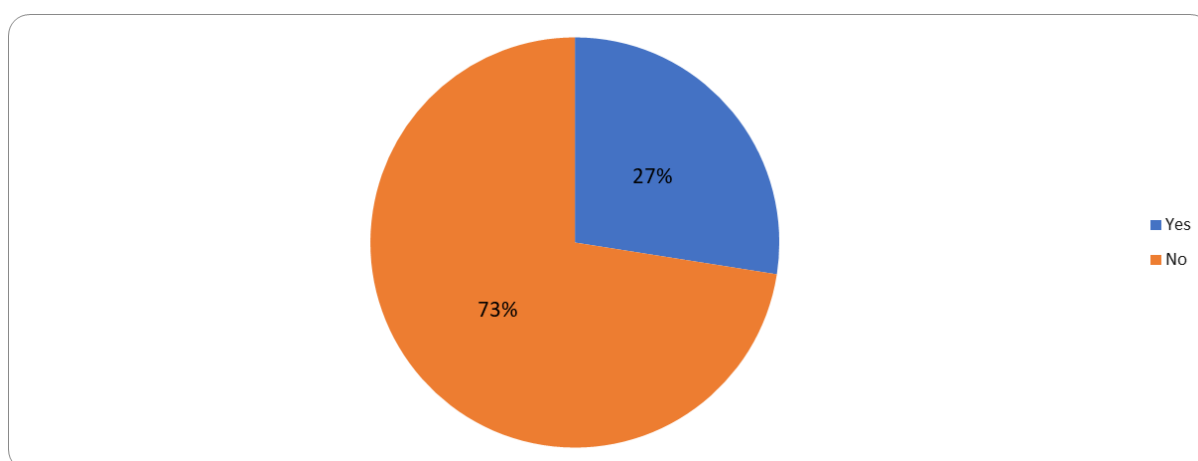


### 4.1.3. Support

#### *Did you seek support?*

Amongst the 484 respondents to the questionnaire only 27% of respondents (133 respondents) answered 'yes' to seeking support in relation to child abuse experienced, whereas 73% of respondents (351 responses) noted that they did not seek any type of support (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Percentage of respondents who sought support



The results of the Pearson Chi-Square's exact test ( $p=0.015$ ) indicate a significant association between support seeking and age. Thus, the results show that there is a relationship between experiencing abuse as a child and not seeking support following such abuse (Table 10 and Figure 19). This reflects that the association is that the younger aged individuals, i.e those aged less than 35 years, are significantly more likely, and have a greater tendency, to report abuse than their older counterparts aged over 45 years, who are or were less prone to do so. One of the main causes of this difference in reporting behaviour is the result of a change in culture, including more education and awareness, as improved and more accessible services where to seek support are made available.

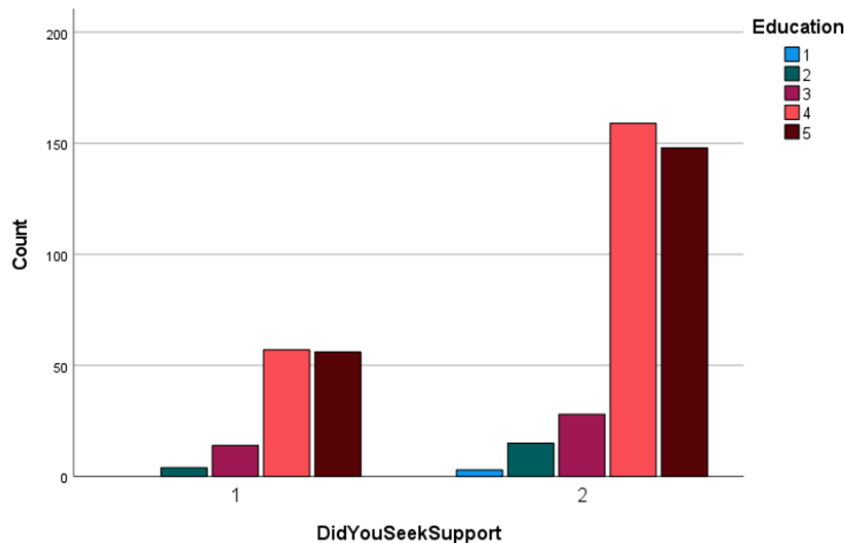
The Pearson Chi-Square's exact test was also conducted to examine the association between seeking support and the district of residence. The results of the Pearson Chi-Square's exact test ( $p=0.182$ ) do not indicate a significant association between seeking support and district of residence. Furthermore, the Fisher's exact test was conducted to examine the relation between seeking support and level of education and type of employment. The Fisher's exact test ( $p=0.777$ ) does not indicate a significant association between seeking support and level of education. In addition, the same test carried out to examine whether a significant association exists between seeking support and type of employment does not ( $p=0.358$ ) indicate as significant the association between seeking support and type of employment adults who have been abused as children are now employed in.



Table 10: Seeking support by age cross tabulation

		Age										Total	
		18-24 years (1)		25-34 years (2)		35-44 years (3)		45-54 years (4)		55 years and over (5)			
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Did You Seek Support	Yes (1)	23	31.1%	53	35.1%	34	25.2%	17	16.8%	4	17.4%	131	27.1%
	No (2)	51	68.9%	98	64.9%	101	74.8%	84	83.2%	19	82.6%	353	72.9%
Total		74	100.0%	151	100.0%	135	100.0%	101	100.0%	23	100.0%	484	100.0%

Figure 19: Statistical association between seeking support and age



With specific focus on the four types of abuse assessed in this research study's online questionnaire, Fisher's exact test was conducted to examine whether a significant association exists between experiencing the four types of abuse and seeking support. With regards to physical abuse and seeking support, Fisher's exact test ( $p=0.006$ ) shows a significant association (Table 11). The same test was also conducted to examine significant associations between emotional abuse ( $p<.001$ ) (Table 12), sexual abuse ( $p=0.123$ ) (Table 13) and neglect ( $p<.001$ ) (Table 14). The percentage differences are significant since the 'p' value for physical abuse are 0.006 for physical abuse,  $<0.001$  for emotional abuse and  $<0.001$  for neglect and are thus smaller than the 0.05 level of significance. These tests show a significant association between those experiencing physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect who did not choose to seek support, whereas there is no significant association between experiencing CSA and not seeking support, although the majority of respondents who experienced CSA stated that they did not seek support. These tests thus reflect a larger percentage of individuals who were physically or emotionally abused or experienced neglect and did not seek support, compared to their counterparts who were not either physically or emotionally abused or experienced neglect. These tests therefore reflect the necessity to

further examine the reasons why people who have experienced various and especially multiple types of abuse as a child do not seek any kind of support.

*Table 11: Physical abuse and seeking support cross tabulation*

		Did You Seek Support (Physical Abuse)					
		Yes (1)		No (2)		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Did you experience Physical Abuse	No	20	15.3%	98	27.8%	118	24.4%
	Yes	111	84.7%	255	72.2%	366	75.6%
Total		131	100.0%	353	100.0%	484	100.0%

*Table 12: Emotional abuse and seeking support cross tabulation*

		Did You Seek Support (Emotional Abuse)					
		Yes (1)		No (2)		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Did you experience Emotional Abuse	No	16	12.2%	134	38.0%	150	31.0%
	Yes	115	87.8%	219	62.0%	334	69.0%
Total		131	100.0%	353	100.0%	484	100.0%

*Table 13: Sexual abuse and seeking support cross tabulation*

		Did You Seek Support (Sexual Abuse)					
		Yes (1)		No (2)		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Did you experience Sexual Abuse	No	49	37.4%	160	45.3%	209	43.2%
	Yes	82	62.6%	193	54.7%	275	56.8%
Total		131	100.0%	353	100.0%	484	100.0%

*Table 14: Neglect and seeking support cross tabulation*

		Did You Seek Support (Neglect)					
		Yes (1)		No (2)		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Did you experience Neglect	No	72	55.0%	281	79.6%	353	72.9%
	Yes	59	45.0%	72	20.4%	131	27.1%
Total		131	100.0%	353	100.0%	484	100.0%

## Seeking Support

Out of the 131 respondents who sought support for the abuse experienced (Figure 20) 48% of respondents sought support for emotional abuse. 29% of respondents sought support for physical abuse experienced, whereas 23% of respondents sought support after experiencing CSA. Support was mainly sought via professionals (41%) followed by family members (29%), as highlighted in Figure 21.

Figure 20: Distribution of types of abuse by support sought

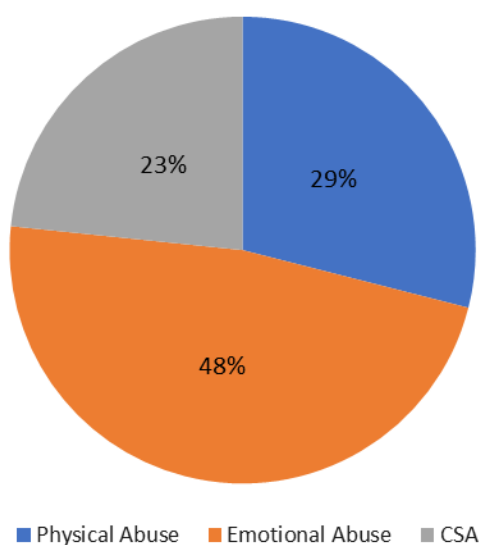
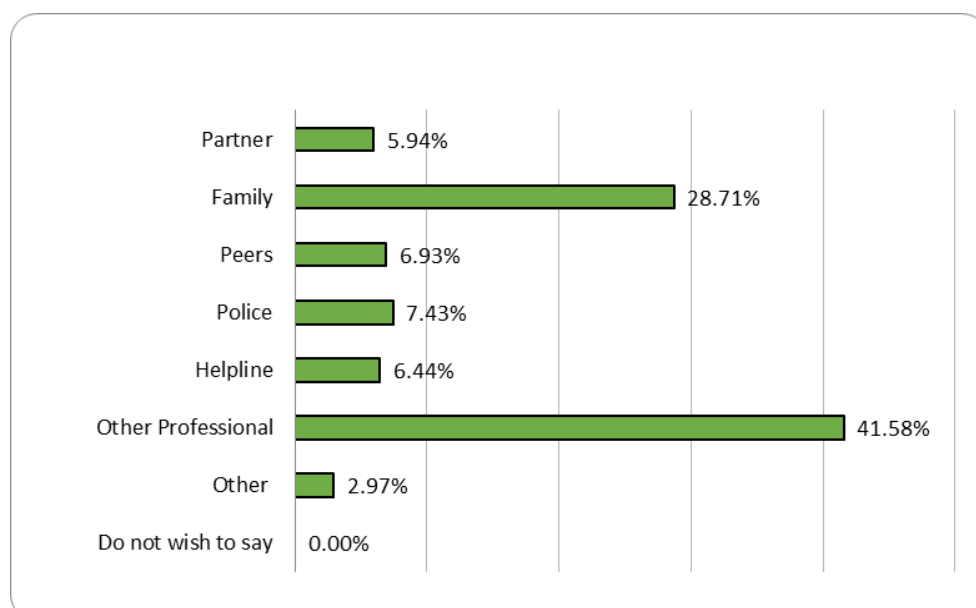
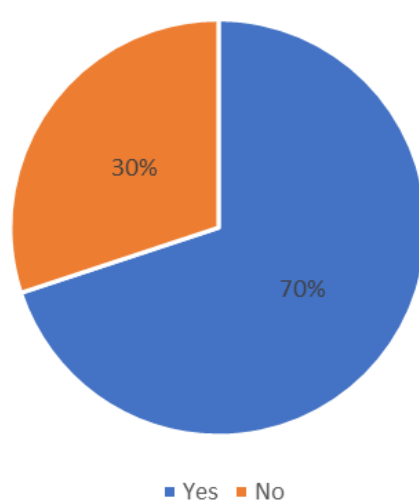


Figure 21: Who was the first person you approached for support

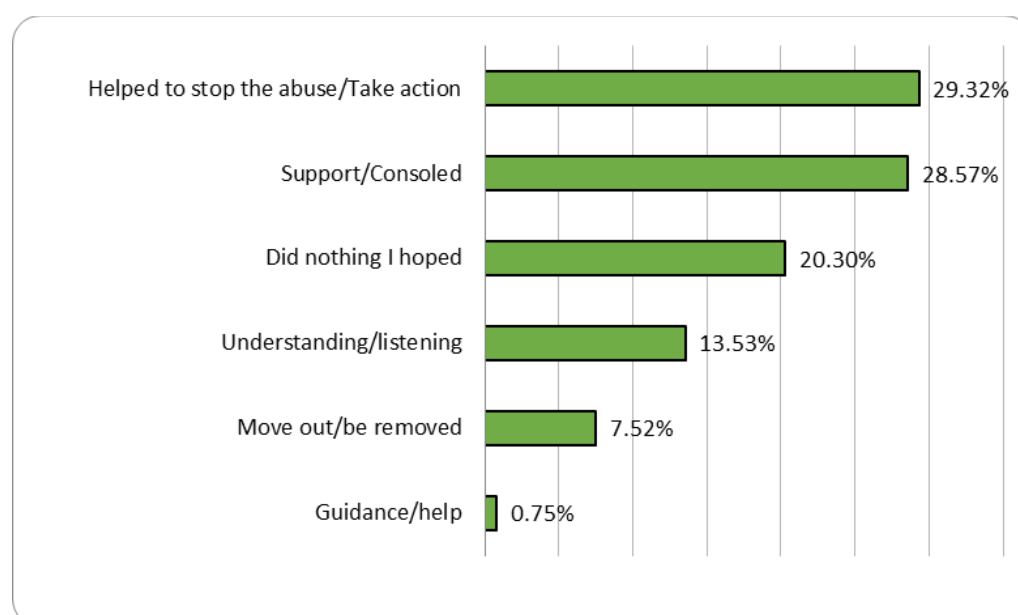


Amongst the respondents who answered that they sought support for the abuse experienced (131 respondents), 70% noted that they found support received helpful, whereas 30% replied that they did not find the support received to be helpful (Figure 22). Amongst the respondents replying that they did seek help (Figure 23), respondents highlighted that they mainly were helped to take action for the abuse to stop (29%), were supported and consoled (28%) and felt understood and/or listened (13%). However, 20% highlighted that the support sought did nothing much to improve their situation or for them to be removed from the abuse.

*Figure 22: Was the support received helpful?*

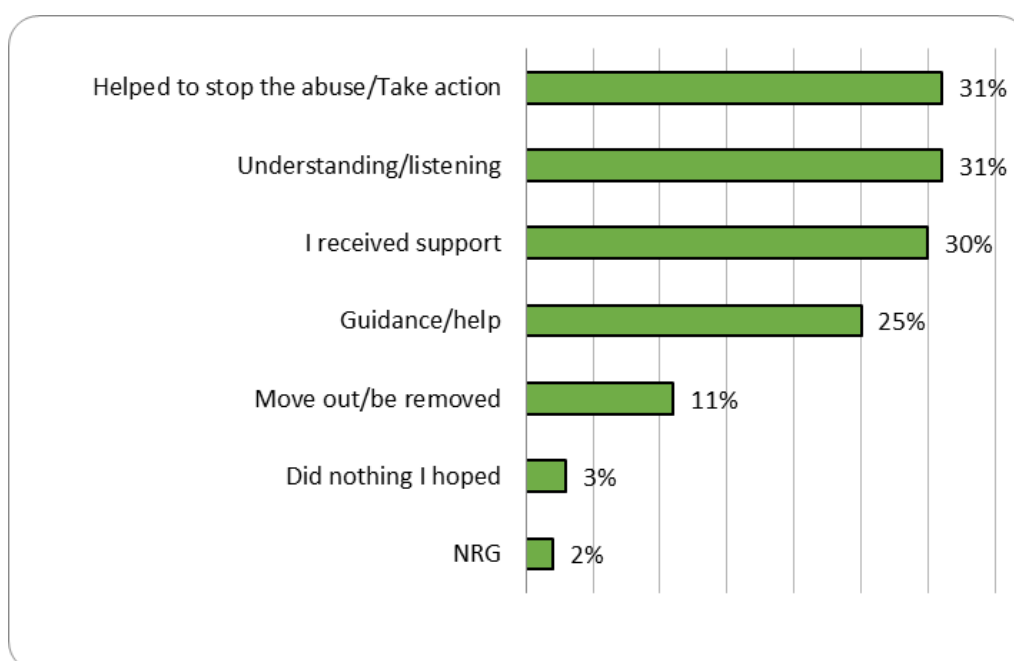


*Figure 23: How was the support received helpful*



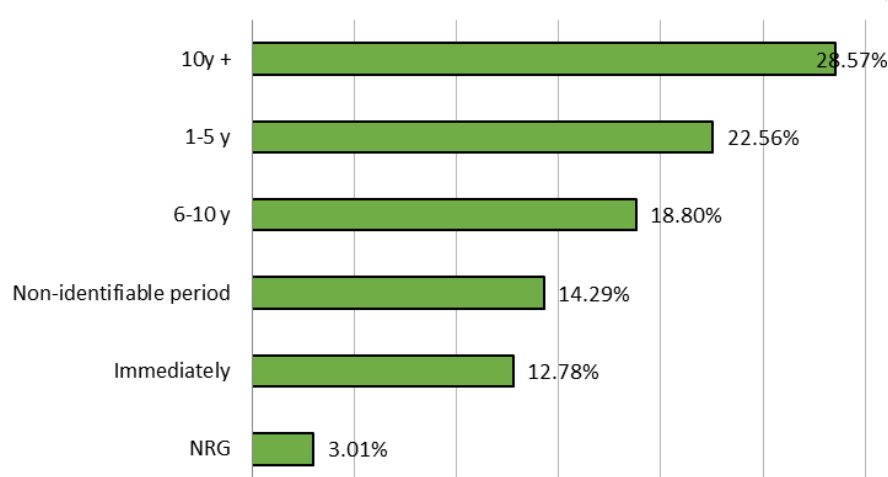
On the other hand, out of the respondents who highlighted that they did not find support received to be helpful (Figure 24), some reported that they wished they had been supported to stop the abuse and take action (31%) and that they would have wanted to be understood and listened to (31%). 30% of this category of respondents wished that they had received psychological support whereas 25% wished they received guidance to understand what to do in the situations they were in.

*Figure 24: Where support was not helpful, what support was hoped for*



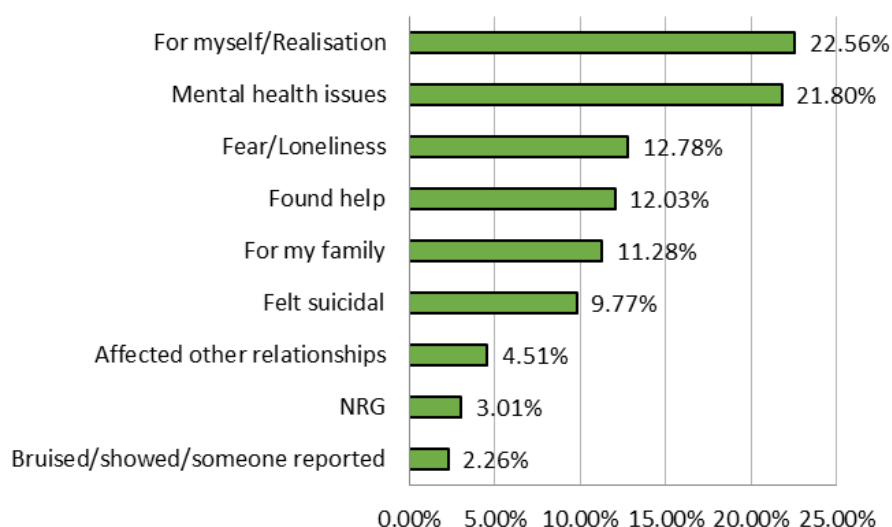
Amongst the responses who replied that they had sought support, 28.57% of respondents highlighted that they sought support more than 10 years after the abuse had taken place (Figure 25). 22.56% of respondents mentioned they sought support between 1 to 5 years after they experienced abuse whereas 18.8% respondents mentioned they sought support somewhere in between 6 to 10 years after experiencing abuse. Only 12.78% of respondents mentioned that they had sought support immediately after experiencing abuse.

Figure 25: Period from experiencing abuse to seeking support



The main reason for seeking support was identified to be for ‘themselves’ to help them process this experience (22.56%), whilst other responses highlighted mental health issues (21.8%) and feeling suicidal (9.77%) as seen in Figure 26. Loneliness (12.78%) and finding help (12.03%) were also amongst the main reasons why support in relation to child abuse was sought.

Figure 26: Main reasons for seeking support



Amongst those seeking support, only 52% were offered further professional support (Figure 27), with the main support offered being counselling and therapy (61%) (Figure 26).

Figure 27: Were you offered professional support

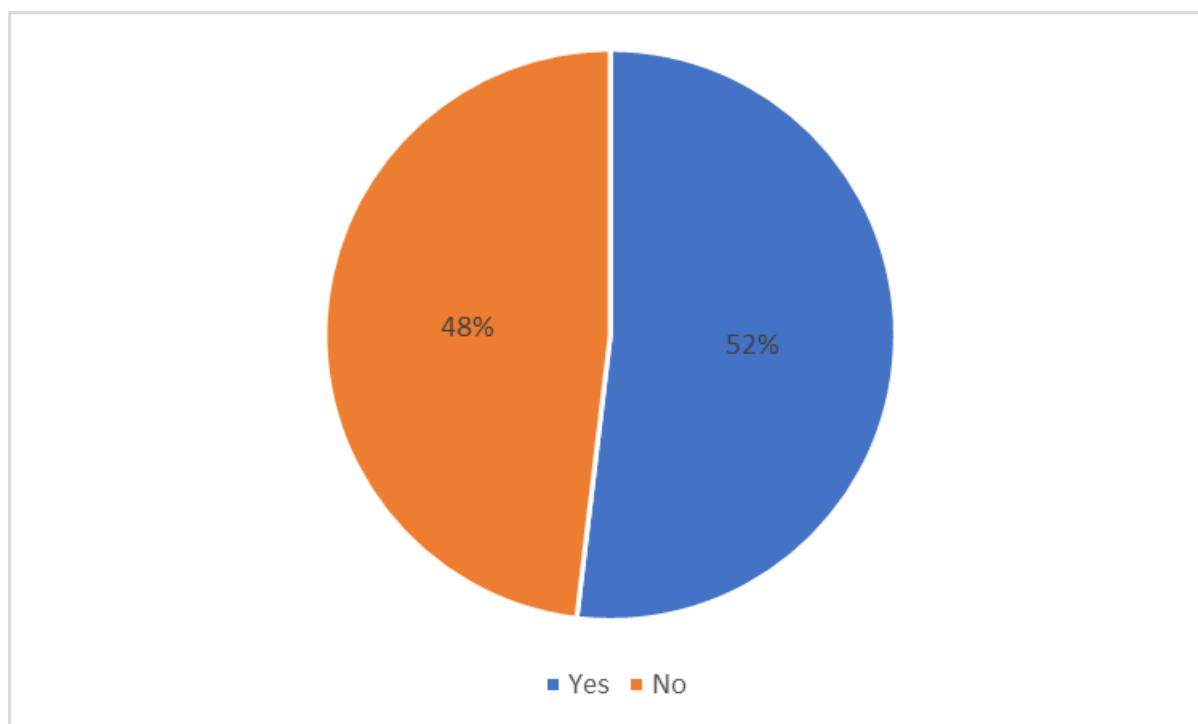
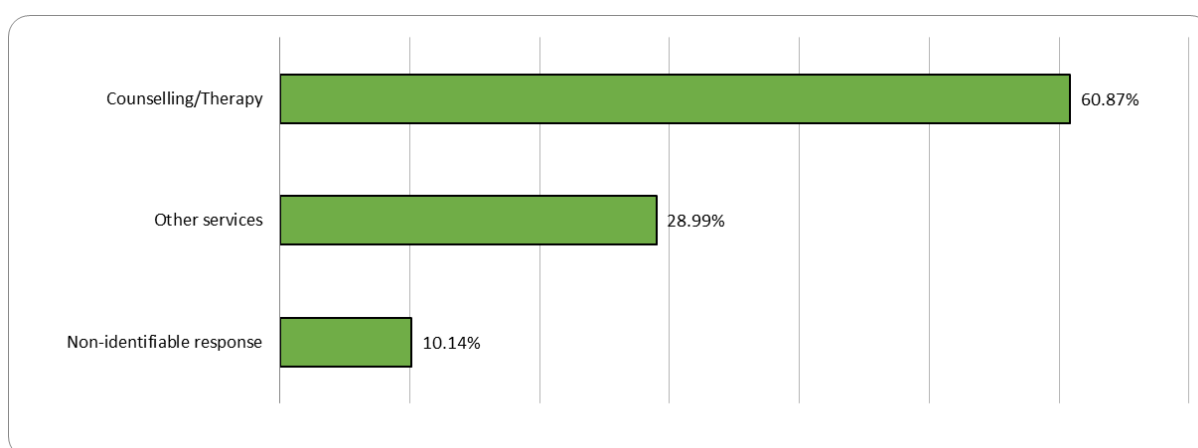
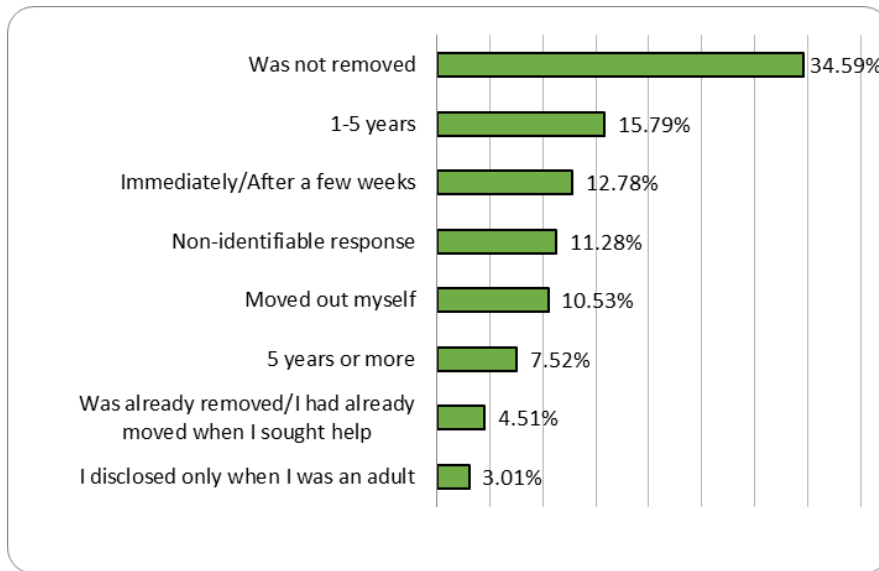


Figure 28: Type of professional support offered



Respondents who sought support were also asked how long after seeking support they were removed from the abusive context they were experiencing (Figure 29). 34.59% of respondents noted that they were never removed from the abuse, whereas it took between 1-5 years for 15.79% of respondents to be removed. Only 12.78% of respondents were removed immediately or a few weeks after seeking support.

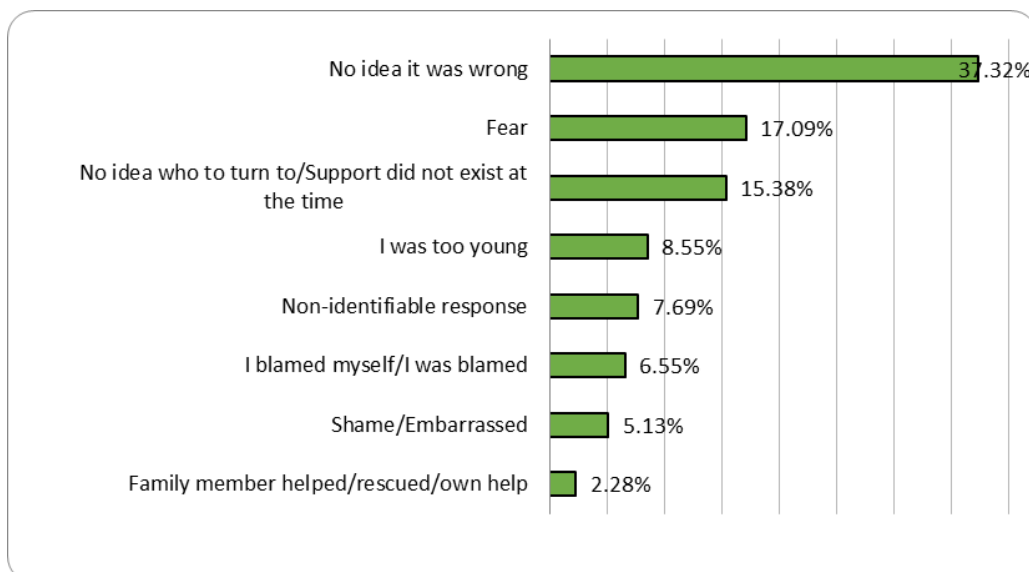
*Figure 29: How much time passed from disclosing your experience to being removed from the context?*



### *No Support Sought*

Out of the respondents who did not seek support (Figure 30), the vast majority responded that they did not seek support as they were not aware that what they were experiencing was wrong (37.32%). Experiencing fear (17.09%), and having no idea whom to turn to, particularly if support did not exist at the time (15.38%) were the most common replies given by respondents who highlighted the reasons they did not seek support.

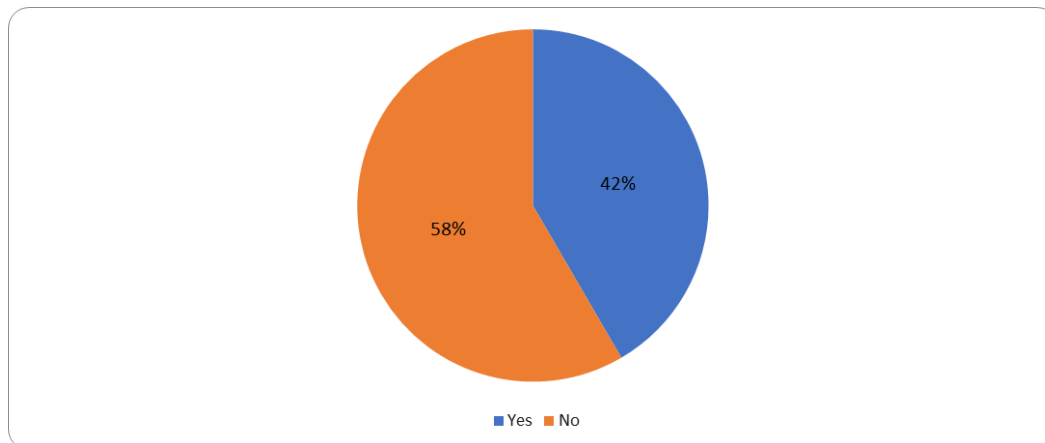
*Figure 30: Why you did not seek support*





Out of those residents who did not seek support (351 respondents out of a total of 484 questionnaire respondents), only 42% managed to remove themselves directly from the context of abuse, with 58% not managing to remove themselves (Figure 29).

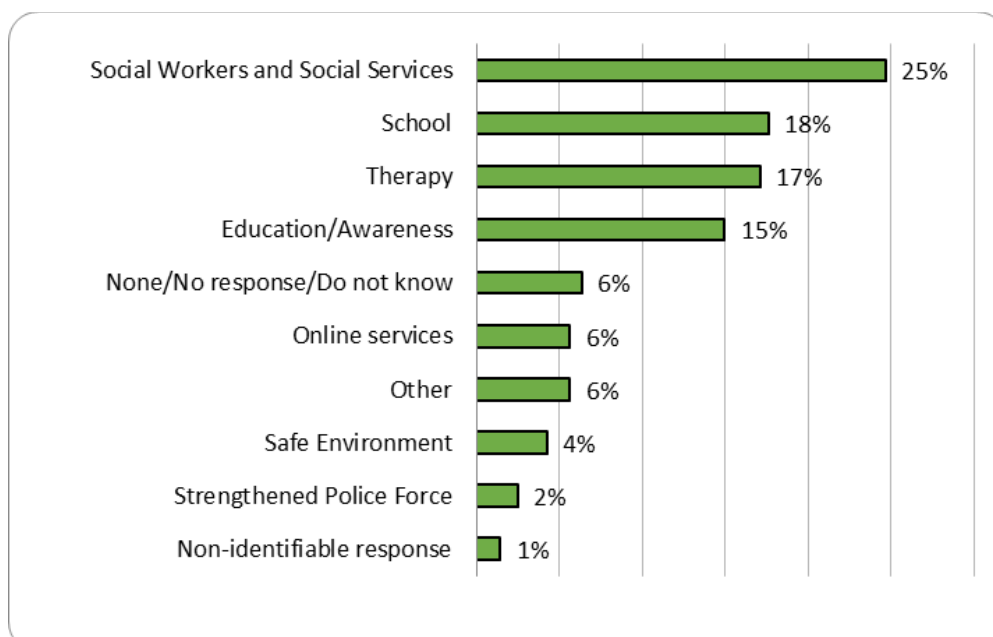
*Figure 31: Did you manage to remove yourself without seeking support*



### *Support Structures*

Respondents were asked which supporting structures they deem to be the most helpful and supportive for children experiencing abusive situations (Figure 32).

*Figure 32: What support services do you feel can most help children go through similar experiences?*



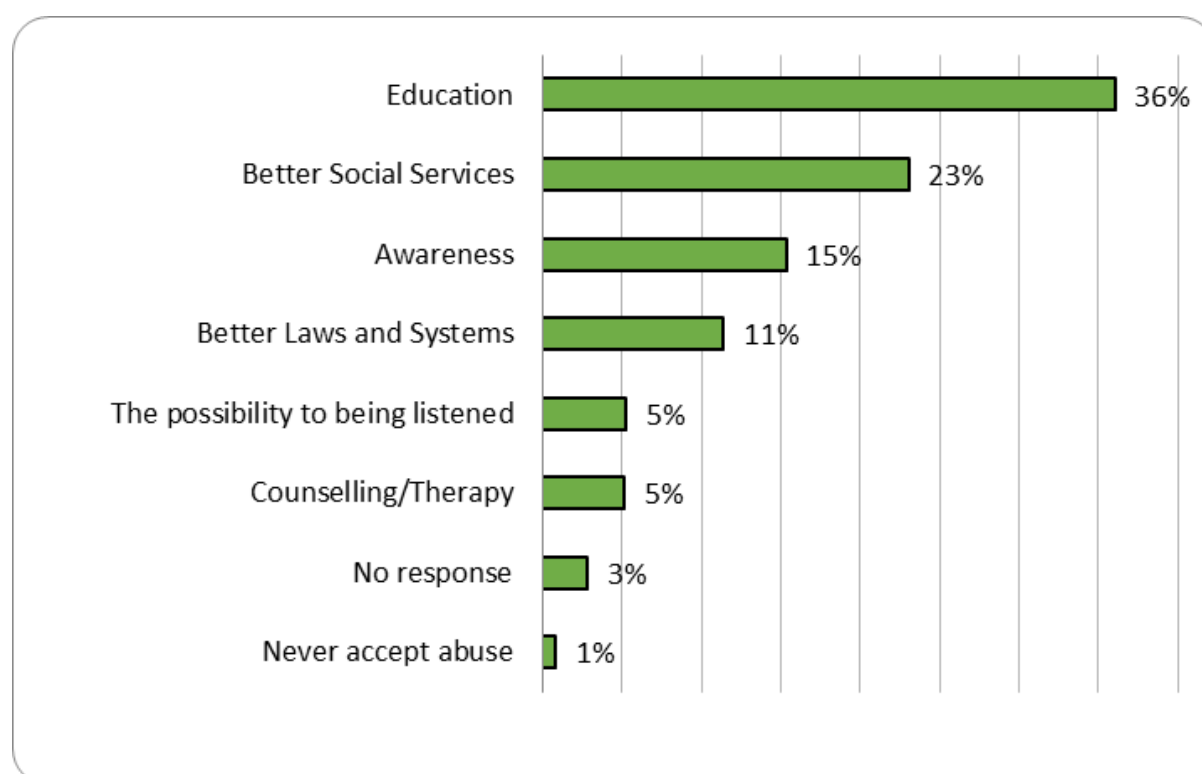
Respondents highlighted that social workers and social services can be the most helpful type of support in supporting children experiencing child abuse (140 responses, 25%). Schools, and the educational system, is also an important pillar in supporting and protecting children from child abuse according to questionnaire respondents (100 responses, 18%).

Respondents also highlighted the need to provide more therapeutic services and make them more accessible (97 responses, 17%) besides educating and creating awareness about what constitutes child abuse (85 responses, 15%).

#### 4.1.4. Preventing Future Child Abuse

Looking ahead, respondents were asked what efforts could be made to reduce the occurrence of similar experiences for children (Figure 33).

*Figure 33: Future Abuse Prevention*



The need for education with regard to awareness about and recognition of child abuse was mentioned by 266 respondents (356%). Here, the need for education also includes supporting

parents in their parenting role. Improved social services and support services were mentioned by 170 respondents (23%). 113 respondents (15%) highlighted the need for increased awareness about child abuse and the risks associated with child abuse. Respondents also mentioned the need to improve laws and overall systems associated with the abuse of children (84 responses, 11%).

## 4.2. Findings from the Qualitative Data

Through qualitative interviews carried out with professionals who work with perpetrators of child abuse, this study sought to explore current channels and structures in place to address the rehabilitation and/or treatment of those convicted of child abuse. This was intended to complement the part of the study looking to shed light on the prevalence of abuse of children, while examining related facets of this phenomenon such as the effectiveness of different rehabilitation approaches and incidents of recidivism. In addition to this, online safety for children, a main concern due to its potential to act as a gateway to abuse, was also examined through a series of qualitative interviews carried out with professionals in the field as well as focus groups that were carried out with children themselves. These sought to bring insight into nature of the online experiences for children while identifying any threats, and strengths, related to these experiences.

### 4.2.1 Professional work carried out with perpetrators of child abuse

*“Child protection is like a jigsaw puzzle. [...] You have a hundred pieces of the jigsaw, and we will know maybe, if we are lucky, ten out of a hundred”. (Participant 4)*

Data gathered through the qualitative branch of this study by way of interviews carried out with professionals working with perpetrators of child abuse brought insight regarding the incidence of this phenomenon and the nature of abuse encountered by these professionals. The quality of services provided, their effectiveness and follow-up services were also discussed with these participants in order to look into the strengths and possible areas for improvement of the current landscape of services. Three overarching themes were identified (Table 15). These are: The face of child abuse; Interventions and rehabilitation services, which includes three sub-themes: Assessment, Treatment success factor, and, Follow-up services; and, Ambitions for service development, which includes three sub-themes: Legislation and judicial systems; Prevention and early intervention; and, Resources and person-power. These themes will now be discussed in further detail.

*Table 15: Themes identified regarding professional work carried out with perpetrators of child abuse*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
<i>1. The face of child abuse</i>	-
<i>2. Interventions and rehabilitation services</i>	<i>(i) Assessment</i> <i>(ii) Treatment success factor</i> <i>(iii) Follow-up services</i>
<i>3. Ambitions for service development</i>	<i>(i) Treatment success factor</i> <i>(ii) Follow-up services</i> <i>(iii) Legislation and judicial systems</i> <i>(iv) Prevention and early intervention</i> <i>(v) Resources and person-power</i>

#### *Theme 1: The face of child abuse*

Discussions with professionals working with perpetrators of child abuse looked into the nature and volume of clients that these professional participants encounter over a period of time. From data collected, different interviewees reported a significant variation in the number of perpetrators that they come across in their professional roles – this variation was mostly due to the nature of the services offered whereby for instance, services related to inmates handled a smaller volume of perpetrators when compared to services such as more general child protection services or parole and probationary services. The interviewees involved in the study are involved in work with perpetrators of child abuse at different stages of these individuals' trajectories, including probationary services prior to incarceration, parole services following the issuing of a court sentence, therapeutic services with people involved in cases of intimate partner violence, as well as work with prison inmates themselves and within the Child Protection Services (CPS).

Participants interviewed who work directly with prison inmates, for instance, reported that there are approximately 25 people who are currently incarcerated on charges of paedophilia, of which around 3 include instances of violence. The most common type of abuse noted in these instances was sexual abuse. Participants who were involved in the treatment of cases of intimate partner violence on the other hand, mentioned physical and emotional abuse, with

incidents of children being hit, threatened, being made to fear violence, and children coming in between parental abusive relationships to protect a parent or mediate issues as the most frequent types of abuse they encounter. They added a further dimension to the incidence of child abuse where children are also victims as indirect participants of cases of intimate partner violence. Statistics related directly to child abuse were not available in these cases since the focus of their services does not directly address child abuse but takes a more comprehensive view of intervention with the entire support system focusing on incidents of intimate partner violence.

*“Swat, għajjat, theddid, biża’ ovvjament [...] ħafna drabi qisu d-dinamika tkun li t-tfal jidhlu biex, jew in between the parents, to safeguard their mother or jidhlu wkoll għax iħossu li isma’ somebody has to control the situation or to mediate” (Participant 2)*

*[Being hit., yelling, threats, fear obviously [...] a lot of times it’s like the dynamic is one where the kids get involved between the parents to safeguard their parents, or they get involved because they feel like somebody has to control or mediate the situation]*

Feedback from other interview participants added yet another dimension to these findings. Participants from parole and probation services reported 166 individuals accessing their services in relation to child abuse on minors since 2012, an average of 15 cases per year. 13 of these, at least 1 per year, were reported to be minors themselves, such as incidents of sexual activity amongst 2 minors. Other service providers such as Participant 4 reported:

*“An average of 30, 35 referrals a year. [...] Some of the people we investigate would be convicted or we would help start the process of the court case. [...] In the past eight years [...] I’m sure we had 20, 30 cases in court, most of them would get convicted”.*

Participants working within services involved with child protection noted that whilst in their capacity they are involved with all children at risk, not solely with children who are victims of child abuse, their role and function also includes the protection of children who are victims of child abuse as well as children who come into contact with or who are close to someone who was convicted of child abuse. In such instances, a risk assessment is carried out to evaluate the proximity of the child to the convicted perpetrator in whose care the the child/ren are. CPS, for instance, highlighted they receive roughly 2,100 cases a year where children are subject to abuse. These mainly include neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, as well as referrals where a parent or guardian conducts a chaotic or criminal lifestyle which pose a risk to the health and wellbeing of the children and that need to be investigated. On average, CPS noted

reporting roughly six to eight cases a month to the Police in relation to instances regarding issues of protection of the child and criminal issues in a situation.

*"Child Protection Services receives roughly about 2,100 cases on a yearly basis [...] for each and every case there would be an adult, that who is accused of committing [...] an act of child abuse towards the children [...] we roughly report to the Police about 6 to 8 cases a month. This means that the Child Protection would have received information that the Child Protection would have evaluated the case and the Child Protection would have found both protection issues and criminal issues". (Participant 6)*

On the other hand, professionals working with children who were victims of verbal and physical abuse, often from immediate family members, as well as neglect and in a few instances, sexual abuse, approximated:

*"I don't know, last year... 10 children. [...] Children who are taken away by a care order because the parents are incapable of taking care of them, so that would be neglect, [...] maybe they issue on average it would be one a week [but] I wouldn't know the statistics". (Participant 5)*

Various types of abuse were reported by the different professional participants, with overlapping findings observed amongst most. These included starvation, neglect, verbal abuse, hitting and other forms of physical abuse, as well as others:

*"Ikollna qisu minn kull tip ta' abbuż. Għandna neglects, abbandun, kellna każijiet, jiena kelli każ ta' persuna per eżempju tefgħet it-tifel tagħha fuq marketplace għax kienet għaddejja minn żmien diffiċli ħafna. Kellna mbagħad sexual abuse, online, teħid ta' videos...jiġifieri tista' tgħid spectrum sħiħ ta' abbuż fuq tfal". (Participant 3)*

*[We encounter all types of abuse. Neglect, abandonment, we had a lot of cases, I even had a case of a person for instance, who places her son on marketplace because she was going through a difficult time. Then we had sexual abuse, online, videos being taken...you could a whole spectrum of abuse on children]*

*"The least we would get would be child sexual abuse, but obviously very concerning cases. [...] We would have all types really. [...] You have a small percentage of child sexual abuse, but then you have also physical abuse, you have emotional abuse,*

*sometimes you get neglect, [...] sometimes Christian abuse, online elements".*  
(Participant 4)

*"L-abuse tan-neglect kiber ukoll".* (Participant 10)

*[The incidence of neglect has increased too]*

*"Most of the time neglect, physical abuse as well, and occasional sexual abuse as well. [...] Verbal abuse, 'Għax qabbzuili', 'Għax tfal imqarbin' ['They made me lose my temper', 'They're not well-behaved children']".* (Participant 5)

Participant 6 highlighted that whilst reports in terms of child abuse are mainly related to accusations of neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse, convictions are mainly in terms of physical abuse or sexual abuse against minors:

*"I do not think that I have ever seen a conviction of neglect. Maybe abandonment [...] but usually it's physical abuse or sexual abuse".* (Participant 6)

Participant 4 also shared their views regarding the experiences of persons who experienced abuse in their childhood. In this respect, they explained:

*"It takes time for victims to, first of all, understand that what they experienced is wrong, that what they experienced is abuse. [...] It's not easy for a child, teenager, young person to stand up against someone, and it takes years. Many times, the young person or the adult then has still fond memories of the abuser and they have, [...] mixed feelings towards them: anger because of what happened, but also appreciation for what they did to them. [...] What victims and survivors go through, both psychologically to recognise at what they experienced was their abusive, but also the courage to speak up".*

Similarly to other professional participants, they also shared how abuse, especially in cases where involves children, is often about an imbalance of power:

*"An imbalance of power, an imbalance of access, an imbalance of resources between a victim and a subject of complaint, or a perpetrator. [...] sexual abuse is primarily about power and control, and sexual arousal is a medium, a means to an end. Because it is*



*about power and control, it's not about sexual gratification. Because if they only want sexual gratification, they can get that in ways that are all, entirely legal [...] Obviously, they have their sexual interest..."* (Participant 4)

*"There is an imbalance of power. But more than that, an abuse of that imbalance".* (Participant 9)

*"A big power imbalance. [...] Fejn jidħol [in cases of] child abuse, it's very clear, because there's a big imbalance of power imbalance".* (Participant 2)

## *Theme 2: Interventions and rehabilitation services*

Interviews carried out with professionals working with perpetrators of child abuse provided a picture of the current services being offered to these individuals. From data gathered through this qualitative branch of this study, three sub-themes in relation to these services provided to perpetrators were identified. These are: assessment and perpetrator profiles; treatment success factors such as victim empathy and individual or group treatment modalities; and follow-up services. These themes, that were brought to light through discussions with professionals working with perpetrators, bring insight into aspects of assessment and treatment plans that are extended to perpetrators of child abuse. Important areas for improvement of services were also discussed with these professional participants and will be presented in the following section.

In the case of participants working with prison inmates and services offered in relation to probation or parole, all individuals who access these services do so following mandates issued from Court. Interview participants who offer services in relation to intimate partner violence on the other hand, encounter clients who may also be self-referred.

### *Sub-Theme 1: Assessment and perpetrator profiles*

A number of professional participants highlighted the value of carrying out an assessment as a first step towards providing a programme of rehabilitation to a perpetrator of child abuse. Pointing out how *"t-treatment ma jgħoddx għal kulħadd"* [treatment is not applicable to everyone], Participant 2, for instance, explained that it is important that a proper assessment

needs to be carried out in order to determine the profile of the perpetrator that the treatment plan is being designed for. Similarly to other participants, they explained how:

*"L-ewwel irrid isir assessment biex inti tgħid, 'Isma' with whom I am dealing with? Am I dealing with a characterological type of perpetrator? Jiġifieri dan person on the verge of psychosis, of personality disorder, or a narcissistic tendency, taf kif? Jew more situation, taf kif, more reactive?' Allura qisek qed titlaq minn hemmhekk biex tagħti treatment. Jiġifieri qisu biex qabel ma tasal biex tagħmel treatment plan, you have to do first the assessment"* (Participant 2)

*[An assessment has to be carried out first so that you can say 'Who am I dealing with? Am I dealing with a characterological type of perpetrator? Is the person on the verge of psychosis, of personality disorder or narcissistic tendency? Or is it more situational, you know, reactive? So, you start from there to give treatment. So that before you design a treatment plan, first you carry out an assessment].*

*"One has to examine the narrative or the narratives...I-amount, it-type, severity, biża' [fear], traumas, manipulation"* (Participant 2)

Another participant highlighted a number of situations or conditions which need to be carefully addressed in the context of child abuse as highlighted by Participant 6:

*"I find that there is a fraction of of people who would accept help. [...] There's a fraction of the the people who believe that we are intruding [...] I find that some of them would actually have a financial incentive to continue doing what they're doing, like the selling of drugs or or being involved in criminal activity, so they would have no incentive whatsoever to shift their position in life and to attempt other less paying jobs. so to speak. This this is most often I feel prevalent in situations where the mother is, for example, involved in sex life".*

*"Sometimes other financial issues might be that they do not have the sufficient means to finance the transportation. For example sometimes we have people who are so impoverished that they can't locate mental resources to go through the program, because they are too concerned for their safety, their food, their shelter. So there are plenty of little reasons".*

*"Some people who have problems [...] sometimes they have difficulties like disabilities or, or significant mental health problems".*

Other participants added:

*“Overview tal-persuna, il-familja, il-background tagħha, ħafna aspetti tax-xogħol, rikreazzjoni, jekk hemmx xi vizzji, jekk hemmx xi problemi, jekk hux qed jieħu għajjnuna ta xi tip. [...] Nitkellmu kemm mal-perpetrator kif ukoll mal-vittmi”* (Participant 3)

*[An overview of the person, the family, their background, aspects of their employment, recreation, any habits/addictions, if there are any problems, whether they are getting any kind of help [...] We speak to the perpetrator as well as the victims].*

*“Through assessments [...] inkunu nafu r-raġuni għalfejn ġew hawnhekk. Aħna tipo noffruluhom terapija b'terapisti li hija ggerjata għall-pedofilja per eżempju, jew għall sexual assault”* (Participant 1)

*[Through assessments [...] we can know the reason why these persons come to us. We offer them therapy with therapists that is geared for paedophilia for instance, or for sexual assault].*

*“There is a story behind every person, [...] even if it's sexual abuse, there's a story. So, rather than the blame, I think we have to understand the story, and always, but always keep the child in mind, and the interest and the safety of the child. [...] Nothing happens in isolation. So, the broader context has to be dealt with. [...] I think first we have to understand the context. What is happening? Once we understand the context, then we can think of, ‘Okay, so this is how I am going to try and work with this perpetrator in a way that [they] will understand’.”* (Participant 5)

In doing so, an understanding of the profile of the person receiving the treatment and/or rehabilitation is established, thereby allowing for better adaptation of the treatment plan laid out for them. Amongst their descriptions of perpetrators, Participant 2 shared:

*“Żewġ kategoriji: qisu hemm the situational, jiġifieri, qisu għandek fejn il-partners both of them qisu dance this dance of abuse, taf kif? [...] Imbagħad hemm dak li jissejjaħ characterological. Characterological tfisser li qisu [...] hija ċara ħafna d-differenza, fejn għandek a perpetrator and a victim. Jiġifieri għandek situational, fejn it's a bit blurred, imma fejn għandek din il-characterological type of perpetrator, it's more on the*

*pathological, fejn il-persuna lanqas għandha sens ta' ndiema, lanqas għandha sens ta' responsabilità, lanqas għandha sens ta' etika".*

*[2 categories (of perpetrators): there are the situational, that is, like when two partners both dance this dance of abuse, you know? [...] And then there is what is called characterological. Characterological means [...] the difference is very clear, where there is a perpetrator and a victim. So, there is the situational, where it's a bit blurred, but where there is a characterological type of perpetrator, it's more on the pathological, where the person doesn't even have a sense of remorse, doesn't even have a sense of responsibility, not even a sense of ethics".*

To this, Participants 3 and 4 added:

*Fil-maġġor parti tal-każijiet, il-perpetrator ikun persuna li huwa, on the outside, il-ħajja tiegħu hija ħajja stabbli, ikunu jaħdmu xogħol stabbli, full-time, ġieli anke xogħlijiet ta' ċertu purtata, jiġifieri ta' ħafna skola wkoll. Jiġifieri, anke meta tagħmel risk assessments - at face value ma tantx ikun evidenti r-riskju". (Participant 3)*

*[In the majority of cases, the perpetrator will be a person who, on the outside, leads a stable life, they will be in stable employment, full-time, at times even in jobs of a certain stature, so well educated too. So, when you carry out a risk assessment, at face value, the risks are not easily evident].*

*"The subject of complaint (referring to perpetrators of child abuse) would be a person with good standing in the community, who would be a leader in the community. [...] Most of abuse happens in families, which makes sense, because that is where access is. [...] Between 85 to 95% of child sexual abuse happens within the family, [...] by a father, an uncle, a brother. Usually, nine out of ten offenders are male". (Participant 4)*

While, with reference to perpetrators of neglect or child verbal and physical abuse, Participant 5 added:

*"These are not really child abusers, but, you know, parents who are struggling with controlling their children's behaviour, and the children might be in residential care because of that. [...] Parents do not wilfully maltreat their children. It's coping strategies.*

*Now, either, because you don't have the proper parenting skills, so you resort to bad discipline, harsh discipline". (Participant 5)*

Participants also pointed out that some perpetrators may have at times been victims of child abuse themselves or may have faced, or could still be facing, challenging circumstances in life:

*"Fl-esperjenza tiegħi rajt nies li kienu vittmi ta' abbuż (meta kienu tfal jew żgħażaġħ) [...] fejn imbagħad daħlu l-ħabs jew bħala perpetrators jew bħala nies li ġew abbużati". (Participant 1)*

*[In my experience I have met people who were victims of abuse (when they were children or adolescents) [...], that then were then in prison either as perpetrators or as people who were abused].*

*"Dawn huma nies bħali u bħalek li forsi kellhom upbringing ħafna drabi diffiċli, jista' jkun ma kellhomx support network kif forsi sibna aħna. [...] Meta ssir tafhom, qisu meta you touch their vulnerability, their pain, their narratives, speċjalment childhood stories, tinduna li ħaddieħor mexa hekk magħhom" (Participant 2)*

*[These are people like me and you that maybe, often, had a difficult upbringing, and maybe didn't have the support network that we had. [...] When you get to know them, when you touch their vulnerability, their pain, their narratives, especially childhood stories, it becomes apparent that someone else treatment them the same way].*

*"There are lots of stressors, lots. [...] A parent who has to struggle to make ends meet, to pay the rent and doesn't know how, where money is coming from, going to put food, can't go home to a toddler who's screaming all over the place. We're maybe expecting too much. You don't expect them never to lose it". (Participant 5)*

## **Sub-Theme 2: Treatment success factors – Structured treatment programmes, victim empathy and sense of responsibility, and individual/group modalities**

*"Prevention and awareness and delivering services in a way that our clients understand them" (Participant 5)*

Professionals working with perpetrators of child abuse are faced with the challenge of providing effective treatment. Through interviews with professionals involved in the delivery of treatment and rehabilitation services with perpetrators of child abuse, a number of factors that can affect the success of a treatment programme success were discussed. These discussions revealed a number of programme and individual-level factors that play a role in the successful (or not) outcomes of these interventions. In particular, 3 main pillars were highlighted by participants as being valuable contributors to the success of interventions and treatment initiatives. These are the role of structured treatment programmes, the importance of victim empathy and perpetrators' sense of responsibility, and individual versus therapy intervention modalities.

### Structured treatment programmes

The value of a successful treatment programme was brought to light by most interview participants. In particular, a number of participants disclosed disappointed views regarding how child abuse perpetrators are handled in court, the quality of sentences given out to them, and shared how further emphasis should be placed on ensuring a proper delivery of mandates by court for treatment programmes:

*"The punishments are ridiculous. [...] People offend, get convicted for a sexual offence of a minor, they get a suspended sentence and then when someone steals something, and they get a prison sentence. [...] So, what we're saying is that money is more important than the dignity of children, which is absolutely ridiculous. [...] So, definitely, prison sentences need to be fixed, what support therapeutically is offered to the offender once they are convicted". (Participant 4)*

*"Ftit hawn maġistrati li sfortunatament that mandate a treatment programme or mandate therapy bħala parti mir-reħab tagħhom" (Participant 2)*

*[There are only a few magistrates that mandate a treatment programme or who mandate therapy as part of their rehabilitation]*

In contrast to this however, Participant 3 pointed out:

*"Dawn it-tip ta' orders [...] jkun hemm treatment order. Jigifieri l-qorti tordna xi trattament b'xi mod".*

*[These types of (court) orders [...] will have a treatment order. This means that court mandates some form of treatment].*

Notwithstanding this, while all interviewees spoke of treatment and rehabilitation services that are offered to the perpetrators that they work with in their professional roles, none spoke about a structured programme that is provided or that exists at a national level. Services were at times offered in-house, and in other cases they were referred to external agencies. Additionally, while those convicted are assigned a coordinator to follow their progress throughout their term in prison, the involvement and monitoring of any progress (or otherwise) of perpetrators throughout their sentence by professionals such as probation officers is only carried out in cases that are specifically assigned this service from court.

*“Kull prigionier, għandu care plan coordinator (Participant 1)*

*[Every prisoner has a care plan coordinator].*

*“Inseguwuhom meta jkun hemm xi tip ta’ supervision, meta l-qorti bħala sentenza, bħala dikriet, jkun hemm li dan għandu jkun supervised minn xi ħadd”. (Participant 3)*

*[We follow them when there is some type of supervision that is mandated as part of their sentence from court or court order that assigns it].*

Participants also pointed out that while in some cases, their respective agencies offered in-house created programmes, these came across as somewhat random, lacking coordination across the various services that these perpetrators in one way or another come across along their sentences or prison terms. This is to say that although the individual agencies, in their own space, offered therapeutic and rehabilitation services to the best of their capabilities based on the resources available to them, the delivery of these was first of all, dependent on the resources available at the time (see further information in ‘Theme 3: Ambitions for service development’ below) and, for instance in the case of child sexual abuse, was not a structured programme that was a national standard for those found guilty of this kind of abuse. Feedback from professional participants in fact, painted a picture where protocol or a set process of the trajectory of child abuse perpetrators from start to end does not seem to have been established. Some professionals in fact question whether appropriate services were being offered at all. In addition to this, these professional participants also highlighted how the services currently offered are general services addressing for instance, general sexual offences but not specific to child abuse. Similar comments were also brought up by participants from different services backgrounds, including those whose professional experience was focused mostly on incidents of neglect or physical abuse, as well as others who worked in the domestic abuse services sector.

*“When someone is convicted, there are very little services offered to them. [...] I don’t think we have the right services to offer them, [...] I don’t think we have a sex offenders’ treatment programme. [...] A specialised service for them [is] absolutely necessary. [...] A specialist treatment for people who offend, especially young offenders - we have very little service for them unfortunately”. (Participant 4)*

*“Whether they are little children and we’re talking about, you know, sexual abuse, healthy relationships, bullying, whatever it is; whether it’s the parents, we’re talking about, how do we build relationships with our children, how would do we discipline our children. Are we making sure that they are understanding? [...] What do we offer these clients before we go for a care order and move children?” (Participant 5)*

*“Din il-persuna mela ġiet irrapurtata, investigajt, għamilna action plan, għamilna follow-up, imbagħad we can terminate, imma the whole process, mhux biċċiet” (Participant 2)*

*[So, this person was reported, you investigated, we developed an action plan, we followed it up, then we can terminate, but the whole process, not bits and pieces].*

*“Ġieli jkun hemm a specialised service li sfortunatament Malta ma jeżistix. Issa għandniex inkunu aħna li noffru jew ikun hemm xi aġenzija oħra li toffrih, però xi ħadd irid joffrih”. (Participant 1)*

*[Sometimes there are specialised services that however does not exist in Malta. I don’t know whether it should be us who offer it or a specialised service, however someone should offer it]*

*“Sex offender programme. [...] huwa wieħed - mhemmx ħaġa speċifika fuq child abuse jiġifieri just sex offender in ġenerali” (Participant 3)*

*[Sex offender programme [...] there’s one – there isn’t something speċifiċi to child abuse, just the general sex offender one].*

Another respondent highlighted that the perpetrator needs to be willing and fully engaged in the treatment programme to ensure success, albeit the respondent highlighting doubt in terms



of the efficacy of mandatory therapy. The same respondent also highlighted the need for and importance of certain level of controls, such as the POMA registry in terms of protecting children from convicted perpetrators by also to support convicted perpetrators to avoid possible temptation whilst they are going through support programmes and after such programmes have been completed. Participant 6 states:

*"I find that whatever the therapy is, if conducted well and if there is a good engagement, if there's the will, by the, by the service user, I think I think that there's a fairly good chance of success. I'm not a particularly a fan of mandatory therapy although I have seen situations where this has worked. [...] However, I find that the success rate is much smaller. So, in an ideal context. I think I think therapy is is a is a good way to try and reshape behaviour."*

*"I also feel like the having certain controls actually help. They actually even help the person has committed the crime. So, for instance, imagine situation where a person has been accused of and has been accused of, sexual crimes against, the child, [...] He would be placed on a particular register held by the Courts of Malta. So that register serves the purpose, so that this person would not be allowed to work with children. Now, that is a control that is very useful, and is because this man might might, might have a little bit of support and avoiding temptation".*

*"That is, you know it's. It's not rehabilitative. It's not rehabilitative in nature. It's controlling in nature, but I feel like everything is pushing towards the same end of protecting the minors, and I find that by protecting the minors, and by incapacitating the person to commit another crime".*

They also added that the services offered in their professional stance are not offered directly to support the perpetrator, but to protect children:

*"We would broker, or we would try to gauge these, these people with therapeutic services to help them change. However, [...] the focus will always be the child. So, if, if the adult does not wish to continue with this therapy, then this, our protection would change gear, would shift position, and the position would then be to protect the child by going by taking that person to court".*

### *Neglect and child verbal and physical abuse within immediate family*

Questioning the effectiveness of interventions offered when it came to services for families where incidents of neglect or child verbal and physical abuse were occurring, Participant 5 added:

*“Trying to teach parenting skills, [...] or a home-based intervention, [...] therapy, you know, for the family, for the carers. [...] I find they go through it, so it's a sort of tick box exercise and yet you find [...] they are unresponsive to services given. Maybe we're not delivering them in the right way, but I see it repeatedly. [...] Are we working well with them to integrate children again with families? I have my reservations. [...] How effective is the service, how effective, how much change has it brought?”*

*“Child protection offer them a social contract. Okay, ‘Do this incredible, yes, programme, have home-based family therapy. If these don't work, you know, then the children might be removed’. So, they do them. But is this as a tick box exercise, and not really wanting it to change? Is it they're not changing because they're not comprehending, because the way we deliver the service, they're not understanding it, they are not internalising it [...] Is it for any other reason? Maybe it's too short, [...] the intervention is too short, or not ideal”.*

The same participant (Participant 5) also reported that in their professional experience with children who were victims of neglect or verbal and/or physical abuse, the dynamics surrounding these incidents usually involved *“parents who don't have the appropriate parenting skills and end up either physically abusing their children or neglecting their children”*. They felt that effective initiatives to address these would include:

*“It's all about teaching family – parents, like children, how to understand, how to manage their emotions, how to manage behaviours. [...] If children feel they understand themselves, they can speak up, and then they can get help. And families. We will decrease the levels of abuse”.*

In addition to the value of parenting skills and positive discipline, they also brought light onto issues such as the value that families attribute to education as playing a role towards child absenteeism in schools.

*“Il-parents ma jsostnuhiex dik il-valur tal-edukazzjoni allura you know, ma jarawx l-importanza li jmorru” (Participant 5)*

*[The parents don’t support the value of an education so, you know, they don’t see the importance of attending].*

They pointed out however, that there are times when the family’s capacity to take in the possible improvements that interventions can bring along are beyond their means to reach.

*“Hemm ċertu parents [...] li jilħqu l-limit tagħhom. Tagħmel x’tagħmel interventions, mhux se tasal”. (Participant 5)*

*[There are parents [...] who reach their limit. No matter what interventions are made, results are not achieved].*

#### *Intimate Partner Violence and domestic abuse*

To the above, with a focus on victims of domestic abuse, Participant 2 also added how while services are being offered to perpetrators, no fixed intervention programmes existed for the victims of these crimes. They considered treatment plans to be very important not only for work with perpetrators, but also with the network of victims around them:

*“Għan-nisa u għat-tfal (li huma vittmi ta’ abbuż), ma hemm l-ebda programm stabbilit” (Participant 2)*

*[For women and children (who are victims of abuse), there is no established programme].*

*“Jekk inti verament trid tipprotegi lit-tfal mhux biss tinvestiga, [...] you give a treatment plan. [...] Jekk inti qed toħloq, għandek servizz ta’ child protection, it has to be holistic, li isma’ dan inti jekk hemm tfal at risk mhux tneħħihom biss mir-riskju, [...] what treatment plan do you give u r-rizorsi li jkunu available for that child, for that family”. (Participant 2)*

*[If you really want to protect children, you don’t just investigate, [...] you give a treatment plan. [...] If you are creating, if you have a child protection service, it has to be holistic, so that if there are children at risk, you don’t just remove them from the risk. [...] what*

*treatment plan do you give and the resources that are available for that child, for that family].*

#### Victim empathy and sense of responsibility

Victim empathy is considered to be a critical component in the success of treatment programmes carried out with perpetrators, thereby holding a central role in recidivism (Carich et al., 2003). The importance of victim empathy was in fact highlighted across all interview participants, emphasized as holding a crucial role in the success of any intervention. The same importance was also attributed to perpetrators taking a sense of responsibility for the crimes committed:

*“Even when you have a conviction, offenders keep saying they didn’t do it. Therapeutically you can work through that, [...] actually, you can use denial to, in your favour, but you need to be in a therapeutic relationship”. (Participant 4)*

*“Qalb niedma u sogħbiena. Jekk ma jkunx hemm dawn iż-żewġ kelmiet, ma taħdimx ma’ dawn it-tip ta’ nies” (Participant 2)*

*[A repentant and sorrowful heart. Without these two words, it’s not possible to work with this kind of people].*

*“Naraha ħafna diffiċli biex qisu tipprova timxi ta’ some form of change, huma nies li they don’t take the invitation to be responsible for their actions” (Participant 2)*

*[I find it very difficult to move try to move forward towards some form of changes, when it comes to people who do not take the invitation to be responsible for their actions].*

*“L-iktar li taħdem jiddependi qisu l-openness” (Participant 2)*

*[What works most is openness]*

*“Jkollok nies li qatt ma jiddispjaci hom ta’ dak li għamlu, u dik ovvjament, jekk inti ma jiddispjaćikx ta’ dak li tagħmel, terapija hija limitata ħafna f’dan il-każijiet” (Participant 1)*

*[We have people who never regret what they did, and that obviously, if you're not sorry for what you did, therapy is very limited in these cases].*

*“Ovvjament isir ħafna xogħol fuq victim empathy, fuq x'inhuma kawżi, fuq ħafna xogħol individwali ma' individwu u mas-psychologist. [...] L-iktar fattur, speċjalment fejn jidħol child sex abuse jista' jkun denial. [...] Denial hija waħda mill-affarijiet li twaqqaf lill-persuna milli tkun successful imbagħad fil-programm [...] Ikollna sfortunatament persuni li jkunux unresponsive għax ma jaċċettaw li huma li għandhom problema.” (Participant 3)*

*[Obviously a lot of work is done on victim empathy, on what the causes are, through a lot of individual work with the person and with a psychologist. [...] The most important factor, especially when it comes to child sex abuse is denial. [...] Denial is one of the things that stop a person from then being successful in the programme [...] Unfortunately, we do meet people who are not responsive because they don't accept that they have a problem].*

### Individual versus group treatment modalities

Another valuable contributor to the success of therapeutic and rehabilitative work carried out with perpetrators which was highlighted by all participants was the modality of the treatment delivery. In particular, all professional participants debated the impact of individual versus group modalities, pointing out advantages and disadvantages in both modalities.

*“There is controversy about them, how successful they are especially on group level, because group work normalises behaviour”. (Participant 4)*

*“Fil-group work per eżempju għandek vantaġġ u żvantaġġ. Fi group work jista' ikollok nies that li għalihom to be vulnerable in a group is very difficult allura they will never take up the responsibility in front of others. [...] Allura jista' jkun li forsi fil-grupp ikun diffiċli biex taħdem miegħu jew magħha dik il-persuna, imma mbagħad individually... [...] Jien nara li mbagħad il-grupp jista' jkun ħafna supportive għal xulxin, qisu jagħmlu kuraġġ lil xulxin, u qisu if somebody isma' expose himself, expose his vulnerability, emotional vulnerability, imbagħad qisu contagious tista' ittieħed, ikun hemm oħrajn ukoll l-istess ilma” (Participant 2)*

*[In group work for instance, there is an advantage and a disadvantage. In group work you can have people who find it difficult to be vulnerable in a group, so they will never*

*take responsibility in front of others. [...] So it could be that maybe in a group, it will be difficult to work with that person, but individually... [...] I feel that a group can be supportive towards each other, like giving each other courage, and if someone exposes themselves, they vulnerability, emotional vulnerability, then it's like contagious, others will feel the same].*

*“Il-programmi li jkunu fi grupp , li anke forsi anke huma jistgħu jisimgħu l-esperjenzi ta’ xulxin, anke jekk ikun hemm iktar awareness fuq il-vittima u konsegwenzi b’dak il-mod, għax forsi ta’ min ikun naqra iktar serju minn ta’ ieħor jew ta’ oħra, u qisu jkun hemm naqra iktar interaction f’kuntast ta’ grupp jiġifieri” (Participant 3)*

*[Group programmes, where maybe they can listen to each other’s experiences, even if maybe there could be more awareness about the victim and consequences in that way, because maybe some are more serious than others, and that way, there is more interaction in a group context]*

### Sub-Theme 3: Follow-up Services

Overall, from interviews with professionals working with perpetrators, it emerged that the rate of recidivism appears to be overall low.

*“M’hemmx reoffending rate għolja ta’ nies fuq abbuż tat-tfal” (Participant 1)*

*[The reoffending rate amongst people convicted of child abuse is low]*

*“Ma kellniex nies li ġew lura bl-istess offence” (Participant 3)*

*[We haven’t had people that came back for the same offence]*

Nevertheless, one participant commented on the fact that these figures might still not be indicative of the full picture since some perpetrators might have made use of a service and not returned to the same offence to them, however, maybe have returned with the same offence to another service.

In relation to this, a lack of follow-up services was brought to light by most participants as a concerning fact. Currently, services offered to perpetrators appear to terminate when court sentences terminate, even though it was agreed upon by all participants that subsequent monitoring is important to ensure adequate participation society and reduce rates of recidivism:

*“How much multidisciplinary work is done to monitor people for example, in the community? [...] The aim is to reintroduce the person to the community. [...] you test whether someone is going to reoffend when they’re in the community [...] and monitoring, multi-agency work, sharing of information, which I don’t think really happens”. (Participant 4)*

*“S’issa m’għandna l-ebda tip ta’ outreach wara li joħroġu mill-ħabs. [...] Nirreferuhom għal servizzi oħrajn. Jekk ikun qed jara psikjatra hawn per eżempju, nibgħatuh jara psikjatra, nagħmlulu referral through one of the community services ta’ Hand in Hand services, però l-follow-up tagħna jieqaf hemm” (Participant 1)*

*[Until now we have no outreach service after they leave prison. [...] We refer them to other services. If he is seeing a psychiatrist here for instance, we send him to see a psychiatrist, we refer him through one of the Hand in Hand community services, however our follow-up ends there].*

Professionals felt that addressing current gaps in follow-up services could impact rates of recidivism, while supporting perpetrators towards a healthier participation in the community.

*“The way to prevent relapse is by follow-up, by intervention, including disciplinary intervention, [...] suspension from contact with children. [...] You put in measures in place, [...] you can put supervision, you can put mentoring, you can put training, depending on the level of abuse”. (Participant 4)*

*“It has to be something continuous speċjalment [especially] monitoring the whole system” (Participant 2)*

*“Aħna nistgħu naraw li qed jaħdem ovvjament meta jmur lura fis-soċjetà – nindunaw, għax hawnhekk mhux ħa jkollhom aċċess għal tfal. Paedophiles ovvjament trid tarahom x’hin ikollhom aċċess lura għat-tfal”. (Participant 1)*

*[We can tell if our programme is working when they go back into society – we can know, because here they won't have access to children. Paedophiles obviously, you have to see them when they have access to children]*

In particular, the introduction of specialised support programmes that are community-based was proposed, with the involvement of multidisciplinary teams of professionals who can monitor and support perpetrators' successful involvement in the community. Participant 4, for instance, explained:

*"Specialised programmes which are community based preferably. [...] When an offender is isolated and is unsupported, does not have a job, does not have a family, does not have friends, does not have a social network, they go dark so to speak, they go underground, and they reoffend, the recidivism goes up. [...] If you work in a role where you have no contact with children, you can have a job, you can develop relationships, that helps them to not offend again. And isn't that what we want?"*

*"Multidisciplinary work [...] in the community. [...] the police, social services, health services, [...] regular meetings, [...] individuals who are back out in the community, to see how they're getting on, what the risks are. [...] To see if they are re-offending, but also to support their integration".*

### *Theme 3: Gaps in service provision*

Notwithstanding the valuable work that is currently being done in the perpetrator rehabilitation scene and that was acknowledged by all the professionals in this study, a number of areas for improvement were also brought to light. These in addition to the points mentioned so far above. One participant summarised a number of these opportunities for development when they said:

*"Meta tara li s-servizz m'hemmx follow-up, qisu t-treatment plan mhux hemm għax m'hemmx riżorsa, m'hemmx, m'hemmx matching ta', tgħid 'Isma' mela intkom għandkom bżonn.. mela ibdew morru'. Mhux 'Isma' sibu lil xi ħadd jew morru private practice'. Jew ħa tipprovdi s-servizz jew inkella tipprovidi xejn hu". (Participant 2)*

*[When you see that there is no follow-up to the service, there is no treatment plan because there are no resources, there is no matching of 'Listen, you need this...so start*



*attending this'. Instead of, 'Listen, find someone or go to a private practice'. You are either going to provide a service or you are not].*

The following section will discuss the key sub-themes brought to light by professional participants in relation to the development and improvement of services offered to perpetrators of child abuse. Three main sub-themes were identified in this respect. These are: Legislation and judicial systems; Prevention and early intervention; and Resources and manpower.

### Sub-theme 1: Legislation and judicial system

Several professional participants expressed varying degrees of disappointment with how they felt that local legal structures and judicial systems addressed crimes committed by perpetrators of child abuse. As also discussed earlier in 'Theme 2: Sub-theme 2', some participants felt that court sentences issued for those found guilty of child abuse, were not always a proportionate response to the impact of that crime on a child.

*"We need to improve, first and foremost, our system. [...] Having a justice system which takes better decisions. [...] I think the courts need real training on the effects of abuse on children in the long term. [...] A more victim-centred approach in terms of policy, in terms of structure. [...] The minority of cases are taken to court and out of the cases taken to court the minority of those are convicted". (Participant 4)*

In relation to this, improvements surrounding the procedures involved in the Protection of Minors Registration Act (POMA) were also brought up amongst professional participants.

*"For a name to go on this list, on this register, you need to be convicted in court, one, and two, the magistrate or judge needs to agree to put the name on the list. So, I could have, I could sexually harass a thirteen year old, be convicted in court and not go on the list". (Participant 4)*

*"The POMA registration needs to be more robust". (Participant 4)*

Recommendations in this regard included, stricter inclusion of child abuse perpetrators on the register, increased enforcement and a wider use of the POMA register by organisations when employing persons to work in contact with children, as well as the proposal of a joint POMA

register and Police Conduct Certificates, which are used by some employers to review the criminal record of an individual prior to employment. Gaps in the efficacy of the POMA register and Police Conducts Certificates in safeguarding of children were pointed out, mostly resulting from delays in the updating of Police Conduct Certificates to reflect court sentences related to child abuse, as well government regulations allowing employers to apply for POMA records prior to commencing a person's employment however permitting them to proceed with the employment that person prior to having received the individual's court decree, due to delays in the system.

Another aspect of the current legislation that professional participants felt could be improved to aid towards the safeguarding of children was local laws regarding prescription. These participants explained how due to the complex nature of child abuse and the difficulties that those who experience it encounter in identifying the behaviour as abuse and in speaking up about it, the setting a time-limit as to for how long a person had the right to report such abuse was not adequate.

*"It's not easy for a child, teenager, young person to stand up against someone, and it takes years. [...] We have ridiculous laws on prescription in Malta, [...] they should be totally abolished for child abuse. [...] It takes years for a child to speak up, years into their adulthood".* (Participant 4)

Other participants also felt that court proceedings regarding cases of domestic violence or incidents involving abuse in homes where children were present, did not always take the children's point of view into account when issuing court sentences for perpetrators and the support and therapeutic services for them and those involved in the abuse.

*"Il-qorti per eżempju, they don't consider fin-narattiva speċi, r-raġel, abbuża lill-mara, imma qisu t-tfal, speċi, there are no questions asked about the children".* (Participant 2)

*[In court for instance, the man abused of the woman, but in their narrative, they don't consider the children, there are no questions asked about them]*

*"We do have programs for domestic violence, but we do not have programs in domestic violence which highlight the impact on children."* (Participant 6)

In addition to the efforts of local courts to address instances of child abuse, improvements in the safeguarding of children across other entities, in particular, those working with children was also emphasized by some professional participants. Defining safeguarding as “*the responsibility of organisations to keep children [...] safe within their activities*” (Participant 4), participants felt that in addition to proper application of the POMA register, child safeguarding practices need to be introduced on a wider scale across local organisations. In particular, calling for these to be national standard requirements for entities working with children, Participant 4 pointed out:

*“You can’t only depend on a court conviction when it comes to child protection, when we know for a fact, uncontested by anyone, that most incidents of child abuse are undetected and never end up in court for a variety of reasons”.*

*“Organisations I think, need to take more responsibility for abuse that happens within organisations”.*

*“You organise services for children, you’re obliged to meet certain national standards. [...] The absence of national standards in this regard means there is an absence of awareness which means that the abuse happens in the dark, [...] and, the more dark corners there are, the more abuse will happen. [...] Decrease these dark corners so, the more awareness there is and the more procedures there are the more systems there are which are effective”.*

Furthermore, another participant highlighted how the Maltese judicial system seems to be more structured in relation to sexual-related crimes but less in terms of other forms of abuse and how the Maltese society seems to ‘boast’ on having a rehabilitative system whilst in reality, according to Participant 6, this is mostly punitive system.

*“We are not where I would like us to be, but we are most structured in relation to sexual crimes. We do not have the same kind of potency [...] in the architecture for supporting adults, for example, to live or using corporate punishment or domestic violence. I feel like we have a few services. [...] I find that even though Malta boasts of this idea that we have a rehabilitative and the reformatory culture within the criminal justice system. I think that it’s still punitive. I think that Maltese society still adopts a punitive attitude towards people who have committed crimes, especially people have committed crimes against children”.* (Participant 6)

## Sub-theme 2: Prevention and early intervention

Across professional participants, the benefits of investing in adequate structures, policies, interventions and measures to address the phenomenon of child abuse were undisputed. A number of participants also further added that early intervention as well as preventive initiatives could also aid towards the safeguarding of children by reducing rates of offence. They related, for instance, to support services offered overseas, such as Germany's Berlin Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (Beier et al., 2009a; 2009b) that offers early intervention services related to child sexual abuse, as well as treatment programmes that address juvenile child abuse or services to families with incidents of neglect, and explain:

*"A preventive service. [...] A person who recognises that they have a problem, that they are attracted to children in a sexual manner and want help and they can go and it's anonymous". (Participant 4)*

*"Research shows that they start when they are quite young, right, in their teenage years. [...] The concept of early intervention. Early intervention presents better outcomes. [...] What services do we have for young people who abuse here nowadays? I think that's a massive gap we have". (Participant 4)*

*"I would try and give services before they are even convicted. I don't think we should even reach that. [...] I think, if we really support beforehand in terms, broadly speaking, in terms of education to parents [referring to neglect and child verbal and physical abuse in immediate family], to children, even if it comes to sexual abuse, if we are going to teach children what exactly is sexual abuse, what should you do, what pathway, they won't get there. We might stop at the grooming phase, you know. So, prevention". (Participant 5)*

*[With reference to incidents of child neglect and physical abuse within immediate family]  
"Supporting families well in the community before we get to this stage, from a very young age". (Participant 5)*

## Sub-theme 3: Resources and person-power

Overall, all professional participants who carry out work with perpetrators exposed a few areas of concern that they feel require addressing and improving. In particular, echoing amongst most of them, is the presence of waiting lists that exist in relation to services assisting those persons involved in child abuse, be it for the perpetrator as well the victims.

*“Għandna waiting list mhux ħażin, għax ovvjament għandna ħafna treatment orders, mhux biss fuq fejn jidhhol sexual offences”. (Participant 3)*

*[We have a substantial waiting list, because obviously we have a lot of treatment orders, not only when it comes to sexual offences]*

*“Hemm nuqqas kbira ta’ rizersi, jigifieri, jiena smajt, ma nafx hekk hux vera, li hemm waiting list, taf kif? Issa immagina fejn għandek child abuse u għandek waiting list, it’s a no-no diġà. [...] You cannot address something fejn tidhhol child abuse jien naf, tliet xhur wara” (Participant 2)*

*[There is a big lack of resources, that is, I’ve heard, I don’t know if it’s true, that there is a waiting list, you know? Imagine having child abuse and you have a waiting list – that’s already a no-no. [...] You cannot address something when it comes to child abuse, I don’t know, 3 months later].*

*“Good services. What I mean [by] good is timely, not huge waiting lists, and of a good duration, and of a frequent, not a, you know, an appointment once in the blue moon, you know. So, a service which really follows the patient, the client”. (Participant 5)*

Consequently, deficiencies when it comes to person-power and human resources were in fact also brought up by a number of participants as one of the main barriers towards development of services.

*“A lot of stress, pressure, m’hemmx rizersa, kif trid taħdem? (Participant 2)*

*[A lot of stress, pressure, there aren’t resources, how can you work?]*

*“Aħna speċjalment għalina, l-human resources hija dejjem il-ħaġa li we lack” (Participant 3)*

*[Human resources are something we always lack].*

*“Aħna, kieku għandna iktar nies jistgħu jaħdmu ma’ dawn il-perpetrators nistgħu per eżempju anke aħna nippruvaw li nagħmlu l-programmi li jkunu fi grupp. [...] Minħabba*

*I-problema kbira ta' human resources m'għandniex il-faċilità' li nagħmluhom fi gruppi".*  
(Participant 3)

*[If we had more staff on board who could work with these perpetrators, we could offer for instance, programmes in group settings. [...] Because of the considerable problem with human resources, we don't have the facility to organise them in a group setting].*

*"We need professional people in the right place, and if we have a lack of social workers [...] encourage people to become social workers, improve conditions for social workers"*  
(Participant 4)

In addition to this, Participant 4 also highlighted that professionals offering services to perpetrators and working in services surrounding incidences of child abuse should be well trained and qualified in order to be able to offer adequate support in these complex experiences:

*"You need to be a person who is qualified, [...] and you need to be a person who is trusted.*

*"To be a professional you had to have a warrant".*

*"Probation who are more trained and geared up on how these people need to be supported especially the reintegration of them with the community".*

Furthermore, Participant 6 highlighted how relapse is common and natural for perpetrators and this the need for resources and programmes to be in place to allow for long-term monitoring, support, and therapy. Participant 6 also notes the importance of educational programmes to help support parents in terms of guiding them with the right actions and words to parent their children.

*"The relapse is a rather natural occurrence. It's frequent. It's common. and and it happens [...] there are mechanisms for that family to remain monitored for a longer period [...] But then there isn't a a therapeutic solution to offer there isn't a therapeutic solution to offer to people with sexual tendency towards [...] there isn't a therapeutic solution to offer to people who believe in physical chastisement as a form of punishment.*

*“There are positive parenting programs, but these positive parenting programs miss the plot when it comes to addressing or dealing with people who actually believe that's hitting your children is good, and it's it's healthy for them [...] I guess we can improve considerably.”*

#### 4.2.2 Professional views on Children's Experiences Online

*“They are living online”*  
(Participant 7)

Qualitative interviews were carried out with professionals who work directly with children in order to explore their views in relation to children's use of the internet. Data collected from this branch of the study was also triangulated by additional data collected through a focus group carried out with a group of children themselves. By way of these, this research sought to bring insight regarding the nature of the online experiences for children, thereby mapping the nature and extent of online usage amongst children. Facets of this were discussed with professionals in order to examine child e-safety awareness, possible threats and strengths surrounding these experiences as well as other related factors such as parental awareness and professionals' recommendations for improvement. Four main themes were identified: Children's online experiences – prevalence, awareness, and appropriate online behaviour; Online risks and threats for children; Parental awareness and involvement; and, Professionals' recommendations for children's healthier use of the internet. These will now be discussed in further detail.

*Table 16: Themes identified from discussions with professional regarding their views on children's experiences online*

<i>Themes</i>
<i>1. Children's online experiences – prevalence, awareness, and appropriate online behaviour</i>
<i>2. Online risks and threats for children</i>
<i>3. Parental awareness and involvement</i>
<i>4. Professionals' recommendations for children's healthier use of the internet</i>

### *Theme 1: Children's online experiences – prevalence, awareness, and appropriate online behaviour*

Several changes brought about by modernity have often been flagged in research as giving rise to a scenario where children are making excessive, unregulated, and unmonitored use of the online world (Kaur et al., 2019; Barber et al., 2017). With 75% of European children aged 6 to 17 reported to be surfing the online world in 2009 (Hasebrink et al., 2009), these figures are likely to have since continued to grow. In fact, while according to the Eurobarometer, in 2005, 57% of children under the age of 18 in Malta were found to make use of the internet (European Commission, 2006), within a decade, in 2015, a Eurostat survey reported that at least 9 out of every 10 young people aged between 16 and 29 used the internet on a daily basis. Unfortunately, more recent Eurobarometer data was not available. In 2021, the figure of young people between the ages of 16 to 29 years in Europe who made use of the internet everyday stood at 95% (Eurostat, 2022). The latter also report also found that 92% in of Maltese young people within the 16 to 29 age group, had basic or above basic overall digital skills.

These experiences provide children boundless opportunities for personal development including access to information and global virtual spaces for connection. Nevertheless, these opportunities are not devoid of risks. These include exposure to inappropriate material, both sexual and other, hate content, unsolicited and potentially dangerous requests or threats to one's privacy, amongst others.

*"It-teknoloġija hija tajba, let's face it, jiġifieri it is something that is essential, u every child has the right to use the technology. Imma naturalment it-teknoloġija ġġib ħafna riskji magħha wkoll". (Participant 8)*

*[Technology is good, let's face it, it is something that is essential and every child has the right to use technology. However, naturally, technology also bring several risks with it too].*

*"The benefits of having the online facilities, [...] they're great and we should maximise that. But that comes along with a lot of risks. [...] The risks associated to that are...could be negligible but could be very high". (Participant 4)*



Online opportunities	Online risks
Access to global information	Illegal content
Educational resources	Paedophiles, grooming, strangers
Social networking for old/new friends	Extreme or sexual violence
Entertainment, games, fun	Other harmful or offensive content
User-generated content creation	Racist/hate material/activities
Civic or political participation	Advertising/commercial persuasion
Privacy for expression of identity	Biased/misinformation (advice, health)
Community involvement/activism	Exploitation of personal information
Technological expertise and literacy	Cyber-bullying, stalking, harassment
Career advancement or employment	Gambling, financial scams
Personal/health/sexual advice	Self-harm (suicide, anorexia, etc)
Specialist groups and fan forums	Invasions/abuse of privacy
Shared experiences with distant others	Illegal activities (hacking, downloading)

Figure 34: Online risks and opportunities (Hasebrink et al., 2009, pp. 7)

Overall, from the views of professionals working with children it transpired that although the prevalence of issues being encountered online by children are not occurring at alarmingly high rates, they are nevertheless occurring and are on the increase. In reply to whether they observe a lot of children encountering concerning issues online for instance, Participant 7 replied:

*“Inneħħi l-kelma ħafna”*

*[I would remove the word a lot]*

Referring to a local helpline that caters for online issues for children, Participant 8 stated:

*“Every week jġifieri jkollhom [they have] 2 cases I would say”.*

Similarly, Participant 4 stated:

*“The incidence of online abuse rapidly increased. [...] I don’t mean necessarily abuse which took place online. It includes them, but abuse which was facilitated through online contacts, either the grooming took place online or the contact took place online. [...] Rather than online, the use of technology, it could include text messaging, it could include phone calls”.*

Participant 9, supported by similar comments from other participants, cautioned however that the true rates of how many children are encountering issues online could be higher than what we are aware of, at times expressing a local need for improved statistics regarding the prevalence of issues encountered online by children.

*“M’għandniex riċerka biżżejjed [...] Qed naraw effetti li ġejjin minn din il-kawża imma sadanittant kemm hija kbira l-problema ma nafux, u lanqas nistgħu nkunu nafu xi prevalenza jista’ jkollna bħala l-effetti. [...] Mapping exercise biex naraw eżattament x’jeżisti, jekk teżistix data, naraw kemm hi kbira l-problema, anke mal-NSO [National Statistics Office] tkellimna, ma kellhom xejn. [...] M’għandniex ideja”.* (Participant 11)

*[We don’t have enough research. [...] We are seeing the impact arising from this but in the meantime, we don’t know how big the problem is and we cannot know the dimension of its impact. [...] Mapping exercise to see what figures we are aware of, if there is any data, to see how big this problem is, we even spoke to NSO, they had nothing [...] We have no idea].*

*“I think it happens much more frequently than we think”.* (Participant 9)

*“Grooming is a little bit under reported being that some and the majority of cases it is some someone that the children know. It could be a family friend or an older uncle for example. So, they find it more difficult to report. [...] Cyberbullying children take some time to report. So, it’s, when they actually report it, it’s already out of control. It’s already out there”.* (Participant 12)

Professional participants highlighted how some incidents of online bullying as well as other negative experiences online can be quite distressing and are occurring at ages lower than expected to worrying extents.

*“I hear a lot of bullying with kids online with the bullying being held in in class, and then online as well. Violent, like, ‘We’ll shoot you. We’re gonna get this type of gun. We’re coming for you’, and ‘You reported it to your mom, we’ll kill your mom and your sister as well”.* (Participant 9)

*“While I was aware of certain problems li kont qed naħseb għal [that I thought were present amongst] 13-14 year old...[...] 9 u 10 years...il-Marija Santa Amen! [Oh my Lord!] That was a surprise, li [that] I would expect at a certain age, went further to a younger generation, age cohort”.* (Participant 7)

*“Marija Santa! Tgħid, ‘Possibli li ċertu lingwaġġ they don’t feel li ħa jgħidu...”*  
(Participant 8)

*[My Lord! You think, ‘Is it is possible that they don’t feel that certain language that they’re going to use...’].*

*“Irridu nibdew miċ-ċokon. [...] We have to start much, much earlier. [...] Għax it-tfal jitmiskru”. (Participant 11)*

*[We have to start from early years. [...] We have to start much, much earlier. [...] Because children are seriously impacted].*

*“Cyber bullying is always top in our way statistics. [...] We see a lot of cyber bullying, especially targeting children”. (Participant 12)*

Because in person bullying frequently includes physical bullying, it is easily presumed that its impact is more severe than in the case of cyberbullying. However, facets of online bullying such as anonymity and larger audiences could result in the effects of cyberbullying being more harmful (Campbell et al., 2012), although both have been found by researchers to have negative consequences (Olweus, 2012). From discussions with professionals, cyberbullying appeared to be the most frequently mentioned type of online issue encountered by children locally. Opinions as to whether this, as opposed to in person bullying, was more impactful, were varied, although there was a consensus about it having concerning consequences on children’s wellbeing was evident across all participants.

*“One good thing about cyberbullying, if you can call it, like, a good thing, it’s that as opposed to traditional forms of bullying, it can, be caught online. [...] With online bullying you can take screenshots, you can report, you can block. So, there are tools that in physical life, you know...”. (Participant 9)*

*“Minn konversazzjonijiet mat-tfal [...] jiddeskrivuh [cyberbullying] bħala forma ta’ bullying li ma tistax teħles minnu. [...] Meta qegħdin l-iskola u jiġu bullied telqu lejn id-dar u sabu l-paċi, imma s-cyberbullying [...] jibqa jiġri warajhom”. (Participant 11)*

*From conversations with children [...] they describe it [cyberbullying] as a form of bullying that you cannot get away from. [...] When they are bullied in school, they leave school and find peace at home, but cyberbullying [...] follows them].*

*“We have tools to have contacts actually, also, with the majority of social media platforms, so we can stop the bullying from being on the platform. We can also help them to take screenshots, so that in the eventuality that they want to make a police report, they have all the evidence”. (Participants 12)*

A number of participants pointed out how issues surrounding children's access to the online not only are on the increase but even more so, increased exponentially throughout the lockdown periods due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

*“Il-cases splodew [...] anke kważi is-cyberbullying. [...] Cyber bullying ovvjament kien very rife during the pandemic għax it-tfal ma kienux qegħdin jiltagħu fiżikament imma xorta baqgħu jgħajjru u jitgħajjru fuq l-internet mid-dar. Mela għandna kull tip ta' sitwazzjoni. Jiġifieri għandna tfal li huma vittmi, imma għandna tfal li huma perpetrators. (Participant 10)*

*[There has been a boom in cases [...] even cyberbullying. [...] Cyberbullying obviously was very rife during the pandemic because children were not meeting physically but they were still insulting and being insulted from home. So, we have every type of situation. We have children who are victims, but we also have children who are perpetrators].*

*“Nitkellmu ma' ħafna tfal, li hija realtà li jkun hemm ħafna tfal li jiffaċċjaw diffikultajiet online, mostly related to cyberbullying u ovvjament fejn jidhru anke peers li għandek is-sexting, imbagħad għandek, jibdew jonqsu...grooming u dawn l-affarijiet. Jiġifieri jeżistu, dawn huma affarijiet li jeżistu. [...] u l-COVID ovvjament, il-COVID ma għenx”. (Participant 8)*

*[We speak to a lot of children, and it's a fact that there are a lot of children who face difficulties online, mostly related to cyberbullying and obviously, when it comes to peers, there is sexting, then there is, they start reducing, grooming and things like that. So, they exist. These are things that really exist. [...] and COVID obviously, COVID didn't help].*

*“Fl-eqqel tal-COVID, kulhadd kien qed jirrealizza li t-tfal issa, l-fatt li qegħdin id-dar għal ħafna ħin quddiem l-iscreens, [...] l-abbuż fuq it-tfal, f’ħafna modi, kien qed jikber”.*  
(Participant 11)

*[During the height of the COVID pandemic, everyone was seeing that children, because they were home in front of a screen for long periods [...] rates of abuse, in many ways, on children were increasing]*

Interestingly, more than one participant pointed out that in our communities, the occurrence of cyberbullying is often linked to bullying also occurring in real life, with some participants cautioning schools and society at large, to be more alert in noticing issues that may be occurring amongst children around them in everyday life that then also spill into the online world.

*“99% if it's happening between those group of kids online, it's happening within your school. [...] Schools should take bullying more seriously. [...] We always say, ‘Open your eyes wider - just look at it closely’. Look, the online world is an extension of society. [...] As a minimum they [schools] should keep their eyes open because it's likely it's going on, and they're missing it”.* (Participant 9)

*“The school might be aware of what what's, what's there. [...] The school maybe now got to know as well, and everything could have been easily prevented”.* (Participant 12)

*“Fejn ikun hemm bullying ta’ nies li tafhom, ikun hemm ġlieda għaddejja in real life u tkompli online, jew ikun hemm xi ħaġa connection, per eżempju, jiltaqqgħu fil-pjazza, l-iskola, whatever it is, imbagħad online jinfexxu”.* (Participant 7)

*[When there is bullying with familiar people, there will be a fight going on in real life, and it continues online, or there will be some sort of connection, for instance, they meet at the square, at school, whatever it is, then it spreads online]*

Through discussions with professionals, an overall picture of children’s experiences online was drawn. Overall, from interviews with professionals it transpired that children tend to display less inhibitions when engaging with others online. In doing so however, children are found to be less rational in processing these interactions and tend to be less cautious when

it comes to exposing themselves or exposing their feelings, even less favourable ones, towards others.

*“People tend to be more abrupt, more direct, more hurtful sometimes, even children, when they are speaking online, because there is a sort of invisible barrier between the people there”. (Participant 9)*

*“Emotions, they play a bigger role when they are online, so their thinking is sometimes switched off” (Participant 7)*

*Putting themselves out there in vulnerable situations (Participant 7)*

*“Qisu online l-istess regoli li wieħed jagħmel fil-grupp face to face mhux dejjem jgħoddu” (Participant 7)*

*[It’s like the rules that apply in a face-to-face group don’t always apply online]*

*“The screen, li mintix qed tara l-persuna quddiemek, dik tneħħilek il-kif tgħid, il-biża, u inti, you know, you don’t see li vera qed twegġa’ lil dak li jkun, għax qed tiktiblu kumment, qed tiktiblu messaġġ u mhux qed tara li qed twegġgħu”. (Participant 8)*

*[The screen, that you are not seeing the person in front of you, that removes your fear and you know, you don’t seen that you are really hurting that person, because you are writing a comment, you are writing them a message and you are not seeing that you are causing them pain].*

According to most professional participants, a wide spectrum of awareness educational initiatives and campaigns has been set up over the years. Participants, such as Participant 8 and Participant 10 for instance, made reference to initiatives such as e-safety activities during Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) class, the BeSmartOnline campaign organised by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), educational talks organised by the Ministry of Education’s National School Support Services (NSSS), educational programmes offered by Sedqa in schools, as well as Teen Outside the Box, which is an initiative organised by Sedqa and the Ministry of Education’s Anti-Substance Unit, that focuses on educating children about the use of technology and the online world. In their view, these efforts bring about a level of awareness amongst children that better prepares

them for any challenges they might encounter online. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the several ongoing educational initiatives, some participants pointed out that this might still not suffice for children to truly know how behave appropriately online and how to handle difficulties they may encounter, with some lamenting that children are at times allowed access to the internet at too young an age:

*“Many, many minors beneath the age of 13 are on social media”* (Participant 9)

*“Għalkemm it-tfal ikunu aware ta’ online safety, ikun hemm xi problemi li t-tfal jiltaqqgħu magħhom u probabbilment forsi ma jkunux daqshekk intiżi biex jaraw huma kif se jżolvu dawk il-problemi”* (Participant 8)

*[Although children are aware of online safety, there might be problems that they encounter and probably, maybe, they are not that familiar on how to solve them].*

*“Jiena naħseb li ċertu etajiet ta’ tfal jista’ għandhom ideja però naħseb li ma aħniex nagħmlu biżżejjed”.* (Participant 11)

*[I think that certain age groups amongst children have a degree of awareness however I feel we are not doing enough].*

*“Aktar ma jikbru aktar ikunu attenti, imma fl-ewwel snin, bejn 10 u 14 għandek inqas thinking li jidhol fiha [...] they overexpose themselves”.* (Participant 7)

*[The older they get, the more careful they become, however in the first years, between 10 and 14, there is less thinking that comes into it [...] they overexpose themselves].*

*“Tfal ta’ 9 jew 10 years ikunu sexting* (Participant 7)

*[Children of ages 9 and 10 are sexting].*

In addition, a number of professional participants felt that entities offering support and creating awareness in relation to issues encountered by children online were often not sufficiently supported and required additional resources in order to be able to improve the achievement of these objectives.

*“Should have a much, much more resources” (referring to initiatives such as the BeSmartOnline). (Participant 4)*

*“There is support, but it's nowhere near enough. [...] There is a huge, huge demand from society. Not just schools. When you're talking kids, I'm referring to schools, but I'm also talking of drama, music, skola tal-baned, MUSEUM, and what you call it, ballet, dancing, you know, martial arts, e-gaming and these sports for kids, they all, cycling, basketball, tennis. These are all asking us (for information talks)”. (Participant 9)*

## *Theme 2: Online risks and threats for children*

*“Online crime [...] It's going to increase, because of accessibility”.  
(Participant 5)*

Participant 11 summarises the extent of the risks that children face online when they say:

*“Tfal jiġu mgħajjra għax hoxnin, tfal jiġu mgħajjra għax bin-nuċċali...għandna tfal li anke daru għal self-harm. [...] Anke kien hemm tfal jikkontemplaw suicides. [...] Jigifieri, there is no limit to the damage”. (Participant 11)*

*[Children being mocked for being overweight, children being mocked for wearing glasses...we have children who even resorted to self-harm. [...] There were even children that considered suicide. [...] So, there is no limit to the damage]*

Data gathered across interviews with professionals working with children exposed a vast array of threats that children are exposed to as a result of their online usage. Increases in the use of the internet amongst children brings potentially increased risks of exposure to harmful or illegal content. Hasebrink et al. (2009) in fact, report that 18% of European parents state that their offspring have encountered this whilst online. Similarly, to those outlined by Hasebrink et al. (2009, above), issues such as exposure to illegal content, pervasive advertising, cyberbullying, sexual abuse and several other possible risks were identified by participants when it comes to children's use of the internet:



*“Affarijiet li għandhom x’jaqsmu mas-self-esteem tagħhom u mal-privatezza tagħhom. Meta tidhōl l-internet, they’re exposing themselves too quickly, kultant literally, u they are exposed to influences. [...] Drogi, armi, sess ovvjament...imma ġieli jkollok, ffit minn kollox. [...] ‘Kemmi hi kerha’, ‘dejjem hekk kienet’, ‘imissek tmur toqtol lilek innifsek’. [...] Il-perikli huma kbar”.* (Participant 7)

*[Things related to their self-esteem and their privacy. When it comes to the internet, they’re exposing themselves too quickly, sometimes literally, and they are exposed to influences. [...] Drugs, weapons, sex obviously... you’ll find a bit of everything. [...] ‘How ugly she is’, ‘she was always like that’, ‘you should kill yourself’. [...] The dangers are big].*

*“Riskji hemm ħafna: hemm abuse, hemm is-sexting, hemm diversi riskji. Hemm naturalment it-tfal jistgħu nagħtu każ ikunu qegħdin jidhlu online ma’ xi ħadd li huma ma jkunux jafu per se u naturalment jista’ jkun ta’ riskju għalihom ukoll. [...] Jista’ jagħtu l-każ ukoll li jkun hemm cyberbullying ukoll. [...] Jiġifieri r-riskji huma ħafna. [...] Jista’ jkollhom kontenut mhux adattat – kemm by mistake jiġifieri, li jaraw ċertu kontenut, però jistgħu jiġu bombardati b’ċertu adverts per eżempju. U hemm ukoll issues ta’ health. Fis-sens li aħna naraw body image, how important it is to children and young people, li jkollok forsi ċeru kontenut li it’s promoting certain unhealthy lifestyles, [...] jippromowtjaw anorexia u bulimia, u they normalise certain things. [...] L-overuse tal-internet. Jiġifieri għandek ċertu tfal, anke minħabba ċertu logħob, jużawh b’mod eċċessiv, jiġifieri li imbagħad they lose all sense of reality, in the sense li it impinges on their studies, their family life, on basic needs ukoll. Grooming... (Participant 8)*

*[There are several risks: there is abuse, there is sexting, a variety of risks. There is naturally a risk that, for instance, children are going online with someone they don’t know and that could be risk for them too. [...] There could be cyberbullying too. [...] So, the risks are many. [...] They could be exposed to inappropriate content – be it accidentally, viewing certain content, but they could also be bombarded by certain adverts. And there are also health issues. I mean, if we look at body image and how important it is to children and young people, where you have content that promotes certain unhealthy lifestyles [...] promoting anorexia or bulimia and they normalise certain things. [...] The overuse of the internet, where some children, even because of certain games, make excessive use of the internet, and then lose all sense of reality and it impinges on their studies, their family life and even basic needs. Grooming...]*

*“There is so much online bullying going on. [...] There is a lot of illegal activity as well. There is a lot of criminal behaviour going on online, even between kids. [...] Psychological manipulation [...] Embarrassing, insulting someone, harassing someone. It could be outing someone. [...] Sexual violence as well [...] So, you can have sexual predators online. Maybe they are thinking they are talking with kids, and they're talking to an older person. [...] A lot of kids are exposed to pornography, even at a very young age, [...] like from 12 or 13 [...] most kids have watched pornography. [...] Sexting, you know, between the kids. And then they fight, and then they suddenly start sharing stuff for each other - revenge porn” (Participant 9).*

*“Jekk irrid nara waħda għarwiena għandi l-mobile, kemm nagħfas buttuna u għandi miljuni, miljuni mhux waħda jew tnejn. [...] It-theddid lit-tfal ġej minn kullimkien. [...] Għandek in-Netflix, għadnek dawn li Instagram, Tinder, jien naf, tant hawn apps. Però l-easy accessibility ukoll hija inkewetanti”.* (Participant 10)

*[If I want to see a naked woman, I have my phone, I just have to press a button and there are millions, millions, not one or 2. [...] The threats for children are coming from everywhere. [...] There is Netflix, Instagram, Tinder, I don't know, there are so many apps. But easy accessibility is also very worrying].*

*“Nowadays if any person takes any mobile with internet you can access a lot of material, you know, which could be appropriate and inappropriate to the user, to the viewer. [...] I think we need to agree that for children, especially young children, they should not have access to certain content or material. [...] certain matters which need to be age appropriate. We seem to be moving away from that, as a society and it worries a lot”.* (Participant 4)

*“Ġieli kien hemm tfal aċċessaw il-porn. [...] ġew mibgħuta stampi pornografiċi. [...] Qegħdin nitkellmu fuq il-vittmi, imma hemm il-perpetrators. Jiġifieri u li ħafna drabi dawn huma tfal ukoll”.* (Participant 11)

*[There have been cases of children accessing porn. [...] Pornographic pictures were sent. [...] We're talking about the victims, but there are the perpetrators too. And many times these are children too].*

*“It-tfal joqgħodu jibgħatu pictures ta’ nudity tagħhom. Dika waħda that is very common. Imma imbagħad jista’ jkollok tfal daqsxejn ikbar, forsi fis-sekondarja, li jkollom relazzjonijiet sesswali flimkien, jieħdu l-images jew videos, imbagħad ipattuha lil xulxin meta jiġġieldu. And they share the pictures. Allura ovvjament it-tifla jew it-tifel li tkun vittima, ħeq, ħa tgħaddi minn trauma. Dik qed tiżdied”. (Participant 10)*

*[Kids send nude pictures of themselves. That is something that is very common. But then you could have children who are somewhat older, maybe in secondary school, that have sexual relations, take pictures or videos, then take revenge on each other when they argue. And they share the pictures. So, obviously, the girl or the boy that is a victim will experience that as a trauma. That is increasing].*

*“It gets them into a lot of isolation, and, and it effects their self-esteem, because also someone is constantly telling you, ‘You, you’re not good at anything’ and, [...] eventually you might also start to believe that, and so cyberbullying I think it is one of the biggest threats. [...] Then you have sexting when they are obviously exchanging pictures of themselves. [...] An issue of mistrust, an issue of shame, an issue of guilt. [...] We do also encounter cases of grooming, but compared to cyber bullying and sexting, they’re not a majority”. (Participant 12)*

*“L-internet ovvjament [obviously], it’s a facilitator. It didn’t create predators, but it facilitates” (Participant 8)*

In addition to these findings, in research carried out with 25 international countries, Livingstone et al., 2012 pointed out that particular risks are typically associated with different age groups. Issues with privacy and exposure to inappropriate content were associated with those of ages 8 – 12; risks related to interactions with strangers tend to steer more towards teenagers (ages 12 – 17); while risks such as cyberbullying, identity theft, hate speech and racism can affect young children and teenagers alike (Annansingh & Veli, 2016; Gasser et al., 2010; Law et al., 2010; Livingstone et al., 2014).

### *Theme 3: Parental awareness and involvement*

*“You have those parents who are very much aware and they're also keen to attend the sessions on online safety and willing to do what's necessary to protect their children. And then you have other parents who are giving the devices to their children [...] because they do not want them to be different from other children. [...] They have lost control, and they find it hard to protect them”. (Participant 12)*

While it is commonly assumed that children and teenagers are more fluent users of the online world when compared to their older parents, the 2008 Eurobarometer (Hasebrink et al. (2009) revealed that while minors use the internet to a higher degree than adults in general, they actually use it less than parents in particular, especially when it comes to children under the age of 11. These findings therefore suggest that parents are generally sufficiently familiar with the internet in order to regulate their offspring's' use, although this may not be the case when it comes to teenage years. Subsequently, the 2014 Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2014) also reported a moderately-strong correlation between parental and children's use of the internet, however it pointed out that in Malta, “less than two-thirds of the [parent] respondents had used the Internet” (pp. 9), reporting that locally, “children were more likely, than their parents, to use the Internet (88% of children vs. 63% of parents)” (pp. 13). The report adds that more than one-fifth of Maltese parents were not aware of the use of filtering and monitoring software on their personal computer, with figures of between 36% and 48% of parents feeling that it was not necessary because they trusted their offspring online. Amongst 27 other European countries, only in Malta in fact, did the report find that more than 1 in 20 parents did not believe in the effectiveness of such software. These finds were also reflected across interviews carried out with professionals, who pointed out that few parents locally were making use of monitoring and filtering software, attributing this to a lack of awareness as well as financial barriers that may be limiting access to them. Participant 4, for instance, warned that the risks are increased “if as a parent you are not responsible to monitor the websites that they view [...] which videos he[they] watch[es] on YouTube”. Other participants too highlighted the importance of parental use of filtering and monitoring software:

*“Parent safeguards, and checks, and... but they are there, and it's important that we use them. But most parents don't know about it”. (Participant 9)*

*“For example, to access sites with indecent images, or with pornography for example, you have to have an age verification”. (Participant 4)*

*“Inħajjruhom idaħħlu t-tip ta’ parental control b’xejn għall-familji, insomma, ħalli l-parents ikollhom l-opportunità that they safeguard their children. [...] Malli aħna jkun jeżisti servizz u ma jkunx free of cost, malajr malajr, tkun qed taqta’ barra kompletament lil min m’għandux mezzi. U allura hemmhekk, inti dejjem tibqa’ bil-gaps. U għandek iċ-ċans ukoll li min m’għandux mezzi, probabbilment ikunu l-iktar nies li għandhom bżonn support” (Participant 11)*

*[Invite them to introduce free parental control for families so that parents will have the opportunity to safeguard their children. [...] When a service exists but it is not free of charge, that easily alienates anyone who doesn’t have the means. And that always creates gaps. And it is possible that those with no means, probably are the ones who need support most].*

On the other hand, 96% of Maltese parents believed that increased and improved education and guidance in educational establishments regarding the use of the internet would yield a safer experience online for their child/ren (European Commission, 2014). Not surprisingly, discussions with local professionals working with children in fact, described the local scenario as one where parents are not very aware of the threats of factors related to their offspring’s use of the internet. Notwithstanding the increased use of the internet amongst parents, some parents are not fluent with the online world and therefore struggle to support their child/ren’s safe online experiences (Livingstone et al., 2021). Many professional participants in fact felt that parents were often not aware of the risks and potentially dangerous behaviours their child/ren maybe be exposed to or experiencing online.

*“Il-ġenituri ħafna drabi ma jkunux jafu x’qed jiġri fil-ħajja tagħhom, u t-tfal juruhom wiċċ differenti lill-ġenituri” (Participant 7)*

*[Parents are often not aware of what is happening in their life, and children don’t show their parents their true feelings]*

*“The parents are excluded from monitoring għaliex [because] they’re unfamiliar with the technology”. (Participant 7)*

*“Il-parents ikun hemm min hu ħafna aware, u forsi oħrajn ma jkunux daqshekk, ikunu mhux daqshekk intiżi (Participant 8)*

*[Amongst parents there are some who are very aware, and maybe others that are not so familiar].*

*“Hemm ġenituri that they are aware, but għandek ġenituri m’għandhomx l-agency, m’għandhomx dak is-sense ta’ agency u forsi għax ġej mill-fatt li they are not aware ukoll”. (Participant 11)*

*[There are parents who are aware, but there are parents who lack the agency, they don’t have that sense of agency and that might be also due to the fact that they are not aware].*

*“I think kids are always, especially when they’re teenagers, they’re always a step ahead of their parents in terms of technology” (Participant 9)*

Throughout interviews, a number of participants made reference to the fact that children nowadays are spending longer hours in schools and that many also tend to spend time with caregivers other than their parents. In this respect, Participant 11 pointed out:

*“Ma ngħidx il-ġenituri biss jien. Jien irrid insemmi n-nanniet ukoll, għax aħna għandna n-nanniet li qed jieħdu ħafna responsabbiltà tat-tfal. [...] It’s more than just the parents. Għandna bżonn il-grandparents ikunu involved, u għandna bżonn ukoll l-għalliema li jkunu empowered”. (Participant 11)*

*[I wouldn’t say only the parents. I need to mention grandparents too, because we have grandparents who take up a lot of responsibilities with children. [...] It’s more than just the parents. We need to involve grandparents and we also need to empower educators”.*

Adding to these, some participants pointed out that the deterioration of the family nucleus and today’s fast-paced lifestyles and perceived weakening of traditional family values often contribute to reduced levels of monitoring of children’s use of the internet and the general reduction of ethical and responsible standards overall:

*“Jien ma nħossx li huma konxji. Hā ngħdilek, mela, inti għandek ħafna familji li t-tfal jieħdu ħsiebhom in-nanniet, għaliex ovvjament ikunu żgħar, il-parents ikunu jaħdmu u jgħixu, mhux jgħixu, jigifieri n-nanniet jieħdu ħsiebhom. In-nanniet huma inqas*

*technologically literate mill-parents. Mela allura ħafna ħin tat-tfal li joqgħodu għand in-nanna, they are not monitored properly, because the grandparents, they don't know kif jużaw is-social media. U jiena ngħidlek anke jekk il-parents ikunu l-iktar bravi, xorta ma' hemmx il-communication, il-monitoring, kif suppost". (Participant 10)*

*[I don't feel that parents are aware (of what their kids are doing online). Let me know tell you, if you have a family where the children are taken care of by the grandparents, because obviously they're young, the parents work and live, not live, so the grandparents take care of them. So, a lot of time while the kids are at their grandparents', they are not being monitored properly, because the grandparents don't know how to use social media. And I feel that even if parents are very good, adequate communication, monitoring, is still not present].*

*"Il-mod ta' kif we perceive very important values, attitudes, you know, qisna narawhom, ma narawhomx li huma xi ħaġa li huma fundamental for our way of life" (Participant 11)*

*[The way we perceive very important values, attitudes, you know, it's like we deem, we don't deem them to be fundamental to our way of life].*

*"Childhood is already small. [...] Governments seem to be pushing to make childhood less and less. [...] Voting at sixteen, [...] drinking at, I think it's seventeen, smoking at seventeen, driving at eighteen. [...] We need to safeguard the child because once you move on from that phase, you never get it back. [...] It will be interesting to look at the effects of this. We take a lot of policy decisions on government, national level [...] without thinking on the long-term effects, or any research on the long-term effects and that's a big shame. Because once things are done, you can't undo them". (Participant 4)*

Several participants asserted that there is no denying that children are spending time online or are, in one way or another, exposed to the online world, with one lamenting that technology is often resorted to as a babysitter for children.

*"Even if they're not using it directly, they're seeing their parents on it, they're seeing their friends on it, they're seeing their family on it". (Participant 9)*

*"Ħafna nies iagħtuhom it-tablet u l-mobile u jħalluhom hemm". (Participant 10)*

*[A lot of people give them the tablet and the phone and leave them there].*

In relation to this reality, several participants pointed out the value of communication between parents and children and parental involvement in children's lives, in particular related to their children's use of the internet.

*"Importanti they keep in contact with their children. [...] Il-parents għandhom isibu aktar kuntatt mat-tfal tagħhom"* (Participant 8)

*[It is important that they keep in contact with their children [...] Parents should find more contact with their kids]*

*"Il-communication fid-dar naqset ħafna, ħafna".* (Participant 10)

Others, on the other hand, felt that the central responsibility of delivering online safety education belongs to schools, even in the case of educating parents. This was also observed in the 2014 Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2014) where 43% of Maltese families were reported to be most likely to have received information about safe internet practices from their child's school.

*"I think even, this should come, maybe from schools as well. That while they're educating their kids about using of electronic communications and social media, they should be offering this education to the parents as well".* (Participant 9)

*"Not necessarily schools imma [however] schools are a good place to have them (training)".* (Participant 7)

*"Sistema edukattiva, fejn inti tista' taqbad it-tfal kollha, jew almenu fil-maġġoranza assoluta tagħhom. U naħseb li għandna, irridu nintensifikaw".* (Participant 11)

*[An educational system, where you can reach all kids, or at least the majority of them. And I think we should intensify].*

In light of this, it is interesting to note the comments made by one of the participants who is involved in online safety educational campaigns in schools. They report that when organising events such as talks about child abuse, cyber bullying, use of the internet, and similar topics:

*"In-nies ma jiġux. Forsi jkollok 2 minn skola ta' 500. Ma jiġux. Issa tgħidli forsi qegħdin kollha x-xogħol. Imma min irid jitgħallem, min irid jifhem, min irid jiskopri u jkun jaf iktar żgur li hawn...għax inti illum tsita' tidhol fl-Internet u tfittex. Jiġifieri għarfien hawn."* (Participant 9)



*[People don't come. There will be maybe 2 out of a school of 500. They don't come. Maybe they're all at work. But those who want to learn, understand, discover u know more, there surely are...because nowadays you can go online and search. So, there is a level of knowledge].*

#### *Theme 4: Professionals' recommendations for children's healthier use of the internet*

*"Prevention, prevention, prevention and again prevention". (Participant 12)*

Amongst strategies proposed to improve children's safety online, the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2014) lists directly supervising internet usage, setting rules for use of the internet and introducing filtering and monitoring software, in addition to increasing awareness and information about safety measures. The report observed that 61% of European parents always or very frequently accompanied their children while they made use of the internet. At least half of these very frequently or always also discussed what they were doing online with their children. On the other hand, the report noted that a large number of European parents were also the least likely to or had never monitored whether their child/ren's had a social media profile or monitored their chats on instant messaging platforms. When it came to the setting of rules regarding their child's internet usage, around 80% of parents shared that they had set rules to their child/ren's use of the internet. These included for instance, restrictions on online shopping (84%), although this figure was noted to be lower (approximately 75%) in Malta, not chatting with strangers (83%) and limits to how much time children were allowed to spend online (79%). As to the use of filtering and monitoring software, as pointed out earlier, more than a fifth of Maltese parents did not know about or make use of such software, with the majority feeling that their child could be trusted online and there was therefore no need for it.

As previously discussed in the preceding point, the value of maintaining healthy channels of communication with children was highlighted by a number of participants. In research, lack of parental engagement with children has been linked to increased vulnerability when it comes to online for sexual abuse (Whittle et al., 2013), as well as augmenting the risks of cyberbullying (Wang et al., 2009). Deficiencies in young adult's communication with parents has also been associated with adolescent online aggression (Law et al., 2010; 2012).

*“Ir-relazzjoni mall-ġenituri fid-dar. [...] Tiddiskuti is-suġġetti kollha li jeżistu mat-tfal, ovvjament skont l-età tagħhom, iktar hemm ċans li t-tfal se jiftħu qalbhom mal-ġenituri meta jiġu affaċċjati b’xi problema. [...] Il-ġenituri jridu jkunu jafu ma’ min qed jagħmluha t-tfal tagħhom. I think that is very important. [...] . Il-ġenituri jridu jaraw kif iqattgħu iktar il-ħin mat-tfal. [...] Quality time”. (Participant 10)*

*[The relationship with parents at home. [...] Discussing all topics with children, obviously according to their age, there will be a higher probability that the children will share their problems with their parents. [...] Parents should be aware of who their children are spending time with. I think that is very important. [...] Parents should seek ways to spend more time with their children. [...] Quality time].*

*“Hawn ħafna problemi illum għax m’hemmx dal-kuntatt bejn il-parents u t-tfal. U jiena nemmen li għandna nišqu ħafna fuq tišhi tal-familja. Għax these things help”. (Participant 8)*

*[Nowadays there are a lot of problems because there is little contact between parents and their children. And I believe that we should strive towards bettering the family. Because these things help].*

The value of providing children with family support and positive channels of communication was in fact flagged across several professional participants and in research alike (e.g. Aljuboori, et al., 2021) as holding considerable mitigating value when it comes to online risks. In addition to providing a space for learning and development and positive role models, it also provides a safe space for children to seek support when faced with distressing experiences (Matsunaga, 2009). Moreover, frequent and unsupervised access to the internet has been found in research to be associated with the likelihood of unacceptable online behaviour (Annansingh, & Veli, 2016; Livingstone 2013; Livingstone et al., 2012; Livingstone, & Smith, 2014), highlighting the importance of parental involvement in children’s experiences online.

*“Din is-safety ifittxuha” (Participant 7)*

*[They seek out this safety]*

*“Nuqqas ta’ role models” (Participant 10)*

*[The lack of role models]*

In addition to these factors, a strong sense of belonging, whether it is to a family, school or any other supportive institution, is often considered in literature to be a protective factor for children (Brooks et al., 2012; Willoughby et al., 2007).

*“Xi ħaġa which is a protective factor għalija huwa being part of an association, a group – a youth centre, scouts, girl guides, some sort of, ċentru armar tal-festa, whatever it is... illi mhumix għal rashom. [...] Closer bonding and monitoring to keep young people safe”. (Participant 7)*

*[Something I consider to be a protective factor is being part of an association, a group – a youth centre, scouts, girl guides, some sort of, ‘festa’ clubs, whatever it is...that they are not left stranded. [...] Closer bonding and monitoring to keep young people safe].*

A number of professional participants in fact, pointed out a need for an overall strengthening of values and general wellbeing for our children, criticising a deterioration in the fabric of our value systems:

*“There is a responsibility to keep children safe in the community. [...] I think we lost a little bit of that. [...] That’s something that as a community, as a society, we need to make a lot of reflections on”. (Participant 4)*

*“With opportunities comes risks and we focus a lot on the opportunities as a society and I don’t believe we focus enough on the risks that exist. [...] I don’t believe we do anywhere near enough”. (Participant 4)*

*“Is-sistema edukattiva tagħna trid tinkorpora dawn l-empowerment programmes fuq bażi ongoing. [...] Media literacy u ethical values iridu jkunu part and parcel mas-sistema edukattiva all through. [...] Respect, tolerance, acceptance, [...] I-valuri kollettivi, that I listen to you, that we can speak with each other. [...] I think our education system, our syllabus, our curriculum, irid ikollu dawn l-objectives”. (Participant 11)*

*[Our educational system needs to include these empowerment programmes on an ongoing basis. [...] Media literacy and ethical values need to be part and parcel of our educational system across the board. [...] Respect, tolerance, acceptance, [...] collective values, that I listen to you, that we can speak to each other. [...] I think our educational system, our syllabus, our curriculum should include these objectives].*

To this, professional participants also added that communication with children should not only be sought by parents, but by society and policymakers alike, this through child-sensitive approaches that can appeal to their age groups (as corroborated in literature by researchers such as Christen, 2009 and Patterson et al., 2022). Nonetheless, professional participants also cautioned for these to be applicable and relatable to the local context; and highlighted the importance of involving young persons in discussions as stakeholders when it comes to strategies and decisions that affect them. When children are active participants in the development of interventions or strategies that impact them, this often results in improved solutions to address the topic at hand and can also yield enhanced knowledge retention (Donovan, 2016).

*“Iżjed discussions mat-tfal per se. Għax iżjed ma nagħmlu diskussjoni magħhom, indaħħluhom fid-diskussjoni, u nisimgħu huma xi jgħidu, it even helps them even more. [...] Ikunu parti mis-soluzzjoni”.* (Participant 8)

*[More discussions directly with children. Because the more we discuss things with them, involve them in the discussion and listen to what they have to say, it helps them even more. [...] They can be part of the solution].*

*“Increase child participation to give children a voice in decision making. So, it’s not about a lack of trust in children or young people, far from it. I’m talking about giving responsibility in an age-appropriate way”.* (Participant 4)

*“Campaigns li jkunu attrajenti, campaigns li jkunu nfurmati jekk jista’ jkun mit-tfal infushom, ħalli nkunu nistgħu nifhmu what works and what does not work, u naturalment l-stakeholders oħra li jaraw fil-fond”.* (Participant 11)

*[Campaigns that are attractive, campaigns that, when possible, are informed by children themselves, so that we can understand what works and what doesn’t, and naturally, stakeholders who can look into these matters in-depth (referring to professional stakeholders e.g. psychologists)].*

*“When you give them videos that were, for example, filmed in the UK or in the US they tell you, ‘Yes, but this happens in the US. I see it on YouTube or whatever, and that can never happen to me’. [...] It is happening online; it’s not really happening”.* (Participant 12)

*“Xi ħaġa li rridu ukoll we work on huwa l-iskills għall-parents” (Participant 8)*

*[We also have to work on parental skills].*

Researchers often highlight the value of knowledge and awareness as a helpful protective factor towards online threats such as sexual abuse and cyberbullying (e.g. Mishna et al., 2011; Patterson et al., 2022; WHO, 2020). Amongst participants, many felt that while children may have a degree of awareness about safe online practices, often this might not be sufficient for them to truly apply it when faced with challenging situations:

*“Ikollhom ċertu knowledge f’moħħhom imma, [...] ma jimmaginawx li tkun tapplika għalihom qabel ma jsibu ruħhom fiha”. (Participant 1)*

*[They have a certain level of knowledge however [...] they don’t imagine it applies to them unless they find themselves in that situation].*

*“Għalkemm it-tfal ikunu aware ta’ online safety, ikun hemm xi problemi li t-tfal jiltaqgħu magħhom u probabbilment, forsi ma jkunux daqshekk intizi biex jaraw huma kif se jżolvu dawk il-problem”. (Participant 8)*

*[Although children are aware about online safety, there could be problems that they encounter and probably, maybe they won’t really know how to address those problems].*

*“I think children are aware that there are things that they cannot do, however, [...] they are not yet mature enough to realize what the what will happen, what can happen if they do not use technology in a safe in a safe way”. (Participant 12)*

With a large part of the professional participants of this research being active stakeholders in the delivery of educational campaigns and initiatives themselves, it therefore comes as no surprise that participation in such initiatives addressing online safety was also considered to be associated with improved knowledge by the participants in this research too. Personality and skills such as coping strategies too were highlighted by participants as factors that can impact children’s degree of risk towards online threats and their approach towards the online world. In research for instance, self-esteem, has been reported to influence the degree to which children are more likely to meet with strangers they met online (Van den Heuvel et al.,

2012), while coping strategies have been reported to be associated with experiences related to cyberbullying (Machmutow et al., 2012). Equipping children and young adults with knowledge and skills that can better prepare them to face online (and offline) challenges can therefore in itself act as a protective factor in the face of these experiences.

*“Education and monitoring. So, first you have to teach them, then you have to monitor. [...] We have a good sense that we need to educate in Malta. But the follow up is always very weak”. (Participant 9)*

*“More awareness”. (Participant 12)*

*“Awareness I think is a big part of it imma rridu naħdmu fuq skills ukoll, li huma ta’ critical thinking. [...] U anke coping mechanisms and conflict resolution.” (Participant 8)*

*“Inħarsu long-term u nużaw is-sistema edukattiva tagħna fejn għandek żgur, qbadt lil kulħadd, hemm iċ-ċans li tassew inkunu qed ninvestu sustainably fit-tfal u f’dawk li għada pitgħada se jkunu l-adulti u l-mexxejja tal-familji tagħna, tal-komunitajiet tagħna u tas-socjetà in ġenerali” (Participant 11)*

*[We look long-term and use our educational system, where you can be certain to have reached everyone, and there is a true chance to invest sustainably in children and those who in the future will be the adults, the leaders of our families, of our communities and of society in general].*

In line with the above, the Eurobarometer 2014 (European Commission, 2014, pp. 56 - 57) found that almost all Maltese parents (96%) believed that “more and better teaching and guidance in schools about the use of the internet would contribute to its safer and more effective use by their child”. Maltese parents were almost amongst those who mostly agreed that training sessions organised by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), governments or local authorities were also useful towards this aim. A large part of Maltese parents also agreed that “more and better information and advice for parents about websites that children use most frequently”, “stricter regulation for businesses that produce online content and provide online services”, and “contact points where parents and children can ask advice about safe Internet use” would also aid towards safer online experiences for their children.

Participant 11 also added that the approach should be two-fold. They felt that education and awareness initiatives should be strengthened so that teaching in schools could act aid towards preventing negative experiences for children and empower their caregivers towards the same aim. They also added that adequate support structures should be present in school and society in order to address the needs of children who encounter negatives experiences online:

*“Jiena kieku nibda mill-iskejjel, però in parallel, irridu naħdmu ukoll mal-parents u man-nanniet. [...] They need to know what could happen, what, how to support the child, etc. Imbagħad jiena nemmen, li l-iskejjel tagħna jrid ikollhom, irridu nsaħħu s-psychosocial support. Mela on one hand investing in prevention, but on the other hand, fejn hemm bżonn irridu aħna nsaħħu s-sapport biex kemm jista’ jkun it-tfal, they overcome the effects...”.*

*[I would start from schools, however in parallel, we also need to work with parents and grandparents. [...] They need to know what could happen, what, how to support the child, etc. Then, I believe, our schools should also have, we have to strengthen psychosocial support. So, on one hand investing in prevention, and in the other, where there is the need, we strengthen support so that children can overcome the effects...]*

The role of the media was also brought to the forefront by some participants as influencing children’s behaviour online. References were made to exposing children to undue details or images of crimes or incidents during news reports or across articles shared online or in print media, as well as to the standards applied when it comes to public behaviour, language and interactions. Suggesting a general code of standards that can act as a framework for journalistic work, professional participants felt that this can set a positive model for children and society alike.

*“There should be a code of conduct. Preferably it should originate [...] from news websites and major platforms... so, they get together, and they even make it a self-regulatory regime”. (Participant 9)*

*“Il-ġurnalisti wkoll huma parti minn dak kollu li qed ngħidu. [...] Fl-iskejjel nippruvaw nagħtuhom l-iktar tagħrif up to date, siewi biex ovvjament għada pitgħada jkunu ċittadini sura ta’ nies. Imma mbagħad l-midja tista’ tkissirlek ħafna affarijiet”. (Participant 10)*

*[Journalists are also part of what we are talking about. [...] In schools we try to give students up to date, valuable knowledge so that obviously, in the future that can be healthy citizens. However then, the media can break a lot of things down].*

On a similar note, some participants called for improvements in local legislation in order to address the parameters of online behaviour.

*“Locally in terms of legislation is that we lack the right legislation to tackle grooming of children. [...] there needs to be more robust laws”. (Participant 4)*

#### 4.2.3 Children’s views about their experiences online

A qualitative focus group was carried out directly with a group of children of varying ages. Listening to the voices of the direct stakeholders can bring valuable insight and a shed light on the perspectives of those directly involved. This focus group therefore sought to explore the views, experiences and ambitions of children in relation to their use of the internet. Data collected was analysed in parallel with the data gathered from interviews that were carried out with professionals regarding the same topic. By way of discussing the experiences of children online, this research thereby sought to expand our understanding of the nature and extent of online usage amongst children, while exposing opportunities, threats and recommendations related to this. E-safety awareness, parental controls, extent of online use and possible were discussed with the group, listening directly to what children have to say. Four main themes and six related sub-themes were identified (Table 17): Accessing the online world; The impact of the online world on children; Parental awareness and involvement; and, Children’s recommendations for healthy use of the internet. These will now be presented.



Table 17: Themes identified from discussions with children regarding their experiences online

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
1. Accessing the online world	-
2. The impact of the online world on children	(i) Personal and relational impact (ii) Cyberbullying and other challenging experiences (iii) Exposure to inappropriate material (iv) Disclosing personal information
3. Parental awareness and involvement	-
4. Children's recommendations for healthy use of the internet	(i) The value of parent-child relationships (ii) Age of use

### *Theme 1: Accessing the online world*

Focus group participants were asked about how they thought children accessed the internet, more specifically, where they accessed it from and what devices they made use of for this. Most participants shared that accessing the online world was a part of their daily life and shared that this was also the case when it came to their peers and other children in general. They explained that they were able to access the internet from most locations they spent time in. The device which came across as the one most frequently referred to for activities online appeared to be the mobile phone. Other devices mentioned for accessing the internet were tablets, laptops and computers, with a less frequent mention of gaming consoles and TV internet.

*"I have internet at home, I have internet at my grandma, at school". (Participant 16)*

*"I have internet at home. Above that, I also have a data bundle, so I've got mobile internet wherever I go. [...] Home, generally everywhere thanks to phone internet, and school". (Participant 18)*

*"Mobiles, maybe tablets, computers". (Participant 16)*

*"A tablet or a laptop or a computer, and phones. [...] PS5s and XBoxes. (Participant 17)*

*"Mostly mobiles, maybe sometimes, when they take away your phone, maybe TV or a tablet, laptops, computers". (Participant 14)*

These claims are not surprising. In 2023, according to the Eurobarometer, 88% of Maltese participants claimed to make use of the internet on a daily basis (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, when it comes to children, in 2015, Lauri et al. reported that 59% of children between the ages of 8 and 15 made use of the internet every day. They also found that while computers, tablets and mobile phone were often the main devices used to go online, 73% of children owned a tablet and more than 70% owned a mobile phone. With new technologies and applications evolving at a rapid pace, children's daily use of the internet naturally continues to increase (Calderón et al., 2021). From the findings of the focus groups, although the data is not quantitative in nature, the perception of the children participating is that these figures appear to be on the increase. Additionally, Lauri et al. (2015) also reported that most Maltese households with children within these age group, had an internet connection and therefore easy access to the internet.

Focus group participants however pointed out that children's use of the internet served not only entertainment and recreational purposes, but was applied also for other uses, such as research and educational purposes, for health reasons, and in the case of those with disabilities, also provided them with accessibility which helped improve their quality of life. Nevertheless, some participants did admit that notwithstanding these useful purposes and applications, internet use amongst children still does often also relate to excessive use for less productive tasks.

*“Apps for example, accessibility apps, those need to connect to the internet and those usually go on [a] phone cause of the portability. [...] For people who are [...] disabled in general, I generally find that technology usage goes from a luxury to basically a necessity. [...] I have seen from [...] disabled people, laptops and stuff like that basically allow you to live the life”. (Participant 18)*

*“In sixth form right now were allowed to do research and look up past papers and syllabi. So, without the internet and the laptop, general computers, it would be a pretty impossible task. [...] a normal person does not depend as much on internet as a disabled person. [...] Without internet... [...] would impact [...] life in general as whole”. (Participant 13)*

*“Text a teacher ‘cause you need a question for homework”. (Participant 14)*

*“My best friend, she’s diabetic... [...] can access the app for her sugar”. (Participant 16)*

*“Technology is important, but, I mean, it is also true that we do use it for like basically entertainment more than we should so, like, there’s two sides to it”. (Participant 15)*

Participants were asked how much time they thought children spent online in a typical day. Several described being aware of limits of online usage due to parental control on their devices, however equally so, others described how they witnessed children making use of the internet for a considerable number of hours a day. Participants felt that technology had become a core part of everyday life even for children with some feeling that today’s society, maybe themselves included, had become dependent on it.

*“They probably do like eight hours and sometimes even in the morning they use it before they go to school. [...] I only use my phone for two hours ‘cause I have a limit”. (Participant 14)*

*“She also has a timer, like, two hours”. (Participant 16)*

*"I think in my entire [...] life, I have never seen anybody go without a phone for, you know, more than an hour. [...] We're a very technologically-dependant society".*  
(Participant 18)

*"One day I left my phone... [...] forgot it at school. [...] As soon as I got home, I was, 'How am I going to spend the day without my phone?!'".* (Participant 15)

Some participants also shared information about the age at which themselves or other children began to make use of devices and the internet. Being part of the online world has come to be a valuable aspect of a child's life (Vanden Abeele, 2016), however some participants still felt that children should be of a certain age in order to be given access to the online world and expressed that seven or eight year olds were still too young for unsupervised internet use.

*"I got my phone when I was in year 6. [...] Children that are in year 1 and year 3 are... they already have their phone. [...] They're too young for that age for that stuff".*  
(Participant 14)

*"Year 4 are still too young. I mean like you're like eight".* (Participant 16)

## *Theme 2: The impact of the online world on children*

Discussions with children carried out during the focus group drew a landscape of the different factors at play while they are using the internet. The experiences shared by the group of youngsters brought insight into some of the situations that children encounter online and how these impact their lives. From the data gathered through this qualitative branch of the study, four sub-themes were identified. These are: personal and relational impact; cyberbullying and other challenging experiences; exposure to inappropriate content; and disclosing personal information. These themes shed light into aspects of children's experiences on the internet such as their level of awareness about specific online threats and how children are protecting themselves during online exchanges, the value of reporting issues and subsequent action being taken and other valuable knowledge regarding how nature and dimension of these online challenges for youngsters.

### Sub-theme 1: Personal and relational impact

Focus group participants shared that the online world can have quite a strong impact on one's self-esteem and levels of confidence due to comparisons being made with material viewed online. Children and teens are often found in research to be self-conscious and more susceptible to harm when compared to adults (Steinberg, 2020). In particular, females have been found dedicate more attention to social comparison when compared to males (Haferkamp et al., 2012). Moreover, the group also felt that the use of devices and access to online content often impacted people's everyday lives and their presence in real life interactions and experiences.

*"Social media affects you, a lot, negatively, most of the time. [...] You're constantly comparing yourself to other people and you see stuff that's not true, but you think that it's true, even subconsciously, it does affect you".* (Participant 15)

*"It also heavily neuters a persons' capability to carry on just a regular conversation mostly without the presence of an electronic device. [...] It causes this ingrained dependence on you know, we have to see the world through the eyes of media".* (Participant 18)

*"The minute we enter online by giving our phones to children... [...] may negatively impact their relationships, both with the adults and both with other children because they will be too distracted by their phones".* (Participant 13)

Additionally, the widespread regular use of the online world is found to be transforming children's socialising behaviours, thinking styles and aspirations (Smith et al., 2015). Not surprisingly, one of the focus groups participants also seem to have touched upon these emerging new trends.

*"If the teacher told her 'What do you want to be when you grow up?', she said 'Tiktoker'".* (Participant 16)

## Sub-theme 2: Cyberbullying and other challenging experiences

In addition to the impact that the online world and the use of technological devices can have on personal and relational facets of children's lives, a number of participants also discussed concerning experiences related to online bullying, that is, cyberbullying. Narrated as an extension of real-life bullying, experiences of cyberbullying were in fact brought up by a number of participants. The impact that this had on the wellbeing of the person being bullied was considerable, with hurtful messages and threats being shared behind the scenes. Nevertheless, most participants appeared to be aware of the importance of reporting incidents of bullying that could be happening directly to them or to others. Some participants however shared experiences where reporting incidents of cyberbullying did not lead to appropriate consequential action, reiterating that prompt action is critical.

*"Rude words like the f word, the b word, saying 'You have no point in life' and like this girl vera ñaditha bi kbira [took it to heart]. I went with her to the head [...] of our school and she really didn't do anything". (Participant 16)*

*"Texted me privately saying really bad words to me". (Participant 14)*

*"She used to text me that she was going to burn the school down while I was in it, she used to tell me that I was a big, fat, ugly rat to everyone, she used to hate me and she used to tell everybody that, so that nobody would be my friend and they all hate me. [...] Students reported her to the principal, and she got into big trouble". (Participant 17)*

*"This friend who always got bullied in year 3. [...] He reported him and that's how it stopped". (Participant 18)*

*"It's true that the best action to report, to report to an adult that you trust, but it's also true that the bully, he might retaliate further, causing the problem to increase if no action is taken immediately". (Participant 13)*

*“I had gotten a message saying, ‘If you don’t send this to fifteen people in 5 minutes, this ghost named Teresa [...] will show up and live with you for the rest of your life’. And I was like scared [...] and after that I had, I couldn’t sleep, I felt like throwing up, I even sometimes felt like someone was watching me [...] and at night I was sweating, I wasn’t feeling alright, I slept like at midnight, I couldn’t sleep at all. [...] In my room especially I wasn’t feeling safe, and sometimes I, also feel unsafe in my room there is someone watching me and judging me”. (Participant 14)*

### Sub-theme 3: Exposure to inappropriate material

The ease with which children can be exposed to inappropriate material online may lead to negative consequences, including for instance, distorted views relating to sexuality (Peris et al., 2015; Tobin, 2019). Similarly, some researchers caution about its impact on the acceleration on child development (Merlyn et al., 2020). Concordantly, focus group participants narrated several instances where themselves or other children were faced with content online that caused them to feel uncomfortable or that they felt was not suitable for their age. Several recounted how these experiences led to considerable unease that, in some cases, even lasted for months. Participants felt that censorship was not always effective in keeping unsuitable material away. In fact, some questioned whether such censorship actually had the opposite effect in making such material more appealing to young people. Although several participants shared experiences where children stumbled across unsuitable material accidentally, one participant however shared that after a certain age, most people accessing inappropriate material online might very well be doing so intentionally. In line with this, it is not surprising therefore that, although the ‘Terms and Conditions’ of applications with widespread use amongst children, such as for instance TikTok, require users to be over the age of 13 (Tik Tok 2022), this is often found not to be the case, with users younger than this age often accessing and sharing data on this platform (Weimann & Masri, 2023). Meanwhile, the efficacy of child safeguarding controls on platforms such as YouTube also do not seem to be keeping up with the reality that children are experiencing in the online world (Wendling, 2017).

*“A friend, so, she watched something, [...] it was like a case where children got kidnapped and she got really scared. [...] She couldn’t sleep the whole night”. (Participant 16)*

*You have to say how much your, like, what your age is... [...] they can easily fake it".* (Participant 16)

*"Certain images do still make me scared and gave me a bad night".* (Participant 13)

*"I watched it through, and I had nightmares for months. There were parts of the house that I would not go to. [...] ...had that going on for several months".* (Participant 18)

*"There's a lot of stuff out there and a lot of it isn't meant for children like my age and as much as you try to censor it and protect them, that's not always the case so they're gonna be exposed to things that they're not meant to be exposed to".* (Participant 15)

*"It's important that there is censorship when it comes to children and what they can and cannot access on the internet, but I think there needs to be a line drawn. [...] When we see that something is forbidden, we are going to look after it even more. So, even if you aren't interested [...] you are going to start looking for it more. [...] Does censorship in a sense almost self-defeat itself?"* (Participant 18)

*"A bit younger, ok, you know, they might mistakenly go somewhere they don't mean to go, but at [the age of around 14] I think when you come to it, if you go on a website, you shouldn't be on or something, it's I think pretty intentional, it's more due to the lack of someone stopping them. I don't think it's by mistake".* (Participant 15)

*"This video popped up, it was [...] very age appropriate, the thumbnail, but and then when they clicked it, it wasn't AT ALL".* (Participant 16)

*"They see this game they upload it and it's actually a virus. Or, someone calls them, they don't know the number and they pick it up and they get hacked".* (Participant 14)



#### Sub-theme 4: Disclosing personal information

A large part of parents feel concern about the experiences that children encounter online (Anderson, 2019). In particular, the disclosure of personal information represents one of parents' highest concerns (Anderson, 2019). According to a 2014 study by part of Intel Security which was carried out with preteens and teens, 39% had not activated their privacy settings when using social networking platforms, 52% kept their location services active across apps, meaning their location was accessible by strangers, while 14% had disclosed their home addresses online (McAfee, 2014). Throughout the focus group, children too expressed concern regarding this facet of their online experiences. While a level of awareness about how to handle requests for information was exposed by the group, some felt that a suitable level of awareness and caution was only achieved mostly with age. In fact, a number of participants shared experiences they were aware of where children had overshared or given access to personal data unknowingly in their earlier years.

*"We give out personal details. I think we shouldn't because people, you don't know who people are, they might say they are ten years old but they're really like seventy years old, you can't really say". (Participant 17)*

*"I didn't do my date of my birthday and neither my name. So, it's safer not to do your real stuff". (Participant 14)*

*"The terms and conditions, like, who's reading them?" (Participant 16)*

*"I mistakenly clicked on continue [...] the game had been taking six euros from the card. [...] If I did notice, I probably wouldn't have clicked obviously, but I didn't at that time. Now I try to stay a little bit more careful, but you never know when these types of experiences may happen to you". (Participant 13)*

*"When we are talking about giving away information on the internet [...] there's a certain age that somebody reaches, adolescence or pre-adolescence, where they know not to do it". (Participant 18)*

*“Service providers ask for things like emails, [...] but then they ask things like home addresses, actual names and stuff like that and when a service provider does it, I find a lot of people, they just want the service, they don’t give two shakes about how it is going to be used, so they just give out the information required. So, you know, with service providers it’s not just children that I think fall victim to it, it’s also adults”. (Participant 18)*

### *Theme 3: Parental awareness and involvement*

Research often points to the involvement and role of parents as playing an important part in children’s behaviour online (Shi et al., 2017). Some studies for instance, indicated that the use of parental controls such as applying rules in relation to internet usage, reduced children’s risk of becoming addicted to the online world (e.g. Harakeh et al., 2004), although this notion has sometimes been put up for debate (e.g. Cheung et al., 2015), with some even pointing out that excessive parental controls could give rise to issues such as low self-esteem and depression (Younes et al., 2016; Fayazi & Hasani, 2017; Shi et al., 2017). The views of this study’s focus group participants appear to echo these findings. Most participants questioned the value of parental control software, a finding also brought up in research (e.g. Gallego et al., 2020). Many felt that their parents’ knowledge of these applications was too limited for it to be effective, with some pointing out that their parents relied on underage siblings to monitor their online usage. Some participants pointed out that so limited was their parents’ awareness of the realities online that paradoxically they were themselves the first to provide access or unknowingly potentiate their children to visit inappropriate sites or view content that was not suitable to them.

*“You have certain parents who through naivety or through obliviousness provide their children with things that are clearly not age appropriate”. (Participant 18)*

*“My parents... [...] they don’t know how to work it. [...] I think even if my mother like tried to get it on her phone, I don’t know how much she’d manage... [...] even my father”. (Participant 16)*

One participant however, felt that parental controls were fair:

*“I do have parental control and for me it’s not unfair”. (Participant 19)*

An interesting point brought up by focus group participants was that aside from whether they were exposed to inappropriate or not, witnessing adults' reactions to this material had an impact on how they perceived and responded to that material. They expressed that watching adults react with shock, fear or alarm to specific content, made them fear it considerably more. These findings shed light on the possible secondary effects of strong online content, for example viewing adult youtubers playing horror games, as well as the value of parental awareness surrounding children's experiences.

*"You just start thinking, 'My God, what is so terrifying that would make a grown man himself be scared? [...] if they're scared, I should definitely, 100% be even more scared"*  
(Participant 18)

*"These reactions when society says that they are more, they are more scarier because a grown man screamed or had a fright and like that exactly like you're going to say what on earth".* (Participant 16)

#### *Theme 4: Children's recommendations for healthy use of the internet*

The focus group provided a platform for children's voices to be heard. In doing so, participants were invited to share their recommendations as what they believe needs to happen in order for young persons to be safer when using the internet. The group discussed how they felt children's experiences online could be supported towards a healthier practice and two sub-themes were identified. These were: The value of parent-child relationships; and, Age of use. These will now be presented.

##### *Sub-theme 1: The value of parent-child relationships*

Improved parent-child relationships are often considered to support healthier emotional intelligence and social performance amongst young people and play a central role in reducing the risks of a child's addiction to the internet when it comes to things such as gaming or social networking (e.g. Zhu et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2022). Researchers in fact, often point to the importance of providing essential education and practical knowledge regarding children's internet use (Rial et al., 2015; Khurana et al., 2015; Keith & Steinberg, 2017; Vanderhoven et

al., 2016). Focus group participants too highlighted the value of spending quality and quantity time with parents. They argued that technological devices are at times taking over this interaction, feeling that these are sometimes used by parents to keep children busy. Overall, their sentiment appeared to be one calling for parents to truly safeguard their offspring's best interest by spending time with your child.

*"I think there needs to be this fundamental understanding from the current perspective to not use technology as a child pacifier and to not use technology as a way of shutting their children up because I feel like that is the cornerstone that causes kids to become you know this dependent always on tech". (Participant 18)*

*"I hear a lot of stories about parents who from a young age teach their children to resort to electronic devices essentially to shut them up and to get them out of the way and quiet. [...] There needs to be this understanding that parents need to, number 1, teach their kids that the tech is not the be all and the end all and then there is things beyond it fundamentally, and to not just let them on it for the sake of getting them out of their hair. You have a child take care of them, spend time with them, do something with your kid, don't just throw your phone in their face. (Participant 18 [child])*

*"Not just 'Have my phone' or 'Watch ma nafx x'hiex' [I don't know what]". (Participant 14)*

## Sub-theme 2: Age of use

The initial age of internet use amongst children is being found be getting lower with children accessing platforms such as social networking apps at younger ages (Oberst et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, this was also observed by participants of the focus group. Most of the group however felt that younger children, even those of ages 7 or 8, are too young to be online. Consequently, amongst their recommendations for healthier internet usage amongst children, focus group participants felt that children should be allowed to goonline only after a certain age, when they are considered to be better prepared for the online world. Moreover, participants felt that even then, restrictions as to what content they are exposed to should be put into place and in a manner that is rigorous enough to avoid them from having to come across material that is not suitable to them.

*“The phone [...] when you first get it [...] maybe you can do your age and your date of birth [...] so, for example, some games or some websites, you won’t be able to access them [...] not to keep you curious ‘cause then you will ask your friend, you will ask everyone. Maybe [...] it won’t even show all the game or the website”. (Participant 16)*

*“I think we need to delay that age in the range of maybe double digits not three year olds. I think those are the first crucial steps to safeguarding children at this point. Also, a cultural shift from the mentality [...] that I will give my phone to my child in order to quiet him down”. (Participant 13)*

*“I don’t know why people, parents give phones to three year olds”. (Participant 14)*

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Experiences of Child Abuse

Child abuse happens to children of all genders and ages and in different levels of society and leads to impacts in the short and long term on the child and in later life as an adult (Norman et al, 2012; UNICEF, n.d.d). This section will discuss the findings from the online questionnaire pertaining to reported experiences of child abuse by respondents who are now aged 18 years and over, including the types of abuse experienced, the perpetrators of the abuse, the age and length of the abuse experienced and the support sought in relation to literature. In the case of respondents to the questionnaire a vast number of respondents highlighted that they did not seek support. This section will critically analyse the findings from the questionnaire in the light of the literature (Chapter two) to understand why persons experiencing child abuse do not seek support. This section will also look into the support systems suggested and the suggestions to prevent child abuse from people who have experienced abuse in their childhood.

#### 5.1.1. Multi-Types of Abuse

According to the questionnaire responses, the most prevalent combination of abuses experienced was physical, emotional and sexual abuse, followed by physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect. A considerable number of respondents also mentioned that they experienced both physical and emotional abuse in their childhood. Research by Kimber et al (2017) highlights that emotional abuse in children, combined with other forms of abuse and neglect, is amongst the most common forms of abuse experienced, whilst Mangion and Buttigieg (2014) note that Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) was the abuse to be mostly associated with other types of abuse locally. Furthermore, UNICEF (2016) notes that more than 17% of children in 58 countries worldwide experience physical abuse together with emotional abuse. This reflects the outcomes of the questionnaire, whereby the vast majority of respondents highlighted experiencing more than one type of abuse throughout their childhood and adolescence. Whereas all types of abuse pose trauma and long-lasting effects in the lives of children and later in life as adults, multi-type child abuse, that is a combination of more than one types of abuse, create a greater risk of long-term trauma which, according to Mangion & Buttigieg (2014) require an interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral and inter-agency approach to help children, and later adults, process the abuse experienced (Mangion & Buttigieg, 2014).

### 5.1.2. Perpetrators

Child abuse usually happens in places where children should be mostly protected and feel safe, including children's own homes and family settings (UNICEF, n.d.d), with such abuse being considered to be mostly invisible (WHO, 2006). Respondents from the questionnaire highlighted their mothers and fathers as the most commonly reported perpetrators in the case of physical and emotional abuse. Siblings, and other relatives were also frequently mentioned as perpetrators of physical and emotional abuse, highlighting how physical and emotional abuse is reportedly more prevalent in the household setting even in Malta.

Research highlights that abuse carried out by males tends to be more aggressive when compared to abuse carried out by females (Hassan et al, 2015). This partially reflects one of the outcomes from the survey carried out in this research study whereby, it was found that parents, both mothers and fathers, were the principal perpetrators of physical abuse. In addition, more mothers, when compared to any other group of perpetrators, were reported as being the main perpetrators of emotional abuse towards their children. This reflects findings from literature which highlights that emotional abuse most commonly happens by the primary caregiver, who is entrusted with the love and nurturing of the child. Of grave concern is that it goes diametrically against creating the secure attachment with the mother that protects against mental health issues as first reported by Bowlby (1969). According to Bowlby (1969), so important is this sense of attachment, that when the mother abuses her child, particularly through emotional abuse, this creates a state where the child experiences augmented stress in later life, both because of the abuse experienced but also because of the fragility of the bond between the mother and child which is often central to a child's life and growing up (Bowlby, 1969 as cited by Shapero et al, 2014).

With respect to identifying the perpetrators of abuse on children, educators and teachers were the third most commonly reported group of perpetrators for physical abuse in the questionnaire. This reflects findings from literature where schools, and in general, a child's own community, also tends to be a space where abuse happens, when the child is abused by someone whom they usually think they can trust and with whom they assume they should be safe with (UNICEF, n.d.d).

In the case of CSA, strangers, other relatives and partners, with the latter suggesting a stronger prevalence in adolescence, were the most commonly mentioned perpetrators of CSA. In the case of other relatives, as well as 'adult neighbourhood acquaintances', this also corroborates with research conducted in other countries, which highlights that most perpetrators of CSA tend to hold a previously established relationship of trust with the child and their family (Craven et al, 2006; Snyder, 2000). In the case of CSA research also shows that perpetrators are at times children or adolescents themselves (Malvaso et al., 2019). The latter is reflected the questionnaire outcomes, where respondents also mentioned 'child neighbourhood acquaintances', 'peers' and 'other pupils at school', reflecting literature findings elsewhere where it is said that juveniles, aged 16 years or under, may also be the abusers, particularly with regards to both sexual and online abuse (Hassan et al, 2015).

### 5.1.3. Seeking Support

The experience of child abuse may have a considerable impact on an individual during childhood and, later on, in adult life (Norman et al., 2012; Spataro et al., 2004). Nonetheless, reporting and seeking support is often problematic. Only 27% out of the 484 respondents to the online questionnaire reported seeking support for the child abuse experienced, with 30% of those seeking support admitting to not finding support as helpful. Sadly, this finding reflects literature and research around the world, where researchers often report that child abuse cases are often unreported (Finkelhor, 2009; Lippert et al., 2009).

#### 5.1.3.1. *Reasons for seeking support*

##### Deteriorating Mental Health

Amongst those who sought support, online questionnaire respondents highlighted that they sought support for 'themselves'. Other respondents mentioned mental health issues and feeling suicidal as one of the main reasons to seek support, in line with research which shows that child abuse has profound consequences which includes mental health concerns such as anxiety disorders, behavioural disorders, feeling depressed, possible self-harm, posttraumatic stress disorder, and possibly suicidal ideation (Safeguarding Commission, 2019; Kimber et al, 2017; Dias et al, 2015; Jung et al., 2015; Duong & Bradshaw, 2014; Shapero et al, 2014; Stoltenborgh et al, 2013; Afifi, 2012; Norman et al, 2012; Gavin, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2009).



Moreover, neglect is a type of child abuse which in itself seems to be often overlooked in scientific research (Mulder et al, 2018; Stoltenborgh et al, 2013) as the cause for mental distress. From the literature available, it is evident that most risks in relation to children experiencing neglect arise from the parent or guardian experiencing or having experienced some type of trauma or abuse themselves, or parents or guardians who are or have experienced mental health and psychiatric issues (Mulder et al, 2018).

### Personal relationships

Other respondents mentioned that they had to seek support as the child abuse experienced was now, as adults, affecting their adult, often intimate relationships, particularly in the case of adults who had experienced CSA, highlighting how child abuse can have a considerable impact on an individual, during their immediate stage of life and in the longer term (Norman et al., 2012; Spataro et al., 2004).

#### *5.1.3.2. Reasons for not seeking support*

Fisher's exact test was conducted to examine whether a significant association existed between experiencing the four types of abuse and seeking support. The tests showed that there is a significant association between experiencing physical and emotional abuse and neglect and not seeking support. There may be a number of reasons why children who have experienced physical or emotional abuse do not seek support, and this includes the possible repercussions on themselves or their families, fear of not being believed in, living in denial or not being aware that what is being experienced is in fact abuse. This highlights the need to place much more emphasis in the local context on placing physical and emotional abuse and neglect at par with sexual abuse, in terms of legislation, awareness and all other important aspects, to allow those who experience this type of abuse to be in a position to seek support and report the abuse. This will be highlighted in what follows.

### Not aware it was wrong/abuse

Out of the respondents who did not seek support, the majority highlighted that they did not seek support because they were not aware that what they were experiencing was abuse, with some respondents still commenting that they saw nothing specifically wrong in some of the questionnaire items referring to abuse. This result reflects research by UNICEF (2016) which

highlights that approximately 3 in 10 adults worldwide still believe that physical punishment is a necessary tool to raise children (2016). Furthermore, amongst the questionnaire respondents who did not seek support, being too young was mentioned amongst the factors, possibly related to the increased dependency children have on their carers, who in this case were often also their abusers, fear to speak up about the abuse but also the need to become aware of, process and understand that what was being experienced was actually a form of abuse.

### Fear and shame

Fear, blaming themselves or being blamed for causing the abusive behaviour towards them to happen and a sense of shame and embarrassment were amongst the major factors which questionnaire respondents reported as the reasons why they did not seek support. On a worldwide level, research shows that fear and stigma and the surrounding culture are major aspects which frequently hinder reporting of child abuse and seeking for support (Norman et al, 2012). Locally, the Maltese Islands' tight-knit communities, where abuse is often a taboo, especially if it happens through commission by a relative or close family friend, is in fact one of the barriers for reporting abuse, and thus in line with the responses of the questionnaire, where shame and fear of the abuser were reported as often halting a person from reporting the abuse experienced as a child (Calleja, 2012). As highlighted in previous sections of this chapter, parents and other family members are frequently mentioned to be the perpetrators of child abuse according to the questionnaire respondents. The fact that parents, or other relatives, perpetuate child abuse may be one of the reasons why children fail to report and seek support with regards to the child abuse experienced, particularly because of fear of the reaction of family members and how reporting would impact the whole family (Dimech, 2000). This may include the possibility of breaking family ties and rupturing the child's closest relationships, which ultimately leads to additional lifelong consequences in terms of relationships with other family members (Larner et al, 1998). A local study carried out by Dimech (2000) also shows that victims of child abuse tend to fear reporting the abuse suffered as a result of fearing the reaction of family members and fear that the whole family will suffer if such abuse is reported.

Furthermore, specifically in the case of CSA, children, or later adults, often fear stigmatisation and labelling, such as boys or young men fearing being labelled as homosexuals or being perceived as 'less masculine' in the case of a young boy being abused by an older female (Hassan et al, 2015). Furthermore, fear to report may also be associated with religious aspects

in the child's or the family of the child's life. A family which is considered to be devoutly religious involve an element of secrecy which hinders, and creates a further barrier to children to seeking support (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, 2017).

## Time

Amongst the respondents who replied that they had sought support, around 30% noted that they sought support more than 10 years after the abuse had taken place, reflecting outcomes from literature which shows that child abuse is often disclosed decades later (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, 2017). Questionnaire respondents also mentioned being too young when the abuse happened to seek support for the child abuse experienced, reflecting the need in this case of time, to realise what happened to have the courage to possibly seek support.

Whilst with time, children, or later adults, may have managed to possibly overcome familial pressures or fear for the unity of their family, time and thus legal prescription, is an issue, when cases of child abuse are reported long after these have happened. Whilst the person who has experienced abuse as a child may finally receive support with regards to the trauma experienced, on a legal aspect, this may mean that the time passed may mean that the crime is now unenforceable as the crime would be prescribed (Bonett, 2020). Unfortunately, the legal barrier of prescription is a serious obstacle to these persons finding justice and closure.

Nonetheless, it must be highlighted that the results of the Pearson Chi-Square's exact test indicate a significant association between not seeking support and age, highlighting that the vast majority of persons who have been abused as a child do not seek out support at any age following such abuse.

### *5.1.3.3. Support solicited to prevent future child abuse*

Questionnaire respondents highlighted that they wished they were supported to stop the abuse and take action, that they were understood and listened to, and that they would have received guidance when they needed it most.

## Social workers and social and online services

Questionnaire respondents mentioned the need for social workers and social services to be present and their roles and services offered to be strengthened, as well as the need for enhanced online services which are easily accessible.

Respondents highlighted the need for better social services, including trained professionals who can offer a continuously available safe space where children are listened to, believed and supported. Respondents also highlighted the need for such services to be free of charge and with sufficient professionals who are available to provide such support. Ultimately, respondents highlighted the need for social services to be present around children, particularly in schools, to allow them to be able to reach out for help.

Locally, an addition to the Child Protection Act in 2021 states that any professional is required by law to report, under professional secrecy, any suspicion of child abuse happening (Government of Malta, 2021), reinforcing the position of professionals to protect children experiencing abuse. However, this has also been described as a double-edged sword by some professionals with children being afraid to discuss with professionals whether they are being abused or not out of fear that the professionals will be obliged to report even a suspicion.

Furthermore, the Child Protection Services (CPS) includes a multi-disciplinary team to investigate and assess children and their families working with a zero-tolerance policy towards any kind of child abuse and neglect for cases are usually referred from various sources, including schools, the Police and other professionals, and through calls received from the National Supportline 179 (Foundation for Social Welfare Services, n.d.a). Locally, the National 179 Supportline is a 24/7 available freephone and the Childwebalert Hotline is also available to report websites which contain CSA Material (CSAM), as part of the BeSmartonline project (MCA BeSmartOnline!, 2017; Foundation for Social Welfare Services, n.d.b; Foundation for Social Welfare Services, n.d.c). Nonetheless, the findings of the questionnaire clearly highlight the need for these services to be further strengthened and be made more accessible. Research shows that on a global level, child helplines are also considered an essential tool with regards to the child protection system, where helplines are often the first access point for children to speak out, receive assistance and request intervention (Petrowski et al, 2021).

Furthermore, particular attention should be given to family contexts with lack of support from the surrounding community, which often result in parents feeling lonely and isolated and possibly creating a situation of possible abuse due to resentment, anger and loneliness itself. Situations with higher poverty and unemployment levels and with poor living standards, as well as areas which are considered violence hotspots are areas where children are more prone to be abused, and as research clearly shows, should be given additional consideration and attention to prevent child abuse and identify possible cases of child abuse happening (WHO, 2020 ad 2017).

## Schools

Questionnaire respondents also highlighted the need for additional support in schools to be able to speak out and seek support. Amongst the respondents, the role of schools was highlighted, with schools being identified as the main refuge for children who are experiencing abuse at home or in other surroundings. The importance of trained professionals in schools was also solicited by respondents.

Teachers and professionals working in schools and the educational system have regular contact with children and are in a prime position to notice and/or detect instances of possible child abuse. Schools are also sometimes considered as a safe haven for abused children. Thus the role of teachers to be able to monitor and notice cases of abuse but also to be available and accessible to children to talk and open up is of paramount importance in allowing abused children to seek support, reflecting the need for professionals working in the educational system to be trained and equipped with the right tools and knowledge to detect situations but also to be able to listen to abused children who may seek comfort and support at school (De Haan, 2019). Locally, such support may also be found through the Child Safety Services (CSS), within the Directorate for Educational Services which specifically specialises in cases and issues pertaining to child abuse. The services offer information sessions on the types of child abuse, detection of abuse and avoidance of abuse to school staff, parents and professionals working with children (K.P. Coleiro, personal communication, January 12, 2023; EduServices, 2017).

## Education and awareness

Education and awareness about what constitute child abuse and in terms of educating parents on how to parent, what is child abuse, thus making them more conscious, and the effects of any type of child abuse was also highlighted by questionnaire respondents.

The importance of educating children about all types of and what constitutes abuse from a very young age was noted, as was encouraging children to speak out immediately if they are abused or fear that they will be abused. Respondents also highlighted the need to educate parents, both in terms of the basics of parenting, what constitutes becoming a parent and to be aware of any possible signs their children may be abused. Awareness about children's rights at school was also mentioned as well as the need for awareness campaigns onto different media, including social media, about what is abuse and the channels available to report abuse.

## Therapy and the role of professionals

Therapy was also mentioned as a support service which should be available and accessible for children experiencing abuse to help them to seek support and report their perpetrators. The availability of trained professionals was highlighted by respondents as well as the importance of providing such service free of charge, since the cost of therapy is often a barrier in seeking help.

The role of professionals and the importance of therapeutic services is thus crucial in supporting children experiencing child abuse. It is the moral and legal duty of any professional to report possible cases of child abuse (Borg & Barlow). Yet it is also crucial to empower professionals to be able to identify such cases as well as to allow them to be more accessible to provide the right therapeutic support required to speak, disclose cases of abuse, or to support adults who have experienced abuse earlier in life to disclose these experiences (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse, 2017). The need for free therapy was also mentioned, particularly for children coming from lower income families who often fail to receive the support required, especially at the time they need it, also due to the long waiting lists for publicly available services.

## Improved laws, systems and a strengthened police force

Online questionnaire respondents also highlighted the need for more serious legal consequences for abusers and more protection by police. The need for the Police force to take necessary action and the need for a change in the legal system when reporting abuse was mentioned by respondents. Those reporting abuse should be protected and their reports immediately processed.

The responses from questionnaire respondents highlight the need for an improved judicial system which looks at protecting children suffering from abuse both from a preventive aspect but also to take immediate action when a case is reported, either directly by the child or through other professionals. Research highlights that those young persons experiencing child abuse deserve attention, help and support, through increased investment in preventive and treatment strategies as well as the identification of programmes to reduce child abuse are necessary (Norman et al, 2012). Since the protection of the rights of a child is crucial, that can only happen if the child has access to justice through a system which is child friendly. This ultimately allows the child to have easy and supported access to make their voice heard and has access to a child-sensitive and child-focused judicial system (Norman et al, 2012).

Locally the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA) allows for the registration of sexual offenders (Government of Malta, 2012:1). Nonetheless, abusers are inscribed within the POMA registry at the discretion of the Magistrate or Judge. Furthermore, the POMA registry only covers for abusers who have been convicted of sexual offences, and thus do not include perpetrators of physical or emotional child abuse or neglect, reflecting a discrepancy in the consideration of the different types of abuse within the POMA Act which necessitates attention and amendment to further protect the interests and safety of children from perpetrators. The latter is further reinforced by the Fisher's test conducted as part of analysing the responses to the questionnaire of this study which shows a significant association with experiencing physical and emotional abuse and neglect (not CSA) and not seeking support, and thus highlighting the need to emphasise further other aspects of abuse on a local level besides CSA, including in the POMA.

## 5.2 Work with perpetrators of child abuse

Through the qualitative interviews carried out with professionals who work with perpetrators of child abuse, this study sought to explore the nature and context of abuse carried out by perpetrators, current treatment programmes and structures to address the rehabilitation and/or treatment of those convicted of child abuse, to also understand the effectiveness of different rehabilitation approaches and incidents of recidivism.

### 5.2.1. Nature and Context of Abuse

From discussions with professionals who come in contact with perpetrators, it has emerged that most respondents' role and function also include the protection of children who are victims of child abuse, children who come in contact or are close to someone who was convicted of child abuse, and the protection of children in general. In such instances, risk assessment including the vicinity and proximity of the child near to the convicted perpetrator, who might possibly be their carer or guardian, is carried out. Amongst such cases, as highlighted by the CPS, approximately 2,100 cases a year are received in which case children are subject to abuse. Most abuse referrals refer to neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse, and cases where the guardian conducts a criminal lifestyle which pose a risk to the health and wellbeing of the child, and may also lead to neglect. Moreover, various types of abuse were reported by the different professional participants, including neglect, physical and emotional abuse and CSA.

Respondents highlighted how in most cases of child abuse, such abuse involves an imbalance of power. Outcomes from interviews with professionals and literature show that child abuse mostly happens in situations where children should be mostly protected, often being their homes and family settings, where children are meant to feel and be safe, and in the care of someone they trust (UNICEF, n.d.d). Emotional abuse is often carried out by the primary caregiver, reflecting the opposite of the natural process of secure attachment as referred to by Bowlby's Attachment Theory, where when situations of abuse by the primary caregiver, this causes a major shock to the child (Bowlby, 1969 and cited by Shapero et al, 2014). This highlights the need to understand the lifelong consequences experienced by children who have experienced abuse (Norman et al, 2012). Furthermore, respondents highlighted that in certain cases, certain types of abuse happen as coping strategies, possibly often due to the lack of proper parenting skills, particularly emotional and physical abuse.



Furthermore, reinforcing the respondents' perspective that in most cases of child abuse such abuse involves an imbalance of power is literature pertaining to CSA which highlights that CSA is perpetrated mostly by those people who children trust the most, or who manage to obtain a child's trust strategically (Ministry for Social Justice and Solidarity, the Family and Children's Rights, 2020; Attard and Montalto, 2007; NSPCC, n.d.f; UNICEF, n.d.c).

Professionals highlighted that the first step in commencing a programme of rehabilitation for perpetrators involves assessing the situation, with various respondents stressing that treatment programmes should be tailor-made to the person and the situation, including the perpetrators' profile, own background and life experiences. Professionals also highlighted the need to understand the situations or conditions which need to be carefully addressed, including the perpetrators' real level of empathy with the victim and willingness to accept help or whether they consider professionals as an intrusion in carrying out their chaotic or illicit lifestyle, which is often also their means of income. Mental health conditions, financial problems and substance abuse are all possible factors which need to be considered, allowing for an understanding of the profile of the person receiving the treatment and/or rehabilitation, thereby allowing for better adaptation of the treatment plan laid out for them. Literature shows that not all forms of abuse may involve deliberate strategies to attract the victims, particularly in the case of neglect. Perpetrators of neglect on children may be the result of mental issues, may have financial difficulties, substance additions or be involved in criminal activities. Other perpetrators may have experienced the same type of abuse as a child themselves (WHO, 2020). Literature also shows that the risk of child abuse tends to increase if there is a history of violence within the family, with lack of family or social support, a sense of isolation and loneliness, low income and education levels and high unemployment levels. These factors have to be considered when carrying out an assessment of the situation and planning treatment for perpetrators (WHO, 2020 and 2017; Norman et al, 2012; NSPCC, n.d.e; UNICEF, n.d.d).

Participants also highlighted how some perpetrators may have at times been victims of child abuse themselves, or having experienced other challenging situations in their own life. As a result, these types of perpetrators often 'do not know better' or require mental health support both in terms of the abuse being procured to their own or any other child, and to themselves, in terms of the trauma/s they might have experienced themselves. Having been victims of abuse themselves, poor social skills, loneliness and lack of self-control, often as a result of past trauma, are considered to be predisposing factors for perpetrating child abuse, whereby

perpetrators are often convinced that they are not harming their victims (Kåven et al, 2019; Norman et al, 2012; UNICEF, n.d.d). From the literature available, it is evident that most risks in relation to children experiencing neglect arise from a guardian who has themselves experienced some type of trauma or abuse, or guardians who are or have experienced mental health and psychiatric issues (Mulder et al, 2018).

Respondents have highlighted the need to carry out a situation analysis in terms of the profile of the perpetrator and situation where the abuse happens. This is line with literature highlighting that anyone may be a perpetrator and that there are different types of perpetrators, including the 'malicious' type who finds abuse satisfying, the 'misguided parents' who incorrectly believe that violence is beneficial in their children's upbringing and the 'instrumental parents', who believe that providing for the material needs for a child compensates for the lack of emotional connection with their children. A number of perpetrators also believe that they have been provoked by the child themselves and thus legitimise their actions (NSPCC, 2022; Libreri cited by Balzan, 2021[online]; Hassan et al, 2015; Ward and Keenan, 1999). Perpetrators in Malta reportedly think and behave very much on the same lines as those in other countries.

### 5.2.2. Treatment Programmes

Respondents highlighted how perpetrators of child abuse are handled in court, the quality of sentences given out to them, and shared how further emphasis should be placed on ensuring a proper delivery of mandates by court for treatment programmes. Respondents noted that only a few magistrates mandate a treatment programme or therapy as part of their rehabilitation thus failing to give support and a chance of rehabilitation to the perpetrator. None of the professionals interviewed mentioned the existence of a structured treatment programme at a national level. Respondents also highlighted that the monitoring of any progress of perpetrators throughout their sentence by professionals, including probation officers, only happens if they are specifically assigned this service from court.

One respondent highlighted that the Maltese authorities 'boast' about having a rehabilitative system whilst in reality, the system is mostly punitive. A number of participants also further added that early intervention as well as preventive initiatives could also help in safeguarding

children by reducing rates of offence, mentioning foreign examples of practice such as Germany's Berlin Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (Beier et al., 2009a; 2009b) which offers early intervention services related to child sexual abuse, as well as treatment programmes that address juvenile child abuse or services to families with incidents of neglect.

Current treatment programmes in Malta for perpetrators are offered in-house with some agencies, but there appears to be a significant lack coordination across various services which perpetrators may come across along their sentences or prison terms, where, according to respondents, no specific structure, coordination or protocol exists, with some respondents questioning if the right services and support are currently being offered to perpetrators, since according to most respondents, only general 'one-size-fits-all' services are actually offered. This includes support on general sexual offences, rather than these being focused specifically on CSA. Furthermore, respondents also highlighted how perpetrators need to be willing to receive and be fully engaged in treatment for this to be successful. Rehabilitative services specifically aimed at perpetrators who resist therapeutic treatment are not available on the island.

In fact, respondents also highlighted that those services are offered as a means to protect children who have experienced child abuse, or to prevent other children from experiencing child abuse, rather than as a means of support and treatment for the perpetrator to be rehabilitated. According to respondents, this should include teaching parents who are convicted of child abuse basic parenting skills, including managing their own behaviour and emotions.

Respondents also remarked that the mode of delivering therapeutic and rehabilitative programmes to perpetrators was a crucial aspect in assessing if such programmes are successful or not. Professionals interviewed discussed the impact and advantages and disadvantages of individual versus group treatment programmes, with respondents highlighting how in group work, people may find it difficult allow themselves to experience their vulnerability in this setting, but would benefit more from individual work, whereas certain people may find a group to be supportive, with expression of vulnerability often being contagious and having a positive effect on all group participants. Group work also allows participants to listen to each other's experiences, feel accepted and understand further the impact of their actions.

Victim empathy was also highlighted by interview respondents, whereby it was mentioned as playing a crucial role in ensuring the success of any type of rehabilitation programme. This includes experiencing remorse for their behaviour towards the child, acknowledging that what they did was wrong and accepting that their actions caused pain and suffering to the child. Literature also clearly shows that victim empathy is considered to be critical in the success of treatment programmes carried out with perpetrators, even preventing recidivism (Carich et al., 2003). However, empathy is rarely acquired later in life when developmentally it was not nurtured or experienced. Therefore, early intervention programmes targeting emotionally neglectful or abusive parents are vital also in having a ripple effect on facilitating the effectiveness of treatment programmes once abuse has been committed. This type of intervention would go a long way in curbing the inter-generational transmission of abuse (Fuchs et al, 2015; Bartlett et al, 2017).

Following up to the lack of coordination of support programmes is also the lack of services offered to preparators when court sentences end. Whilst most interview respondents highlighted that recidivism is apparently low, the gaps in follow-up services could impact rates of recidivism. Follow-up services should ideally also be considered as a tool to allow for a healthier participation in the community, particularly with the possible introduction of specialised community-based support programmes which involve a multidisciplinary team of professionals. Nonetheless, one respondent highlighted how relapse is common and natural for perpetrators and thus the ended for resources and programmes to be in place to allow for long-term monitoring, support, and therapy.

### 5.2.3. Levels of Control

Respondents highlighted the need for and importance of certain level of controls. This includes the Protection of Minors (Registration) Act (POMA) registry (Government of Malta, 2012), in terms of protecting children from convicted perpetrators but also as a means to support convicted perpetrators to avoid possible temptation whilst they are going through support programmes and after such programmes have been completed. Nonetheless, with regards to the POMA, for a name to be placed on the list, a person needs to be convicted in court, and the magistrate or judge needs to agree to put their name on the list. This means that it is upon the discretion of the magistrate or judge whether to place the name of the convicted perpetrator onto the POMA list. Respondents highlighted the need for stricter inclusion of perpetrators on the register and the need to have a wider use of the POMA register by

organisations when employ people who will come in contact with children. Another respondent also highlighted the need to have a joint POMA register and Police Conduct Certificates, since according to the same respondent, there are currently delays in the updating of Police Conduct Certificates to reflect court sentences related to child abuse. Furthermore, besides people convicted of sexual offences, directly involving children, or adults, the POMA register was originally also aimed to include people convicted of other types of child abuse and other criminal offences involving children (Government of Malta, 2012). This is not currently the case and the POMA should be updated to reflect all types of perpetrators involving all types of abuse on children. In line with this, one particular participant highlighted how the Maltese judicial system is more structured in relation to sexual-related crimes and less in terms of other forms of abuse.

Respondents also highlighted issues with regards to the current local laws in terms of prescription, highlighting how setting a time-limit as to for how long a person had the right to report such abuse was not adequate, particularly given the nature and complexities associated with child abuse and the implications for a child to speak up about an abuse experienced. In reporting abuse, particularly in the local context, one needs to keep in mind the stigma associated with child abuse, particularly in the tight-knit communities of Maltese society and the need oftentimes for the child, or later the adult, to be able to overcome familial pressures not to report abuse (Bonett, 2020; Hassan et al, 2015; Calleja, 2012; Dimech, 2000). People who may have experienced abuse as a child also tend to consider the possibility losing their family and relationships (Larner et al, 1998). Furthermore, a child might not realise that they are being abused when this is happening, only to realise at a much later stage in life, or may 'simply' be fearful to report (Bonett, 2020)

Furthermore, resources and person-power are crucial in protecting children from abuse and in providing suitable services for perpetrators to be treated and rehabilitated. Respondents highlighted the waiting lists that exist in relation to service surrounding child abuse, for both perpetrators and children who have experienced abuse, as a result of lack of person-power and human resources.

Respondents also highlighted the need for professionals offering services to perpetrators to be well trained and qualified in order to be able to offer adequate support in these complex experiences. Professionals should also be receiving more targeted training to be able to

rapidly and reliably detect cases of child abuse. Whilst in Malta it is the moral and legal duty of any professional that comes into contact with a child that is potentially being abused to report such concerns to the relevant authorities (Government of Malta, 2021), research shows that the main barrier to identifying and reporting suspected cases of child abuse is the lack of knowledge or experience of professionals who come in contact with such cases, thus highlighting the need for training, support systems and support from the law to protect them against legal liability (Borg & Barlow, 2018). Borg & Barlow's research (2018) also highlights how paediatricians interviewed, for example, highlighted that they never received training related to possible cases of child abuse, reflecting the need to ensure clarity and provide training to those professionals who come in contact with child abuse situations from any perspective. The same applies for teachers, who are in a prime position to detect cases of child abuse and who need to be adequately trained to be able to identify such instances (De Haan, 2019).

## 5.3 Children's Experiences Online

Notwithstanding the boundless opportunities and benefits that the online world brings along, researchers have often pointed out that this can also bring an array of risks and consequences with it too. Cyberbullying for instance is often amongst the highest flagged issues arising from internet use, together with other possible concerns such as for instance, excessive use (Aharony, 2016; Andreassen, 2015; Debatin et al., 2009). Although long previously encountered by children, threats such as bullying, racism, and abuse, amongst others, are now more than ever, easily accessible at the touch of a button.

### 5.3.1 Accessing the online world

With figures of up to 75% of children between the ages of 6 and 17 making use of the internet, and even higher ones for teenagers (Hasebrink, 2009), the internet has obviously come to form part of everyday life for most families (Edwards et al., 2016; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2014). In addition to home computers, the easy access to the online world has increased even further with the widespread use of smartphones, which brought further autonomy of use and access from any location (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). In Malta, Smahel et al. (2020) reported that amongst children aged 9 to 16, 77% accessed the internet using a smartphone or mobile phone daily, 58% used a desktop computer, laptop or notebook, 43% went online by using a tablet, while 34% did so using game consoles. These findings were also observed across the team of professional participants who felt that the online world was a daily part of today's children's lives. Child participants' views also resonated with this, with all of them expressing that they access the online world from most of the locations they frequent, be it home, school or public places, through the use of a multitude of devices, most frequently a mobile phone allowing for portable access.

### 5.3.2 The impact of the online world on children

Naturally, with children's increasing access to the online world, comes growing concern amongst parents, professionals and policymakers alike to ensure that, while children are empowered to connect with online opportunities, they can do so in a manner which is safe and where their rights are still safeguarded. Participant 5 for instance remarks, "*it's a whole*

*new area through which abuse can take place. So, we have to, we have to start thinking of the newer forms of maltreatment now and abuse, you know, cybercrime, social media”.* According to a 2021 Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2021) in fact, 53% of Europeans find online safety and children’s wellbeing to be a concern to them. Moreover, Smahel et al. (2020) reported that 45% of Maltese children aged 9 – 16 years had experience being bothered by something online over the last year, with 15% of these claiming to have experienced something bothersome at least once a month. As also brought to light across several of the interviews carried out with professionals working with children as well as the focus group with children that were carried as part of this study, amongst Smahel et al.’s (2020) sample of participating children, 34% Maltese 9 – 16 year olds expressed they had been subjected to hurtful or nasty behaviour online over the past year, with researchers observing that victimisation substantially increased with age. In addition to this, scoring highest amongst children from all 19 participating countries, 23% of Maltese children aged 9 – 16 also reported having received a virus or spyware (Smahel et al., 2020). Unsurprisingly, several of the child participants in this study told of stories where harmful discourse was used towards themselves or other children they knew and how this had impacted them strongly.

The professionals involved in the study expressed how children online tend to engage in behaviours they would not otherwise perform in the physical world. The sense of invisibility and anonymity created by the screen appears to be viewed as leaving them with fewer inhibitions, blurring the boundaries they would otherwise hold in the physical world, making it appear to them as less threatening and less consequential to engage in riskier, at times, more hurtful behaviour. Lack of eye contact, and a filter from communication feedback such facial expressions and body language, reduce their degree of timidity (Zilka, 2017). Acknowledging the positive aspects of these opportunities for young people online, participants however felt that while this might be an advantage online for those who may be insecure in interactions in the physical world, the shedding of inhibitions makes it easier for them to over-expose themselves and put themselves in risky and vulnerable situations. Moreover, participants added that in this scenario, children may also be more prone to behaving inappropriately, creating a scenario where the risks for children are not only those of being victimised online but also of becoming perpetrators themselves.

Cyberbullying was observed to be the most predominant issue encountered by local children online across professional participants as well as child participants. This finding is also often reported in international literature (e.g., Aharony, 2016; Andreassen, 2015) and it is not



surprising that both the professional participants as well as the child participants in this study both painted a similar picture. Behaviours such as the use of offensive or hurtful language were in fact brought up by both groups of participants, as was the incidence of exposure to unsuitable content. In both cases however, children's experiences appeared to bring these up more frequently than the feedback gathered from professionals, suggesting the occurrence of these online behaviours might be more frequent amongst children than adults actually think they are. Professionals also report moderate potentially damaging online behaviours such as the spreading of false or personal information about other children and outing them or excluding them. Professionals however flagged a need for more local research into this area pointing out that the true picture might run much deeper and wider than what is currently understood, as is in fact evidenced by this study.

Another important aspect of cyberbullying that was brought up during discussions with child participants as well as with some of the professional participants was that online bullying is at times an extension of real-life bullying. In this respect, professionals cautioned about keeping a more vigilant eye on concerning behaviours that may be occurring for instance, at school since these may then escalate in the filter-less, behind the scenes, online world. Child participants also added to this that when incidences of cyberbullying are reported, these need to be acted upon promptly. From data gathered from children as well as professionals it appears that institutions working with children, such as schools, are not always prepared or aware on how to deal with cyberbullying. Notwithstanding a level of awareness and knowledge that both professionals and child participants agreed exists, the recounting of real life stories from both parties exposed a picture where on more than one occasion across both groups, incidents of cyberbullying were reported however the adults were not aware how to proceed, or no action was taken regarding the behaviour being reported, thus depriving the children involved of the assistance they needed.

All professional participants agreed that several educational and awareness campaigns were being organised in the local scene, by virtue of which children are being equipped with a degree of awareness when it comes to identifying and understanding the risks related to being online. Professional participants however felt that this was not always enough and did not always translate in effective avoidance of risky situations and behaviours online, pointing out that children might still not always be successfully applying their knowledge into practical online use.

Child participants appeared to present a healthy knowledge of awareness about safety practices online, such as not sharing personal information or facets of online social interactions wherein someone they might be chatting with might not be who they say they are. The group of children also felt however that a suitable level of awareness can only be reached at a certain age and that when it comes to younger children, the risks are higher. In relation to this, Smahel et al. (2020) looked into the frequency of children meeting up with people they met online that they did not know previously and their feelings in relation to this. 5% of 9 – 11 year old Maltese children reported having done so in the past year, with this figure rising to 20% for 12 – 14 year olds, and to 31% for 15 – 16 year olds. Of these, more than 80% reported feeling happy after the meeting with only 5% or less reporting any feeling of upset.

Moreover, when it came to online experiences of sexual nature, 21% of Maltese 12 – 14 year-olds and 44% of Maltese 15 – 16 year-olds claimed to have received sexual texts, pictures or videos over the last year (Smahel et al., 2020). Amongst the 12 to 16 year old group, 12% of Maltese children even disclosed sending sexual content to someone, scoring 2<sup>nd</sup> highest amongst the 19 participating countries. Meanwhile, 40% of Maltese 9 - 16 year olds had been exposed to sexual images (both online and offline). Of these, 65% of 9 – 11 year olds reported feeling upset as a result of this, with this emotion decreasing with age (42% of 12 – 14 year olds and 18% of 15 – 16 year olds). These findings further corroborate the data collected from interviews with professionals as part of this study although the figures cannot be confirmed due to the qualitative nature of the methodology used in this section of the present study. The discussions with children during the focus group brought up incidents of exposure to inappropriate material, however no specific reference to sexually explicit material was made and most examples brought up by participants referred to content that they found frightening.

In this respect, professional participants called for more, improved and ongoing educational initiatives and proper embedding of educational opportunities in school curricula that empowered children not only about safe use of the internet and threats related to its use, but also focused on developing personality skills and ethical values.

### 5.3.3 Parental awareness and involvement

Smahel et al. (2020) observed that 37% of Maltese parents were reported by children (9 – 16 year olds) to have often or very often discussed what their child/ren had done online, while on the other hand, 42% had been reported to never or hardly ever do so. The views of professionals working with children often pointed out the value of communication as a protective factor against online (and offline) threats, however most professionals shared how they felt that parents needed to be more present and involved in their children's lives. In particular, a consistent call for more communication and sharing of ethical values with children was resounding across most professional participants. The need for parental initiatives was in fact brought forward by several professional participants in order to address parental and general caregiver (e.g., grandparents) knowledge regarding children's experiences online, but also regarding general parenting skills such as empowering children with ethical values, communication skills, resilience, and overall, providing them with a safe place to belong. These findings were also strongly corroborated by the group of children who all strongly concurred about the importance of parents dedicating quality time to their children, and in particular, not resorting to devices to keep their offspring occupied instead of directly spending time with them themselves. Criticising the use of parental controls for internet access as something that, according to the group of children, most parents were not familiar enough with to use adequately, the general consensus amongst the group shifted the onus of online safety to the development of good quality relationships with children rather than the manual use of technology to monitor their online usage. Some child participants even questioned the efficacy of censorship since they felt that it may, at times, make content more appealing and conducive to more curiosity across young users. Ultimately, both professional and child participants felt that the most important contributor towards healthy use of the online world was the quality of relationships that children had with their parents.

Further emphasizing the importance of this was the fact that when it came to parents, interviews with professionals revealed concerning views that children often do not show their true selves to their parents and may avoid involving their parents when they encounter negative experiences online. In contrast with the findings of the 2014 Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2014) where almost all Maltese parents (96%) felt that improved education in schools could contribute towards mitigating online risks, professional participants most frequently mentioned protective factor was establishing positive channels of communication with children, with some even pointing out the use of monitoring and filtering software in addition

to this. Similarly, the views of professionals and child participants alike regarding efforts to involve and include children also extended towards involving them in discussions when it came to policy and decision-making regarding their childhood and online experiences. “The key to success is finding a solution in cooperation with the children, defining the needs and the difficulties, and providing an adequate response” (Zilka, 2017, pp. 334).

All professional participants agreed that empowering children and young people with knowledge about smart navigation of the online world can encourage them to take a healthy advantage of the opportunities for learning, development, civic participation, networking, and creativity that this offers. They believed that in doing so, a sense of ownership and awareness about online risks and how to handle them can be instilled in them. This of course, not taking away from the value of parental involvement and guidance throughout these experiences and as a baseline across children’s lives online and offline. Making use of the technological innovations and the online world that children find so appealing and that is part of their normality in order to reach out to them, for instance, was recommended by participants as a novel way that could potentially aid to embrace these rapid changes and attempt to steer them towards useful applications where their advantages can be enjoyed safely.

As an extension of real-world, physical interactions, the use of technological applications can strengthen existing family ties (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014; Rudi et al., 2015). The use of mobile applications as novel approaches for national helplines, the use of technology in schools for educational activities, as well as the use of ICT supports to strengthen family communication and ties were amongst the positive uses of these advances that professionals felt could bring the divide between ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’ closer.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations are necessary but not sufficient to ensure the protection of children and timely and effective action and assistance to those persons who have experienced abuse and neglect is what is needed above all.

### 6.1 Recommendations for Preventing, Identifying and Intervening with Incidents of Child Abuse

- 1) The current principles for working with children, young people, parents and carers need to be examined and revised as, evidently, the factors that increase vulnerability to child abuse and neglect are not being identified and recognised within our communities at a time when the abuse can be prevented.
- 2) Although help for families showing possible signs of child abuse or neglect is available at an early stage of the child's development, further efforts to make such services attractive to persons who fear possible repercussions of seeking help is necessary.
- 3) There appear to exist elements that discourage people from seeking help. Some have been identified through this study. However, services need to find ways of realistically and effectively identifying these barriers to seeking help which may be particular to a specific service and/or the impression the public has of the service.
- 4) The community-based programmes and services that are functioning in our society, although perceived as helpful, are severely under-resourced and not sufficiently available to those who seek help. Intake services are often easy to access but further intervention tailored to the individual, such as therapeutic services, is not.
- 5) Children and adults who have experienced abuse as children are evidently still falling between the gaps. A collaborative, coordinated multi-agency response to child abuse and neglect, especially with regards to the education, sport and social assistance services, is required to ensure timely prevention and identification of abuse and neglect and multi-professional therapeutic interventions for children, young people and families after child abuse and neglect.

- 6) A child-centred approach in all settings involving children and young people should be adopted. Children should be involved in decisions that concern them to the fullest extent possible, depending on their age, level of understanding and developmental stage.
- 7) Effective work with children is based on the premise that children are not underdeveloped adults but complete persons in their own right at whichever stage of development they may be. Therefore, any useful communication with children needs to be sensitive to their age, developmental stage, neurodivergences and any particular disabilities, for example learning disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, and neurodevelopmental disorders.
- 8) All persons working with children and young persons should be trained in a trauma-informed approach in whichever setting they may be, including summer camps, voluntary organisations and after-school activities. This is especially applicable to teachers and youth workers as often they are the first port of call for children experiencing abuse and neglect and need to be able to respond effectively. Teachers and professionals working in schools and the educational system have regular contact with children and are in a prime position to notice and/or detect instances of possible child abuse. Thus, teachers and other educators are in a key position to be able to monitor and notice cases of abuse but also to be available and accessible to children to talk and open up, allowing abused children to seek support. This reflects the need for professionals working in the educational system to be trained and equipped with the right tools and knowledge to detect situations but also to be able to listen to abused children who may seek comfort and support. For this reason, it is being recommended that all persons working with children read for and successfully complete a course in helping skills which will enable them to be open to any issue that children may want to confide in them and also have the skills with which to respond effectively.
- 9) Helping professionals need to prioritise building good working relationships with parents and carers to encourage their engagement with whichever services children may be receiving and to effectively maintain continued participation and involvement. This should avoid assigning blame, even if the parents themselves may be responsible for the child abuse or neglect, actively processing shame and regret, identifying strengths and building on these.
- 10) Helping professionals and all those persons working with children need to be more aware of and make adjustments for any factors which may prevent parents and carers

from seeking support such as chronic illness, neurodevelopmental disorders, mental health issues, refugee status, disability of any type and living conditions.

- 11) Various vulnerability factors have been identified as increasing the risk of child abuse and neglect. Although the presence of these factors does not signify that child abuse or neglect will inevitably occur, practitioners especially need to identify those vulnerability factors that may be at play in specific situations and how these separate factors can exponentially increase the risk of harm to a child or young person. These factors include for example various socioeconomic vulnerability factors for child abuse and neglect, such as poverty, financial stress and inadequate housing, parental factors such as a history of unaddressed child abuse or domestic violence, emotional dysregulation, anger management issues, chronic parental stress, substance misuse problems, being exposed or subjected to sexual violence or exploitation, and mental health issues which may significantly impact parenting tasks.
- 12) Evidently the greatest number of perpetrators of child abuse live with children in their homes. Further education through non-blaming and non-shaming media campaigns aimed at parents and carers with vulnerability factors for abusive behaviour should be carried out by making use of various social platforms. This campaign should also address the culture of violence apparent in our communities, often disguised as care and education, which perpetuates and maintains the current system of victimisation of those most vulnerable.
- 13) Practical parenting programmes for vulnerable mothers of pre-school children and those attending early years education, for example, those with a lower level of education, mental and physical health issues or diminished income should be made attractive through incentives that contribute to an improved standard of living for the family. These programmes should be based on planned activities which focus on equipping parents or carers to prevent and effectively address those behaviour in children that parents find challenging.
- 14) Trauma-informed group parenting intervention should be considered for all parents but especially for adoptive parents and those providing fostering services for children and young persons who have been abused and/or neglected.
- 15) The safeguarding of children in all settings needs to be strengthened. Persons working directly with children should be asked to attend and successfully complete a course in

safeguarding children and young persons within a specific time-frame as part of the requirements of their work.

- 16) Clearly, the emotional abuse of children within the Maltese society is being perpetuated from generation to generation. As this type of abuse is so intrinsic to this community, it is imperative to build a concerted educative programme from the pre-natal stage of development to late adolescence for all parents but especially those at risk of emotionally abusing their children.
- 17) With the paucity of persons seeking help and support with abusive and neglectful situations and the significant number of those persons who sought help who found it unhelpful, the services concerned need to look at the barriers preventing help-seeking behaviour and what in their service may be perceived as unhelpful to persons experiencing abuse. Effort must be made to respond to these concerns and reduce/abolish those barriers to seeking help.
- 18) The collaboration between the services involved in the assistance of persons who have been abused or neglected requires reflecting on and subsequent improvement. This is especially applicable to the collaboration between the Police and Social Workers particularly in the stages of referral and initial intervention. It is suggested that extensive joint training in child abuse and neglect would be extremely effective and beneficial, as has been demonstrated in other countries such as Scotland.
- 19) Evidently, the social work-related services on the island are severely understaffed and under resourced. The influx of social workers is scarce at best and therefore serious and immediate action needs to be taken in making the social work profession more attractive to potential students. Improving the conditions of work for social workers is imperative to ensure the continued safety of children and timely interventions to combat the far-reaching impact of abuse and neglect. As it is, their services are much needed but rarely available in social and educational settings where children have been seen to be also vulnerable to abuse.
- 20) The Child Protection Act (2021) was a step in the right direction for the protection of minors. However, an evaluation of the applicability and effectiveness of its clauses in preventing and addressing the abuse and neglect of minors may be due two years from its inception, as the mixed feedback expressed in this study also indicates. Although it is deemed as useful, in some respects it may be also inadvertently



preventing children and young persons from reporting abuse to professionals and this serious barrier to reporting should be investigated.

- 21) The present state of the judicial system in Malta was highlighted across the different methods of data collection. Although it mainly refers to the system in itself and not to the work done by individual judges and magistrates, most definitely, easy access to a child-friendly, well-resourced, effective and timely judicial system is imperative for improved outcomes for children and young persons experiencing abuse and reporting it. Assigning a therapeutically trained professional such as a counsellor, psychologist or psychotherapist to each child who, by virtue of the abuse and/or neglect experienced is required to be involved in court proceedings and who would accompany the child throughout, is essential to ensure the child's wellbeing during the process.
- 22) The POMA should be used in the way it was originally intended – a conviction for child abuse or neglect should result in the person's name being registered automatically, and not according to the discretion of the judge or magistrate, and it should not only be used for convictions of sexual abuse but for all cases of abuse and neglect.
- 23) Related to this, places of work seeking information regarding the employment of persons with children and young persons, and courses training helping professionals, should have access not only to the police conduct but also to the 'fedina penali' which would indicate important information often missing on the police conduct that may prejudicated the safety of children the person would be working with.

## Recommendations for Policy

- 1) Physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect need to be placed at par with sexual abuse. The evidence demonstrates that the damage to children caused to children by these types of abuse at least matches that caused by sexual abuse.
- 2) The victim blaming culture in Malta needs to be seriously addressed through social media campaigns with the use of Maltese and international role models. This would definitely improve the rate of reporting of abuse and neglect.
- 3) Easier systems of reporting with less fear of retribution need to be devised especially with regards to the police. It is recommended that a specific unit for child victims of abuse is set up within the police force with officers extensively trained in trauma-informed practice, helping skills and child development.

- 4) More emphasis needs to be placed on ways of collaboration between the various entities working in this area and the presence of multidisciplinary teams. The professionals within these teams should work collaboratively in order to put their particular expertise synergically at the service of the victim, also to ensure that the victim of abuse and neglect does not fall between the gaps in the systems.
- 5) Various influential stakeholders in Malta such as Churches of various religious denominations, should engage in collaborative campaigns to promote awareness on the topic of abuse and neglect of children and promote the safeguarding of children.
- 6) A situational analysis with regards to the perpetration of child abuse and neglect in the Maltese Islands needs to be undertaken with the aim of further understanding those particular issues related to this context that contribute to maintaining child abuse and neglect.
- 7) If rehabilitative services offered to perpetrators are going to persist in being piecemeal and non-specific then the level of effectiveness and recidivism is going to remain as is. An in-depth evaluation of the services offered is required and the way forward, also based on success in rehabilitating persons convicted of child abuse in other countries, should be planned and implemented.
- 8) Services need to be created to support potential and convicted perpetrators of abuse and neglect. Those for persons already convicted should go beyond the end of court services such as probation in order to decrease the possibility of recidivism and improve a safe reintegration into society where the person is no longer a potential danger to children. Community-based support programmes would be instrumental in addressing this issue.
- 9) A post-implementation evaluation of the Child Protection Act (2021) should be carried out to determine the effectiveness of this act in preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.
- 10) The legal system should evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of the sentences handed down to convicted perpetrators of abuse and how they have been implemented. Engaging the services of a helping professional such a counsellor, social worker, family therapist, psychologist or psychotherapist assigned to the judge or magistrate would be one way in which this can be done without added pressure on the judiciary.

## Recommendations for Research

- 1) Enrich findings from the current study with views obtained directly from perpetrators of child abuse themselves. This could include aspects of the perpetrator's trajectory such as precursors, mechanisms, inhibitors and therapeutic and support successes for recidivism.
- 2) Conduct research with mothers and fathers who emotionally abuse their children and who are at risk of doing so in order to investigate and prevent the intergenerational transmission of this type of child abuse.
- 3) Conduct research on the experience of shame in situations of abuse and how this construct impinges on help-seeking behaviour and prognosis.
- 4) Carry out further quantitative investigation on the views of the Maltese population on child abuse and neglect and how these opinions and perceptions influence the reporting of child abuse and intervention is warranted.
- 5) Further investigate the barriers to help seeking for situations of abuse and neglect in children and young persons.
- 6) Conduct evaluations of all the systems involved in combatting and preventing abuse and neglect to gauge the efficacy of the assistance provided and indicate any changes that need to be made to improve the services given to victims of abuse.
- 7) Conduct qualitative research with children who have been through the judicial system to understand their experience and what, if anything, needs to be done to improve it.
- 8) Create a children's forum on matters related to the prevention of childhood abuse and neglect to learn from children themselves what they think is the current state of affairs in their generation, the particular contextual issues and the way forward with regard to effective intervention.

## 6.2 Recommendation regarding Online Use amongst Children

The fast growth in development, accessibility, and use of technology such smartphones and the online world has transformed the lives of most people. Children who do not know a world without these inventions are often referred to as 'digital natives' in this rapidly ever changing

and often only partly understood modern reality (Prensky, 2001). Often associated with teenagers, the influence of these innovations and the use of the internet is seen to gradually also spill towards younger age groups (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). In addition to that, contrary to the prevalent belief that young people are the 'digital natives' and their parents, the 'digital immigrants', remarkable increases in the number of parents online are also changing the shape of this novel, modern landscape.

This technology-based new reality brings endless opportunities for entertainment, networking and knowledge. That being said, it also brings novel risks and scenarios with it. Amongst the most predominant of such risks is cyberbullying, aggressive online behaviour, stalking, hate speech, racism, sexting, grooming, fake news, friends/influencers and the (unrealistic) body image and issues related to self-esteem (Livingstone et al. 2021), although its rapid evolution also means that new risks continue to arise, such as the more recent spread of the influencer culture. In response to this, researchers have, over the past couple of decades, often been concerned with the impact of the online world and these innovative technologies on children and young people (e.g. Ling & Haddon, 2008; Vandebosch et al., 2013). This research study clearly indicates that parental controls in and of themselves, whilst helpful in preventing some of the dangers to children, are not as effective as imagined by parents themselves.

## Recommendations for Policy

- 1) As key stakeholders, listen to the voices of children and young people in the development and delivery of online related initiatives and curricula that aim to address their safety online. This in accordance with UNCRC article 12 (United Nations, 1989) and the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 (Council of Europe, 2012). Involving children as to those directly involved in the defining of their needs, concerns, difficulties, and aspirations when it comes to the online world, and in collaboration with them, providing adequate responses and solutions can ensure these are true to their reality and suitably presented to cater for their needs in a way that appeals to them.
- 2) Develop and deliver further educational (e.g. through PSCE and Computer Literacy classes) and awareness campaigns for children, adults and society alike regarding eSafety, risks online, appropriate online behaviour and related topics.
- 3) Similarly, provide adequate assistance to support NGOs and other awareness raising entities.

- 4) Support and ensure adequate resources are assigned to entities that offer support and guidance to children such as national helplines and school support services such as counsellors and therapists. This in order to ensure adequate levels of manpower are available to address the current demand and reduce any waiting lists in the handling of queries for assistance.
- 5) Ensure proper legislation and policy frameworks are in place, together with effective mechanisms in order to tackle the rapidly evolving online world and regularise behaviour online. Legal safeguards need to be developed in parallel with technological advances. For instance, draw out proper policies in order for online teasers and 'clickbait' to be appropriate for the content they are advertising and/or strengthen age-appropriate filters that can avoid these appearing on devices (or profiles on a device) that are being used by young children. Another suggestion brought about by children themselves would be to have a filter applied directly to a device when this is being first used by the child to reduce the risk of exposure to inappropriate material and the reliance of this on additional parental controls.
- 6) Provide education to parents-to-be and parents-to-be of young children on issues related to online safety and practical/technical ways of combatting unwanted intrusions on children's wellbeing online.
- 7) Provide incentives for training opportunities amongst professionals who work with children, such as schools as well as entities offering extra-curricular activities. This in order to increase levels of awareness regarding appropriate online behaviour and eSafety practices, elevate levels of awareness about behaviours to look out for such as in person bullying (that can translate into cyberbullying), while also empowering these professionals to make positive use of technology during their work with children (which children find appealing) and in doing so, also modelling positive online behaviour.
- 8) Promote adequate journalistic standards that respect the needs of children and moderate content exposure while also modelling positive online and public behaviour.
- 9) Incentivise opportunities for families to come together and establish positive channels of communication. This can be done through educational campaigns, family events organised with schools or child-addressing institutions, or work branched out through local NGOs, wellbeing foundations and similar groups.

- 10) Promote, educate and incentivise towards the use of monitoring and filtering applications for children's access to the internet. This for instance, could be done through the involvement of local service providers.
- 11) Incentivise students and companies in the computer technology fields to contribute towards awareness raising when it comes to respect the rights of children in the digital environment and consider developing applications and/or technology-based modes for the delivery of these that can thereby be more appealing to young people nowadays.
- 12) Create opportunities – or support entities that create opportunities – and promote the participation of children and young people in extra-curricular activities. In addition to being educational, these can yield character-building and networking opportunities for them.

## Recommendations for Research

- 1) Investigate the risks and incidences of negative online experience across different age groups and genders in the local scenario.
- 2) Given the high percentages of young people locally who are willing to meet with strangers they have only met online, investigate the effectiveness of education and awareness initiatives on not only awareness raising but also their effect on young people's online behaviour.
- 3) Investigate factors that contribute towards mitigating online risks for the Maltese society. These could include personality traits, demographics, levels of education, parental involvement and/or parental knowledge, etc.
- 4) Examine profiles, traits and factors associated with underage perpetrators of online crimes.

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## Glossary

BIK	Better Internet for Kids
CPD	Child Protection Directorate
CPS	Child Protection Services
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
CSAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material
CSS	Child Safety Services
FSWS	Foundation for Social Welfare Services
NAI	Non-Accidental Injury
NGO	Non-Governmental/Voluntary Organisation
NSO	National Statistics Office
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NSSS	National School Support Services
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
POMA	Protection of Minors (Registration) Act
PSCD	Personal, Social and Career Development
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Child Abuse Questionnaire

#### **Protecting our Children: Exploring and Preventing Child Abuse**

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta is conducting a study looking into the prevalence and impact of abuse on children. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse. This survey should take around 20 minutes to complete.

**The survey can only be completed by consenting adults. Please do not answer the survey if you are younger than 18 years.** Your participation in this survey is voluntary and anonymous. Should you decide not to participate in the survey, you may stop at any time and your responses will not be recorded if you do not complete the whole survey. You will be asked to provide your consent if you proceed to answer the survey. The information gathered (raw data) will be used for research purposes only and will be deleted once the research is completed.

***\* TRIGGER WARNING: This questionnaire asks about your personal experience with abuse or sexual misconduct, such as harassment, sexual assault and other forms of violence. Some of the language used in this questionnaire is explicit and some people may find it uncomfortable, but it is important that we ask the questions in this way so that you are clear what we mean. While this study is not anticipated to cause distress and the research questions were formatted in as sensitive a manner as possible, it is still possible that you are emotionally affected during or after this questionnaire. If your participation leads you to experience any distress or discomfort for whatever reason, a list of free professional support that you might find helpful can be found at the end of this questionnaire by means of the link provided. Please ensure that you access the link and store the information before submitting the questionnaire, whether or not you think you may need it.***

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you require any further information,

please do not hesitate to contact us on the e-mail addresses and phone number provided below

Acceptance to participate in this study implies that you:

- Are 18 years old or older;
- Are participating in an online questionnaire that will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete to share your experience related to child abuse;
- Understand that your participation is completely voluntary and that you may choose to withdraw at any time while completing the questionnaire by not submitting it. However, once the questionnaire is submitted you will no longer be able to withdraw your participation as your data is stored anonymously.

All responses will remain anonymous. No identifying details (namely, your name, email or IP address) will be noted, and thus, neither you nor your responses can be identified.

Additionally, no one will know whether or not you participated in this study.

You can save and keep a copy of this information by right clicking on the current web page, selecting 'Print' and then selecting PDF.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact the research team on 2340 3518 Ms Graziella Vella on [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt) or Ms. Olga Formosa on [olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt).

By completing the questionnaire, you agree that you (a) have read the above information, (b) voluntarily participate in this study, (c) are at least 18 years of age.

By clicking 'I Agree', you agree to participate in this study.

1. Your Gender

*(Please specify)*

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Your Age

*(Please specify)*

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Where do you reside?

*(Please select one)*

Gozo and Comino Region

☐

Northern Harbour Region

☐



*(Birkirkara; Gżira; Ħal Qormi; Ħamrun; Msida; Pembroke; San Ġwann; Santa Venera; St Julian's; Swieqi; Ta' Xbiex; Tal-Pietà; Tas-Sliema)*

#### Southern Harbour Region

*(Cospicua; Fgura; Floriana; Ħal Luqa; Ħaż-Żabbar; Kalkara; Marsa; Paola; Santa Luċija; Senglea; Ħal Tarxien; Valletta; Vittoriosa; Xgħajra)*

☐

#### South Eastern Region

*(Birżebbuġa; Gudja; Ħal Għaxaq; Ħal Kirkop; Ħal Safi; Marsaskala; Marsaxlokk; Mqabba; Qrendi; Żejtun; Żurrieq)*

☐

#### Western Region

*(Ħad-Dingli; Ħal Balzan; Ħal Lija; Ħ'Attard; Ħaż-Żebbuġ; Iklin; Mdina; Mtarfa; Rabat; Siġġiewi)*

☐

#### Northern Region

*(Ħal Għargħur; Mellieħa; Mgarr; Mosta; Naxxar; St Paul's Bay)*

☐

#### 4. Your Level of Education

*(Please select one)*

Primary level of education

*(primary school, middle school)*

☐

Secondary level of education

*(junior lyceum, area secondary school, etc.)*

☐

Post-Secondary / Vocational level of education

*(MCAST, ITS, Junior College, etc.)*

☐

Tertiary level of education

*(diploma, degree, etc.)*

☐

Postgraduate level of education

*(post-graduate certification, masters, etc.)*

☐

#### 5. Your Employment Status

*(Please select one)*

Self-Employed

☐

Full-time employment

☐

Part-time employment

☐

Casual employment

☐

Unemployed ☐

Retired ☐

Other ☐

6. Your Civic Status

*(Please select one)*

Married ☐

In a civil partnership ☐

Living as couple ☐

Divorced or separated ☐

Widowed ☐

Single ☐

Other ☐

Do not wish to say ☐

**Sometimes children experience violence or are treated badly by family members or other adults. This happens to many children around the world. We would like to ask you about your experiences so we can know how to help children stay safe in the future.**

**Please try to answer these questions as best and honestly as you can, thinking about your own experiences. This is not a test and there is no right or wrong answer. What is important to us is what you remember happened to you. *Please answer the questions by focusing on the first 18 years of your life.***

**The next section explores some behaviour YOU *may* have experienced.**

**7. When you were growing up, during the first 18 years of your life . . .**

**7.1 Were you ever...**

*(Please tick one or more as applicable)*

Hit or punched ☐

Kicked ☐

Beaten with an object ☐

Shaken hard ☐

Cut or stabbed ☐

Burned or scalded ☐

- Pulled hair, pinched, twisted ear ☐
- Locked in a small place ☐
- Tied up ☐
- Forced to eat mouldy/expired food ☐
- Physically punished for bodily functions such as menstruation, urination etc. ☐
- None of the above ☐
- You experienced physical abuse other than specified above ☐
- Do not wish to say ☐

7.2 If you have experienced any actions listed in 7.1, please specify:

- a) How old were you when these acts occurred? *(Please specify age)* \_\_\_\_\_
- b) How long did these actions occur for? *(Please specify time period)* \_\_\_\_\_

7.3 If you have experienced any actions listed in 7.1.1, who were the above acts carried out by?

*(Please tick one or more as applicable)*

- Father ☐
- Mother ☐
- Step-mother ☐
- Step-father ☐
- Sister ☐
- Brother ☐
- Grandmother ☐
- Grandfather ☐
- Family friend ☐
- Other relative ☐
- Educator / Teacher ☐
- Other pupil at school ☐

Member of a religious order ☐

Adult neighbourhood  
acquaintance ☐

Child neighbourhood  
acquaintance ☐

Peer/s ☐

Partner ☐

Stranger ☐

Someone else ☐

Do not wish to say ☐

**8. When you were growing up, during the first 18 years of your life . . .**

8.1 Were you ever... Told you were not loved ☐

*(Please tick one or more as applicable)*

Told "I/we wish you had never  
been born" or "I/we wish you were  
dead" or something similar ☐

Threatened to be hurt or killed ☐

Threatened to be abandoned /  
refused into home ☐

None of the above ☐

Subject to emotional abuse other  
than those specified above ☐

Do not wish to say ☐

8.2 If you have experienced any actions listed in 8.1, please advise:

a) How old were you when these acts occurred? *(Please specify age)* \_\_\_\_\_

b) How long did these actions occur for? *(Please specify time period)* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8.3 If you have experienced any actions  
listed in 8.1, who were the above acts  
carried out by?

Father ☐

Mother ☐

---

Step-mother ☐

Step-father ☐

Sister ☐

Brother ☐

Grandmother ☐

Grandfather ☐

Family friend ☐

Other relative ☐

Educator / Teacher ☐

Other pupil at school ☐

Member of a religious order ☐

Adult neighbourhood  
acquaintance ☐

Child neighbourhood  
acquaintance ☐

Peer/s ☐

Partner ☐

Stranger ☐

Someone else ☐

Do not wish to say ☐

## **9 When you were growing up, during the first 18 years of your life . . .**

9.1 Were you exposed to or did you  
experience the following:

*(Please tick one or more as applicable)*

Someone exposed their genitals  
to you in a way that made you  
feel distressed or uncomfortable ☐

You were made to pose naked ☐

Someone touched your genitals  
in a way that made you feel  
distressed or uncomfortable ☐

- You were forced or enticed to touch another person's genitals ☐
- You were forced or enticed to have sexual intercourse ☐
- You were forced or enticed to have oral sex or had oral sex performed on you ☐
- You were forced to or enticed to have anal sex or had anal sex performed on you ☐
- You were talked to using sexual or explicit language ☐
- You were shown pornography by someone older than you ☐
- You were forced or enticed to kiss someone in a sexual way ☐
- You were drugged in order for someone to touch you sexually/ have sex with you ☐
- You were given alcohol in order for someone to touch you sexually/ have sex with you ☐
- You were forced/enticed to have sex with older persons for money ☐
- You were threatened with violence in order to have sex with someone older than you for money ☐
- None of the above ☐
- You were subjected to sexual abuse other than specified above ☐
- Do not wish to say ☐

9.2 If you have experienced any actions listed in 9.1, please advise:

a) How old were you when these acts occurred? *(Please specify age)* \_\_\_\_\_

b) How long did these actions occur for? *(Please specify time period)* \_\_\_\_\_

9.3. If you have experienced any actions listed in 9.1, who were the above acts carried out by?

*(Please tick one or more as applicable)*

- Father ☐
- Mother ☐
- Step-mother ☐
- Step-father ☐
- Sister ☐
- Brother ☐
- Grandmother ☐
- Grandfather ☐
- Family friend ☐
- Other relative ☐
- Educator / Teacher ☐
- Other pupil at school ☐
- Member of a religious order ☐
- Adult neighbourhood acquaintance ☐
- Child neighbourhood acquaintance ☐
- Peer/s ☐
- Partner ☐
- Stranger ☐
- Someone else ☐
- Do not wish to say ☐

## 10. When you were growing up, during the first 18 years of your life . . .

10.1 Were you ever...

Not provided with enough food or drink even if it was readily available? ☐

(Please tick one or more as applicable)

Not sent to school even if you could have been? ☐

Not taken care of because caregiver/s were too intoxicated due to alcohol or drugs? ☐

Not provided with clean clothes or a way to keep clean ☐

Not provided with a safe and comfortable place to live? ☐

Not cared for when you were ill? ☐

None of the above ☐

You were subjected to neglect other than those specified above ☐

Do not wish to say ☐

10.2 If you have experienced any actions listed in 10.2, please advise:

a) How old were you when these acts occurred? (Please age)

b) How long did these actions occur for? (Please time period)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11.1 Did you seek support in relation to these experiences? (Please select one)

I sought help for experiences mentioned in number 7 (physical abuse) ☐

I sought help for experiences mentioned in number 8 (emotional abuse) ☐

I sought help for experiences mentioned in number 9 (sexual abuse) ☐

I didn't seek help ☐ (go to 11.11)

11.2 If you did seek support, who was the first person you approached about it?

Partner ☐

Family member ☐



*(Please select one or more as applicable)*

Peer/s ☐

Priest or religious member ☐

Police ☐

Helpline ☐

Other Professional ☐

Other ☐

Do not wish to say ☐

11.3 Did you find this person helpful?

Yes ☐

*(Please select one)*

No ☐

11.4 What did they do that helped you? *(Please specify)*

---

---

11.5 What did you wish they would do when you approached them for help? *(Please specify)*

---

---

11.6 If you did seek support, how much time had passed since these acts occurred until you were able to disclose with someone they had happened? *(Please specify time period)*

---

11.7 If you did seek support, what was the strongest factor that motivated you seek support? *(Please give details)*

---

---

11.8 If you did seek support, approximately how much time passed between when you first disclosed what you had experienced and when you were removed from the context that made you subject to that experience? *(Please specify)*

---

11.9 If you did disclose your experience with someone, were you offered professional support services?

Yes ☐

No ☐

*(Please select one and if 'Yes', please give details)*

11.10 If you were offered professional support services, do you think these were suitable in aiding you deal with the experience? *(Please give details)*

---

---

11.11 If you did NOT seek support immediately when the acts occurred, what was the reason for NOT seeking support immediately? *(Please give details)*

---

---

11.12 If you did NOT seek support, did you manage to remove yourself from the context that made you subject to that experience?  
*(Please choose one)*

Yes ☐

No ☐

12. What support services do you feel can most help children go through similar experiences? *(Please give details)*

---

---

13. What efforts do you think can be made to reduce the occurrence of similar experiences for children? *(Please give details)*

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Link to services

## Appendix B

### Child Abuse Questionnaire

#### **Niproteġu t-tfal tagħna: Esplorazzjoni u Prevenzjoni tal-Abbuż tat-Tfal**

Il-Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn il-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li ngibu għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal. Dan l-istħarriġ għandu jiehu madwar 20 minuta biex jimtela.

L-istħarriġ jista' jimtela biss minn adulti li jagħtu l-kunsens tagħhom. Jekk jogħġbok twegħibx l-istħarriġ jekk għandek inqas minn 18-il sena. Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istħarriġ hija volontarja u anonima. Jekk tiddeċiedi li ma tippartecipax fl-istħarriġ, tista' tieqaf fi kwalunkwe ħin u t-twegħibiet tiegħek ma jiġux irreġistrati jekk ma tlestix l-istħarriġ kollu. Inti tintalab tipprovi l-kunsens tiegħek jekk tipproċedi biex twieġeb l-istħarriġ. L-informazzjoni miġbura (dejta mhux ipproċessata) tintuża għal skopijiet ta' riċerka biss u titħassar ladarba jitlesta l-istudju.

**\* *TWISSIJA TA' TRIGGER:* Dan il-kwestjonarju jistaqsi dwar l-esperjenza personali tiegħek b'abbuż jew imġieba sesswali hażina, bħal fastidju, attakk sesswali u forom oħra ta' vjolenza. Partijiet mill-lingwaġġ użat f'dan il-kwestjonarju jista' jkun espliċitu u xi nies jistgħu jhossuhom skomdi, iżda huwa importanti li nistaqsu mistoqsijiet b'dan il-mod sabiex dan li jkun qed jintqal ikun ċara. Filwaqt li dan l-istudju mhuwiex antiċipat li jikkawża tbatija u l-mistoqsijiet tar-riċerka ġew ifformattjati bl-aktar mod sensittiv possibbli, xorta waħda jista' jkun li jqanqal xi emozzjonijiet waqt jew wara li jimtela l-kwestjonarju. Jekk il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek twassal biex tesperjenza xi dwejjaq jew skumdità għal kwalunkwe raġuni, tista' ssib lista ta' servizzi ta' appoġġ professjonali b'xejn fil-link ipprovdut. Jekk jogħġbok aċċessa l-link u salva l-informazzjoni qabel tissottometti l-kwestjonarju, kemm jekk taħseb li jista' jkollok bżonnha jew le.**

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-konsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk teħtieġ aktar informazzjoni, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntatjana fuq l-email jew numru tat-telefon indikati hawn taħt.

Jekk tippartecipa f'dan l-istħarriġ, dan ifisser illi inti:

- Għandek 18-il sena jew aktar;

- Qed tipparteċipa fi kwestjonarju onlajn li għadu jieħu madwar 20 minuta biex jimtela sabiex taqsam l-esperjenza tiegħek relatata mal-abbuż tat-tfal;
- Tifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek hija kompletament volontarja u li tista' tagħżel li tirtira fi kwalunkwe ħin waqt li timla l-kwestjonarju billi ma tissottomettix il-kwestjonarju. Madankollu, ladarba l-kwestjonarju jitlesta ma tkunx tista' tirtira l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek minħabba li l-informazzjoni (data) hija anonima.

It-tweġibiet kollha se jibqgħu anonimi. L-ebda dettalji ta' identifikazzjoni (jiġifieri, ismek, email jew indirizz IP) ma jiġu nnutati, u għalhekk, la int u lanqas ir-risposti tiegħek ma jistgħu jiġu identifikati. Barra minn hekk, hadd ma jkun jaf jekk ipparteċipajt jew le f'dan l-istudju. Tista' tisseyvja u żżomm kopja ta' din l-informazzjoni billi tikklikkja bil-lemin fuq il-paġna tal-web attwali, tagħżel 'Stampa' u mbagħad tagħżel PDF.

Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet dwar dan l-istudju ta' riċerka, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattja t-tim ta' riċerkaturi fuq 2340 3518 jew lil Ms Graziella Vella fuq [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt) jew lil Ms Olga Formosa fuq [olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt).

Billi timla l-kwestjonarju, taqbel li inti (a) qrajt l-informazzjoni ta' hawn fuq, (b) tipparteċipa volontarjament f'dan l-istudju, (c) għandek mill-inqas 18-il sena.

Billi tikklikkja 'Naqbel', taqbel li tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

1. Sess

(Agħti dettallji)

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Età

(Agħti dettallji)

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Fejn tgħix?

(Agħżel waħda)

Reġjun ta' Għawdex u Kemmuna ☐

Reġjun 'Northern Harbour'

(Birkirkara; Gżira; Ħal Qormi; Ħamrun; Msida; Pembroke; San Ġwann; Santa Venera; St Julian's; Swieqi; Ta' Xbiex; Tal-Pietà; Tas-Sliema)

☐

Southern Harbour Region

(Cospicua; Fgura; Floriana; Ħal Luqa; Ħaż-Żabbar; Kalkara; Marsa; Paola; Santa Luċija; Senglea; Ħal Tarxien; Valletta; Vittoriosa; Xgħajra)

☐

Reġjun 'Southern Harbour'

(Cospicua; Fgura; Floriana; Ħal Luqa; Ħaż-Żabbar; Kalkara; Marsa; Paola; Santa Luċija; Senglea; Ħal Tarxien; Valletta; Vittoriosa; Xgħajra)

☐

Reġjun Xlokk ☐

☐

(Birżebbuġa; Gudja; *Hal Ghaxaq; Hal Kirkop; Hal Safi; Marsaskala; Marsaxlokk; Mqabba; Qrendi; Żejtun; Żurrieq*)  
 Reġjun Majjistral  
 (Western Region)  
 (*Had-Dingli; Hal Balzan; Hal Lija; H'Attard; Haż-Żebbuġ; Iklin; Mdina; Mtarfa; Rabat; Siġġiewi*)

☐

4. Livell ta' Edukazzjoni  
 (Agħżel waħda)

- Edukazzjoni tal-primarja ☐  
 (skola primarja, 'middle' school)  
 Edukazzjoni tas-sekondarja ☐  
 (junior lyceum, skola area secondary, eċċ.)  
 Edukazzjoni post-sekondarja / vokazzjonali ☐  
 (MCAST, ITS, Junior College, eċċ.)  
 Edukazzjoni ta' livell terzjarja ☐  
 (diploma, degree, eċċ.)  
 Edukazzjoni Postgraduate ☐  
 (ċertifikazzjoni post-graduate, masters, etc.)

5. Sitwazzjoni ta' Impjieg  
 (Agħżel waħda)

- Self-Employed (*naħdem għal rasi*) ☐  
 Impjieg full-time ☐  
 Impjieg part-time ☐  
 Impjieg każwali ☐  
 Qiegħed / qiegħda mix-xogħol ☐  
 Irtirat/a ☐  
 Ohrajn ☐

6. Status Ċiviku  
 (Please select one)

- Miżżewweġ/Miżżewġa ☐  
 Koppja ngħixu flimkien ☐  
 Iddivorzjat/a jew is-separat/a ☐  
 Armel/armila ☐  
 Persuna waħdeha ☐  
 Ohrajn ☐  
 Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

**Xi drabi t-tfal jesperjenzaw vjolenza jew jiġu ttrattati hażin minn membri tal-familja jew adulti oħra. Dan jiġri lil hafna tfal madwar id-dinja. Nixtiequ nistaqsuk dwar l-esperjenzi tiegħek sabiex inkunu nistgħu nkunu nafu kif ngħinu lit-tfal jibqgħu sikuri fil-futur.**

**Jekk jogħġbok ipprova wieġeb dawn il-mistoqsijiet bl-aħjar mod u b'kemm jista' jkun onestà, waqt li taħseb dwar l-esperjenzi tiegħek. Dan mhuwiex eżami u m'hemm l-ebda twegiba tajba jew hażina. Dak li nixtiequ hu li tgħid biss dak li tiftakar li ġralek. Jekk jogħġbok wieġeb il-mistoqsijiet billi tiffoka fuq l-ewwel 18-il sena ta' hażitek.**

**Il-parti li jmiss tesplora ċerti mġieba li INTI forsi esperjenzajt.**

**7 Meta kont qed tikber, matul l-ewwel 18-il sena ta' ħajtek . . .**

- 7.1 Qatt kont... Mogħti daqqiet jew jew daqqiet ta' ponn ☐
- (Agħżel waħda jew iżjed skont kif Mogħti/ja daqqiet ta' sieq ☐
- applikabbli) Imsawwat/immsawta b'oġġett ☐
- Imriegħed/a (shaken hard) ☐
- Maqtuġħ/a b'oġġett jew mogħti ☐
- daqqiet b'oġġett jaqta' ☐
- Maħruq/a jew mismut/a ☐
- Xagħar miġbud, maqrus/a jew ġbid ☐
- tal-wudnejn ☐
- Imsakkar f'post żgħir ☐
- Marbut / Marbuta ☐
- Imġiegħel/a tiekol ikel immuffat ☐
- Ikkastigat/a fiżikament għal ☐
- funzjonijiet tal-ġisem bħal ☐
- mestrwazzjoni, awrina eċċ. ☐
- Xejn minn dawn ☐
- Esperjenzajt abbuż fiżiku ieħor ☐
- apparti dawk speċifikati hawn fuq ☐
- Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

**7.2 Jekk esperjenzajt azzjonijiet imsemmija f'7.1...**

- a) Kemm kellek żmien meta ġraw dawn l-azzjonijiet? (Agħti età) \_\_\_\_\_
- b) Għal kemm żmien seħħew dawn l-azzjonijiet? (Agħti perjodi ta' \_\_\_\_\_
- żmien) \_\_\_\_\_

**7.3 Jekk esperjenzajt azzjonijiet imsemmija**

**f'7.1, min wettaq dawn l-azzjonijiet?**

(Agħżel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli)

- Missieri ☐
- Ommi ☐
- Mara ta' missieri ☐
- (stepmother)
- Raġel ta' ommi (stepfather) ☐
- Oħti ☐
- Ħija ☐
- Nanna ☐
- Nannu ☐
- Ħabib tal-familja ☐
- Qraba oħra ☐
- Edukatur / Għalliem ☐
- Studenti oħrajn l-iskola ☐

- Membru ta' għaqda reliġjuża ☐
- Adult li kont nafu/ha ☐
- Tifel/tifla li kont nafu/ha ☐
- Ħabib/a jew Ħbieb ☐
- Partner / Imsieġeb/a ☐
- Xi ħadd li ma kontx nafu/ha ☐
- Oħrajn ☐
- Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

## 8. Meta kont qed tikber, matul l-ewwel 18-il sena ta' ħajtek . . .

8.1 Qatt ġralek, ...

(Agħżel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli)

- Intqallek li mintix maħbub/a ☐
- Intqallek "nixtieq li qatt ma twelidt jew ma kont mejjet/mejta" jew kliem simili ☐
- Kont mhedded/a li tiġi mweġġa' jew maqtul/a ☐
- Kont mhedded li tiġi abbandunat/a jew miċħud/a mid-dar ☐
- Xejn minn dawn ☐
- Kont soġġett/a għal abbuż emozzjonali ieħor apparti dawk speċifikati hawn fuq ☐
- Ma nixtieqx tgħid ☐

8.2 Jekk esperjenzajt azzjonijiet imsemmija f'8.1...

a) Kemm kellek żmien meta ġraw dawn l-azzjonijiet? (Agħti età)

b) Għal kemm żmien seħħew dawn l-azzjonijiet? (Agħti perjodu ta' żmien)

8.3 Jekk esperjenzajt azzjonijiet imsemmija

f'8.1, min wettaq dawn l-azzjonijiet?

(Agħżel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli)

- Missieri ☐
- Ommi ☐
- Mara ta' missieri (stepmother) ☐
- Raġel ta' ommi (stepfather) ☐
- Oħti ☐
- Ħija ☐
- Nanna ☐
- Nannu ☐
- Ħabib tal-familja ☐
- Qraba oħra ☐
- Edukatur / Għalliemi ☐

- Studenti oħrajn l-iskola ☐
- Membru ta' għaqda reliġjuża ☐
- Adult li kont nafu/ha ☐
- Tifel/tifla li kont nafu/ha ☐
- Ħabib/a jew Ħbieb ☐
- Partner / Imsieħeb/a ☐
- Xi ħadd li ma kontx nafu/ha ☐
- Oħrajn ☐
- Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

## 9 Meta kont qed tikber, matul l-ewwel 18-il sena ta' ħajtek . . .

9.1 Qatt kont espost/a jew esperjenzajt dawn:

*(Agħżel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli)*

- Xi ħadd espona l-ġenitali tiegħu / tagħha lilek ☐
- Ġejt imġiegħel/a tippoża għarwien/a ☐
- Xi ħadd mess il-ġenitali tiegħek ☐
- Kont sfurzata/a tmiss il-ġenitali ta' persuna/i oħra ☐
- Kont sfurzata/a biex ikollok rapport sesswali ☐
- Kont sfurzata/a biex ikollok sess orali ma' xi ħadd jew kellek sess orali mwettaq fuq persuntek ☐
- Kont sfurzata/a biex ikollok sess anali ma' xi ħadd jew kellek sess anali mwettaq fuq persuntek ☐
- Kont imkellem/a b'lingwaġġ sesswali jew esplicitu ☐
- Ġejt muri/ja pornografija minn xi ħadd ikbar minnek ☐
- Ġejt sfurzata/a tagħti bewsa b'mod sesswali/provokattiv ☐
- Kont mogħti/ja drogi sabiex xi ħadd imissek b'mod sesswali jew ikollu/ha rapporti sesswali miegħek ☐
- Kont mogħti/ja alkoħol sabiex xi ħadd imissek b'mod sesswali jew ikollu/ha rapporti sesswali miegħek ☐
- Kont sfurzata/a biex ikollok rapport sesswali għall-flus ☐
- Ġejt mhedded/ha bil-vjolenza sabiex ikollok rapporti sesswali ☐



- ma' xi hadd akbar minnek għall-flus  
 Xejn minn dawn ☐  
 Suġġett għal abbuż sesswali  
 ieħor appartati dawk speċifikati ☐  
 hawn fuq  
 Ma nixtieqx tgħid ☐

9.2 Jekk esperjenzajt azzjonijiet imsemmija f'9.1...

a) Kemm kellek żmien meta graw dawn l-azzjonijiet? (*Agħti età*) \_\_\_\_\_

b) Għal kemm żmien seħħew dawn l-azzjonijiet? (*Agħti perjodu ta' żmien*) \_\_\_\_\_

9.3 Min wettaq dawn l-azzjonijiet?

(*Agħzel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli*)

- Missieri ☐  
 Ommi ☐  
 Mara ta' missieri (stepmother) ☐  
 Raġel ta' ommi (stepfather) ☐  
 Oħti ☐  
 Hija ☐  
 Nanna ☐  
 Nannu ☐  
 Ħabib tal-familja ☐  
 Qraba oħra ☐  
 Edukatur / Għalliem ☐  
 Studenti oħrajn l-iskola ☐  
 Membru ta' għaqda reliġjuża ☐  
 Adult li kont nafu/ha ☐  
 Tifel/tifla li kont nafu/ha ☐  
 Ħabib/a jew Hbieb ☐  
 Partner / Imsieħeb/a ☐  
 Xi hadd li ma kontx nafu/ha ☐  
 Oħrajn ☐  
 Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

**10. Meta kont qed tikber, matul l-ewwel 18-il sena ta' ħajtek . . .**

10.1 Qatt esperjenzajt minn dawn...  
 (*Agħzel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli*)

Ma ngħatajx biżżejjed ikel jew xorb  
 anke jekk kien faċilment disponibbli?

Ma kontx mibgħut/a l-iskola anke  
 jekk kien possibbli?

☐
☐

- Ma ħadux ħsiebek għax min jieħu  
ħsieb kien/u fis-sakra jew taħt l-effett  
tad-droga? ☐
- Ma kellekx ħwejjeg nodfa jew mod  
biex iżżomm ruħek nadif/a ☐
- Ma kellekx post sigur u komdu fejn  
tgħix? ☐
- Ma ħadux ħsiebek meta kont ma  
tiflaħx? ☐
- Xejn minn dawn ☐
- Sogġett/a għal tip ta' negligenza  
oħra apparti dawk speċifikati hawn  
fuq ☐
- Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

## 10.2 Jekk esperjenzajt azzjonijiet imsemmija f'9.1...

a) Kemm kellek żmien meta graw dawn l-azzjonijiet? (*Agħti età*) \_\_\_\_\_

b) Għal kemm żmien seħħew dawn l-azzjonijiet? (*Agħti perġodu ta' \_\_\_\_\_  
żmien*) \_\_\_\_\_

## 11.1 Fittixt għajnuna dwar dawn l-esperjenzi? (*Agħzel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli*)

Fittixt għajnuna għal esperjenzi  
msemmija f'numru 7 (abbuż fiżiku) ☐

Fittixt għajnuna għal esperjenzi  
msemmija f'numru 8 (abbuż  
emozzjonali) ☐

Fittixt għajnuna għal esperjenzi  
msemmija f'numru 9 (abbuż sesswali) ☐

Ma fittixtx għajnuna ☐ (mur  
11.11)

## 11.2 Jekk fittixt l-għajnuna, ma' min fittixtha l-ewwel?

(*Agħzel waħda jew iżjed skont kif applikabbli*)

Partner / Imsieheb/a ☐

Membru tal-familja ☐

Ħbieb ☐

Qassis jew xi ħadd mill-  
knisja ☐

Pulizjija ☐

Helpline ☐

Professjonisti oħrajn ☐

Xi ħadd ieħor ☐

Ma nixtieqx ngħid ☐

11.3 Din il-persuna/i kien/u ta' għajnuna?

Iva ☐

(Agħżel waħda)

Le ☐

11.4 X'għamel/għamlet/għamlu li kien ta' għajnuna? (Agħti dettalji)

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11.5 Xi xtaqt li għamel/għamlet/għamlu meta kellimtu għall-għajnuna? (Agħti dettalji)

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11.6 Jekk fittixt l-għajnuna, kemm għadda żmien minn meta graw  
dawn l-azzjonijiet sa meta tkellimt ma' xi ħadd dwarhom?

(Agħti perjodu ta' żmien)

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11.7 Jekk fittixt l-għajnuna, x'kien l-iktar fattur prinċipali li għenek titlob l-għajnuna?  
(Agħti dettalji)

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11.8 Jekk fittixt l-għajnuna, bejn wieħed u ieħor kemm għadda żmien minn meta  
l-ewwel li tkellimt dwar l-esperjenzi tiegħek sa meta ġejt imneħhi mill-kuntest fejn  
kont qed tiġi soġġett għall-dawn l-azzjonijiet? (Agħti perjodu ta' żmien)

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11.9 Jekk tkellimt dwar l-esperjenzi tiegħek ma' xi  
ħadd, ġejt offrut servizzi ta' support professjonali?  
(Agħżel waħda u jekk 'Iva', agħti dettalji)

Iva ☐

Le ☐

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11.10 Jekk ġejt offrut servizzi ta' support professjonali, taħseb li dawn kienu adattati biex  
jgħinuk bl-esperjenzi tiegħek? (Agħti dettalji)

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11.11 Jekk MA FITTIXTX għajnuna dwar dawn l-esperjenzi, x'kienet ir-raġuni għaliex MA  
fittixx appoġġ? (Agħti d-dettalji)

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11.12 Jekk MA FITTIXTX għajnuna, irnexxilek tneħhi lilek innifsek mill-kuntest fejn kienu qed jiġru dawn l-azzjonijiet? (*Agħzel waħda*)

Iva ☐

Le ☐

12. Liema servizzi ta' support taħseb li l-iktar jistgħu jgħinu lil tfal li għaddejjin minn esperjenzi simili (*Agħti dettalji*)

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13. X'taħseb li jista' jsir sabiex jitnaqqsu esperjenzi simili għat-tfal? (*Agħti dettalji*)

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Link għas-servizzi ta' support

## Appendix C



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

### **Faculty for Social Wellbeing**

University of Malta  
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 2672  
[socialwellbeing@um.edu.mt](mailto:socialwellbeing@um.edu.mt)

[www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing](http://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing)

### INFORMATION SHEET – Interviews with professionals regarding persons convicted of child abuse

#### Principal Researcher

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1<sup>st</sup> August 2022

Dear Professional Helper,

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research looking into the prevalence and impact of abuse on children. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse.

As a professional in the field, we would like to invite you to participate in this research, which would involve voluntarily participating in an interview regarding your views about persons convicted of child abuse, their rehabilitation and treatment. Participation is entirely voluntary; you may accept or refuse to participate without needing to give a reason for your choice. Your participation does not entail any known risks. Below you will find information about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part. Your participation would help contribute to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse.

Should you choose to participate, the one-time interview will be held online via Zoom at a time convenient for you and will take approximately an hour. During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your professional views regarding persons convicted of child abuse. Interviews will be audio recorded for later written analysis. This recording will make use of Zoom security features such as end-to-end encryption. Your name and surname and any other personally identifiable details will not be used in the study or disseminated in any way.

Following the interview, the researchers will transcribe and code the data gathered. This will be pseudonymised upon transcription and end-to-end encrypted, so that your personal data and identification will remain confidential. The data will be used for the purpose of this study and any research outputs from this study, will be stored in a pseudonymised form and raw data will only be accessed by the named team of researchers directly involved in the project. Any data gathered will be destroyed within 2 years of completion of the study: any recordings will be deleted, both those stored in the cloud as well on a password-protected computer, and any transcribed material will be deleted and shredded if this is hard copy. Until then, any printed material will be stored in a locked, safe location separately from any identifying information.

If you choose to participate, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and national legislation, you have the right to access, rectify and erase any information pertaining to you. In addition, you could decide to withdraw your consent to participate, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw your participation, any data collected from you will be deleted, as long as this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives. Withdrawal can be carried out by not later than one month from the date of the interview. This is acknowledged in point 2 of the consent form and is in line with the exemptions provided for in GDPR Article 17(3)(d). If it is technically impossible to delete your data, it will be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you other than contributing to the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse, and that your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. In order to participate you will need to sign a consent form.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us by phone or

email. Thank you for your time and consideration. Your contribution is of great value to this study. Whilst thanking you in advance, we look forward to your participation.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa

## Appendix D



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

**Faculty for  
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**ITTRA TA' INFORMAZZJONI – Intervisti ma' professjonisti dwar persuni kkundannati li abbużaw mit-tfal**

### Riċerkatriċi Akkademika

Isem: Dr Roberta Attard

Emejł: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Tel: 2340 3518

### Riċerkaturi

Isem: Ms Graziella Vella

Emejł: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

1 ta' Awwissu 2022

Għeżież professjonisti,

Il-Fakultà għat-Tishiñ tas-Socjeta' fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn il-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li ngħibu għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal.

Bħala professjonist f'dan is-settur, nixtiequ nistednuk tipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka, billi b'mod volontarju tipparteċipa f'intervista dwar il-fehmiet tiegħek rigward persuni li huma kkundannati li abbużaw mit-tfal, ir-rijabilitazzjoni u t-trattament tagħhom. Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek hija b'mod volontarju u għandek id-dritt illi taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr bżonn li tagħti raġuni. Din ir-riċerka ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. F'din l-ittra għandek issib l-informazzjoni dwar x'tinvolvi l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek, fil-każ illi tagħżel illi tipparteċipa. Il-kontribut tiegħek jista' jgħin sabiex iġib għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal. L-informazzjoni u d-data miġbura f'din ir-riċerka ser tintuża biss għall-iskopijiet ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk inti tagħżel illi tipparteċipa, l-intervista, li ser issir f'darba online fuq Zoom f'hin konvenjenti għalik u għandha tiegħu madwar siegħa. Waqt l-intervista, inti tintalab tiddiskuti l-fehmiet professjonali tiegħek dwar persuni kkundannati li jabbużaw mit-tfal. L-intervista tiġi vidjo rreġistrata sabiex tiġi traskritta għall-analiżi. Din ir-reġistrazzjoni ser tagħmel użu mill-karatteristiċi ta' sigurtà ta' Zoom, bħal 'encryption end-to-end'. Ismek u kunjomok u kwalunkwe dettalji personali oħra mhux ser jintużaw fl-istudju jew ikunu mxerrda bl-ebda mod.



Wara l-intervista, l-informazzjoni miġbura tiġi traskritta u kodifikata mir-riċerkatriċi. Id-data miġbura ser tkun psewdonomiżzata waqt it-traskrizzjoni, jiġifieri ser jintużaw psewdonimi (ismijiet fittizji) sabiex id-data u identifikazzjoni tiegħek tibqa' kunfidenzjali. Kwalunkwe data miġbura ser tiġi użata għall-iskopijiet ta' din ir-riċerka u kwalunkwe riżultat tar-riċerka minn dan l-istudju, ser tkun miżmuma b'mod psewdonomiżzat u d-data mhux proċessata ser tkun aċċessibbli biss għar-riċerkaturi imsemmija involuti direttament f'dan l-istudju.

Kwalunkwe data miġbura ser tiġi distrutta fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka: kwalunkwe reġistrazzjonijiet ser jiġu mħassra, kemm dawk maħżuna fil-cloud onlajn kif ukoll fuq kompjuter protett bil-password, u kwalunkwe materjal traskritt se jiġihassar u jitqatta' jekk din tkun kopja stampata. Sa dakinhar, kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jinħażen f'post imsakkar u sigur separatament minn kwalunkwe informazzjoni ta' identifikazzjoni

Jekk tagħżel illi tipparteċipa, kif skont il-liġi tal- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandek id-dritt li taċċessa, tirrettifika u tħassar kwalunkwe informazzjoni li tappartjeni lilek. Barra minn hekk, tista' tiddeċiedi li tirtira l-kunsens tiegħek biex tipparteċipa, mingħajr ma jkollok bżonn tipprovdi ebda spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni negattiva għalik. Jekk tagħżel li tirtira l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek, kwalunkwe data miġbura mingħandek tiġihassar, sakemm dan ikun teknikament possibbli, sakemm it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka. Il-parteċipazzjoni tista' tiġi rtirata sa mhux aktar tard minn xahar mid-data tal-intervista. Dan huwa rikonoxxut fil-punt 2 tal-formola tal-kunsens u huwa konformi mal-eżenzjonijiet previsti fl-Artikolu 17(3)(d) tal-GDPR. Jekk ikun teknikament impossibbli li tħassar id-data tiegħek, din tinżamm f'forma anonima.

Jekk tagħżel illi tipparteċipa, mhux ser ikun hemm kumpens għal parteċipazzjoni, ħlief li tgħin biex iġib għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal. Il-parteċipazzjoni ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. Sabiex tipparteċipa ser ikollok bżonn tiffirma formola ta' kunsens.

Qed tiġi pprovdut/a b'kopja ta' din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni sabiex iżżommha għal referenza fil-futur. Jekk tkun meħtieġa aktar informazzjoni, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattjana permezz ta' ittra elettronika jew b'telefonata.

Grazzi għall-attenzjoni mogħtija. Il-kontribut tiegħek huwa ta' valur għal dan l-istudju. Filwaqt li nirringrazzjawk bil-quddiem, nittamaw il-quddiem għall-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa

## Appendix E



**L-Università  
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### **Faculty for Social Wellbeing**

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### INFORMATION SHEET – Interviews with professionals regarding children's online safety

#### Principal Researcher

Name: Dr Roberta Attard

Email: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Contact no: 2340 3518

#### Research Support Officers

Name: Ms Graziella Vella

Ms Olga Formosa

Email: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

1<sup>st</sup> August 2022

Dear Professional Helper,

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research looking into the children's use of the internet. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse while exploring actions to be taken to keep children safe online and examining the nature of the online experience for children.

As a professional in the field, we would like to invite you to participate in this research, which would involve voluntarily participating in an interview regarding your views about children's use of the internet. Participation is entirely voluntary; you may accept or refuse to participate without needing to give a reason for your choice. Your participation does not entail any known risks. Below you will find information about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part. Your participation would help contribute to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse online.

Should you choose to participate, the one-time interview will be held online via Zoom at a time convenient for you and will take approximately an hour. During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your professional views regarding the use of the internet amongst minors. Interviews will be audio recorded for later written analysis. This recording will make use of Zoom security features such as end-to-end encryption. Your name and surname and any other personally identifiable details will not be used in the study or disseminated in any way.

Following the interview, the researchers will transcribe and code the data gathered. This will be pseudonymised upon transcription and end-to-end encrypted, so that your personal data and identification will remain confidential. The data will be used for the purpose of this study and any research outputs from this study, will be stored in an pseudonymised form and raw data will only be accessed by the named team of researchers directly involved in the project. Any data gathered will be destroyed within 2 years of completion of the study: any recordings will be deleted, both those stored in the cloud as well on a password-protected computer, and any transcribed material will be deleted and shredded if this is hard copy. Until then, any printed material will be stored in a locked, safe location separately from any identifying information.

If you choose to participate, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and national legislation, you have the right to access, rectify and erase any information pertaining to you. In addition, you could decide to withdraw your consent to participate, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw your participation, any data collected from you will be deleted, as long as this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives. Withdrawal can be carried out by not later than one month from the date of the interview. This is acknowledged in point 2 of the consent form and is in line with the exemptions provided for in GDPR Article 17(3)(d). If it is technically impossible to delete your data, it will be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you other than contributing to the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse online, and that your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. In order to participate you will need to sign a consent form.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us by phone or

email. Thank you for your time and consideration. Your contribution is of great value to this study. Whilst thanking you in advance, we look forward to your participation.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa

## Appendix F



**L-Università  
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**ITTRA TA' INFORMAZZJONI – Intervisti ma' professjonisti dwar dwar is-sigurtà tal-minorenni onlajn**

#### Riċerkatriċi Akkademika

Isem: Dr Roberta Attard

Emejł: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Tel: 2340 3518

#### Riċerkaturi

Isem: Ms Graziella Vella

Emejł: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

1 ta' Awwissu 2022

Għeżież Professjonisti,

Il-Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn il-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li nġibu għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal.

Bħala professjonist f'dan is-settur, nixtiequ nistednuk tipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka, billi b'mod volontarju tipparteċipa f'intervista dwar il-fehmiet tiegħek rigward is-sigurtà tal-minorenni onlajn. Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek hija b'mod volontarju u għandek id-dritt illi taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr bżonn li tagħti raġuni. Din ir-riċerka ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. F'din l-ittra għandek issib l-informazzjoni dwar x'tinvolvi l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek, fil-każ illi tagħzel illi tipparteċipa. Il-kontribut tiegħek jista' jgħin sabiex iġib għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal. L-informazzjoni u d-data miġbura f'din ir-riċerka ser tintuża biss għall-iskopijiet ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk inti tagħzel illi tipparteċipa, l-intervista, li ser issir f'darba online fuq Zoom f'hin konvenjenti għalik u għandha tiegħu madwar siegħa. Waqt l-intervista, inti tintalab tiddiskuti l-fehmiet professjonali tiegħek dwar l-użu tal-internet fost il-minorenni. L-intervista tiġi awdjo rreġistrata sabiex tiġi traskritta għall-analiżi. Din ir-reġistrazzjoni ser tagħmel użu mill-karatteristiċi ta' sigurtà ta' Zoom, bħal 'encryption end-to-end'. Ismek u kunjomok u kwalunkwe dettalji personali oħra mhux ser jintużaw fl-istudju jew ikunu mxerrda bl-ebda mod.

Wara l-intervista, l-informazzjoni miġbura tiġi traskritta u kodifikata mir-riċerkatriċi. Id-data miġbura ser tkun psewdonomiżżata waqt it-traskrizzjoni, jiġifieri ser jintużaw psewdonimi (ismijiet fittizji) sabiex id-data u identifikazzjoni tiegħek tibqa' kunfidenzjali. Kwalunkwe data miġbura ser tiġi użata għall-iskopijiet ta' din ir-riċerka u kwalunkwe riżultat tar-riċerka minn dan l-istudju, ser tkun miżmuma b'mod psewdonomiżżat u d-data mhux proċessata ser tkun aċċessibbli biss għar-riċerkaturi imsemmija involuti direttament f'dan l-istudju. Kwalunkwe data miġbura ser tiġi distrutta fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka: kwalunkwe reġistrazzjonijiet ser jiġu mħassra, kemm dawk maħżuna fil-cloud onlajn kif ukoll fuq kompjuter protett bil-password, u kwalunkwe materjal traskritt se jiġihassar u jitqatta' jekk din tkun kopja stampata. Sa dakinhar, kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jinħażen f'post imsakkar u sigur separatament minn kwalunkwe informazzjoni ta' identifikazzjoni.

Jekk tagħżel illi tipparteċipa, kif skont il-liġi tal- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandek id-dritt li taċċessa, tirrettifika u tħassar kwalunkwe informazzjoni li tappartjeni lilek. Barra minn hekk, tista' tiddeċiedi li tirtira l-kunsens tiegħek biex tipparteċipa, mingħajr ma jkollok bżonn tipprovdni ebda spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni negattiva għalik. Jekk tagħżel li tirtira l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek, kwalunkwe data miġbura mingħandek titħassar, sakemm dan ikun teknikament possibbli, sakemm it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka. Il-parteċipazzjoni tista' tiġi rtirata sa mhux aktar tard minn xahar mid-data tal-intervista. Dan huwa rikonoxxut fil-punt 2 tal-formola tal-kunsens u huwa konformi mal-eżenzjonijiet previsti fl-Artikolu 17(3)(d) tal-GDPR. Jekk ikun teknikament impossibbli li tħassar id-data tiegħek, din tinżamm f'forma anonima.

Jekk tagħżel illi tipparteċipa, mhux ser ikun hemm kumpens għal parteċipazzjoni, flief li tgħin biex iġib għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal. Il-parteċipazzjoni ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. Sabiex tipparteċipa ser ikollok bżonn tiffirma formola ta' kunsens.

Qed tiġi pprovdut/a b'kopja ta' din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni sabiex iżżommha għal referenza fil-futur. Jekk tkun meħtieġa aktar informazzjoni, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattjana permezz ta' ittra elettronika jew b'telefonata.

Grazzi għall-attenzjoni mogħtija. Il-kontribut tiegħek huwa ta' valur għal dan l-istudju. Filwaqt li nirringrazzjawk bil-quddiem, nittamaw il-quddiem għall-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa

## Appendix G



### Faculty for Social Wellbeing

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#### CONSENT FORM – Interviews with professionals regarding persons convicted of child abuse

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research looking into the prevalence and impact of abuse on children. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. Please fill in this form after reading the Information Sheet and the information listed here. If you have any questions, please ask the researchers before you decide to sign this consent form and participate in this research.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation without giving any reason and without any penalty. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased if this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives and that withdrawal can be carried out by not later than one month from the date of the interview. If it is technically impossible to delete your data, it will be retained in an anonymised form.
3. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked.
4. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a one-time interview in order to discuss my professional views regarding convicted child abusers, such as rehabilitation, treatment, and related matters.
5. I am aware that the interview will take approximately one hour and that it will take place online, via Zoom, at a convenient, previously-agreed time.
6. I am aware that, if I give my consent, the Zoom interview will be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed). This recording will make use of Zoom security features such as end-to-end encryption. The audio recording will be stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer. It will be deleted from the cloud as soon as it is stored on the encrypted file. The recording saved on the computer will be deleted two years from completion of the study, in approximately September 2025.

7. I am aware that upon transcription, my data will be pseudonymised, that is, my identity and that of my organisation will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researchers will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be stored in a secure place. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and destroyed within two years of completion of the study.
8. I give my consent for extracts of the interview to be reproduced in the study outputs in a pseudonymised form (made-up name/code e.g. respondent A).
9. I am aware that my identity and that of my organisation and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
10. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
11. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study but that my participation can contribute towards the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse.
12. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives
13. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a pseudonymised form and only the research team will have access to the raw data. Raw data will be erased within two years of completion of the study.
14. I have been provided with a copy of the information and recruitment letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form, which includes the contact details of the researcher.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's name

Participant's signature

Date

Name of Academic researcher: Dr Roberta Attard

Contact: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt) Tel no: 2340 3518

Researchers: Ms Graziella Vella

Email: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)



## Appendix H



**L-Università  
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[www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing](http://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing)

### FORMOLA TA' KUNSENS – Intervisti ma' professionisti dwar persuni kkundannati li abbużaw mit-tfal

Il-Fakultà għat-Tiŝiħ tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn il-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li ngibu għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal. Grazzi talli qed tikkunsidra tiegħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka. Jekk jogħġbok imla dil-formola wara li taqra l-folja tal-informazzjoni u l-informazzjoni inkluża hawnhekk. Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet, jekk jogħġbok staqsi lir-riċerkaturi qabel tiddeċiedi li tiffirma dil-formola tal-kunsens u tipparteċipa fir-riċerka.

Jiena, is-sottoskritt/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi sabiex nipparteċipa fir-riċerka immwettqa minn Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa. Din il-formola ta' kunsens tispeċifika t-termini tal-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju ta' riċerka.

1. Irċevejt, qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' informazzjoni bid-dettalji ta' dan l-istudju; staqsejt għall-informazzjoni kollha li għandi bżonn biex nkun parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju u li l-mistoqsijiet kollha ġew risposti.
2. Jien qed nifhem illi l-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi hija b'mod volontarju u għandi d-dritt illi nagħzel illi nipparteċipa jew nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi mingħajr bżonn illi nagħti raġuni u mingħajr penali. F'każ illi nagħzel illi nirtira l-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi, d-data tiegħi ser tiġi mħassra sa fejn hu teknikament possibbli u sa fejn it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel b'mod drastika il-kisba tal-għanjet tar-riċerka u nista' nirtira l-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi sa mhux aktar tard minn xahar mid-data tal-intervista. Jekk ikun teknikament impossibbli li tħassar id-dejta tiegħi, din tinżamm f'forma anonima.
3. Jekk nagħzel illi nipparteċipa, nista' nirrifjuta li nwieġeb għal kwalunkwe mistoqsijiet magħmula lili.
4. Jien konxju/a li l-parteeipazzjoni tiegħi se tikkonsisti f'intervista li ser issir f'darba, sabiex niddiskuti l-fehmiet professjonali tiegħi dwar persuni kkundannati li abbużaw mit-tfal, bħar-riabilitazzjoni, it-trattament, u kwistjonijiet relatati. Nifhem illi din l-intervista ser tiegħu madwar siegħa. Nifhem ukoll illi din ser issejtn online fuq Zoom, f'hin konvenjenti li jkun miftiehem qabel.
5. Jiena konxju/a li, jekk nagħti kunsens, l-intervista li ssir fuq Zoom tkun awdjo rreġistrata għal analiżi għall-iskop tar-riċerka u li din ser tiġi transkritta. Reġistrazzjoni ta' intervisti fuq Zoom tagħmel użu mill-karatteristiċi ta' sigurtà ta' Zoom, bħal 'encryption end-to-end'. Ir-reġistrazzjoni tal-awdjo se tkun maħżuna f'fajl encrypted fuq kompjuter protett minn password. Se titħassar mill-cloud onlajn hekk kif tinħażen

fuq il-fajl encrypted. Ir-reġistrazzjoni salvata fuq il-kompjuter ser tiġi mħassra fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka, bejn wieħed u ieħor f'Settembru 2025.

6. Jiena konxju/a li fit-traskrizzjoni, d-data tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi u tal-organizzazzjoni tiegħi ma tkunx innotata fuq traskrizzjonijiet jew noti mill-intervista bl-użu ta' kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jgħaqqdu d-data tiegħi mal-identità tiegħi ser jinħażnu b'mod sigur u separat mid-data, b'mod kriptat (encrypted) fuq kompjuter tar-riċerkatur protett b'password u r-riċerkaturi biss ser ikollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat ser jinżamm f'post imsakkar u sikur separatament minn kwalunkwe informazzjoni ta' identifikazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal li jista' jidentifikani bħala parteċipant f'dan l-istudju ser jinħażen b'mod sikur sa tmiem l-istudju u ser jinqered fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka.
7. Nagħti kunsens sabiex siltiet mill-intervista jistgħu jiġu riprodotti fil-pubblikazzjoni tas-sejbiet b'mod anonimu, bl-użu ta' psewdonimu (isem magħmul jew kodiċi eż. parteċipant A).
8. Jiena konxju/a li l-identità tiegħi, tal-organizzazzjoni tiegħi u informazzjoni personali mhux ser jiġu żvelati fl-ebda publikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tirriżulta minn din ir-riċerka.
9. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat.
10. Nifhem ukoll illi ma hemmx benefiċċji diretti marbuta mal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju iżda l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ser tikkontribwixxi lejn il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal.
11. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha li tiġi miġbura se tiġi mmaniġjata skont il-proviżjonijiet tal-General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) u leġiżlazzjoni lokali, u għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nirrettifika u fejn applikabbli nħassar data dwari nnifsi, sakemm it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka.
12. Nifhem illi d-data miġbura ser tiġi miżmuma b'mod psewdonimizzata u li ser ikollhom aċċess għal data mhux ipproċessata r-riċerkaturi biss. Id-data mhux ipproċessata ser tiġi mħassra fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka.
13. Jiena ġejt ipprovdut/a b'kopja tal-ittra ta informazzjoni u nifhem li ser ningħata kopja ta din il-formola ta' kunsens, li tinkludi d-dettalji tar-riċerkaturi.

Jiena qrajt u fhimt id-dikjarazzjonijiet ta' hawn fuq u naqbel illi nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem tal-parteċipant

Firma tal-parteċipant

Data

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## Appendix I



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ta' Malta**

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### CONSENT FORM – Interviews with professionals regarding children's online safety

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research looking into the use of the internet amongst minors. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse while exploring actions to be taken to keep children safe online and examining the nature of the online experience for children.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. Please fill in this form after reading the Information Sheet and the information listed here. If you have any questions, please ask the researchers before you decide to sign this consent form and participate in this research.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation without giving any reason and without any penalty. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased if this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives and that withdrawal can be carried out by not later than one month from the date of the interview. If it is technically impossible to delete your data, it will be retained in an anonymised form.
3. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked.
4. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a one-time interview in order to discuss my professional views regarding children's use of the internet. I am aware that the interview will take approximately one hour and that it will take place online, via Zoom, at a convenient, previously-agreed time.
5. I am aware that, if I give my consent, the Zoom interview will be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed). This recording will make use of Zoom security features such as end-to-end encryption. The audio recording will be stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer. It will be deleted from the cloud as soon as it is stored on the encrypted file. The recording saved on the

computer will be deleted two years from completion of the study, in approximately September 2025.

6. I am aware that upon transcription, my data will be pseudonymised, that is, my identity and that of my organisation will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researchers will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be stored in a secure place. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and destroyed within two years of completion of the study.
7. I give my consent for extracts of the interview to be reproduced in the study outputs in a pseudonymised form (made-up name/code e.g. respondent A).
8. I am aware that my identity and that of my organization and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
9. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
10. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study but that my participation can contribute towards the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse throughout their use of the internet.
11. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives.
12. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a pseudonymised form and only the research team will have access to the raw data. Raw data will be erased within two years of completion of the study.
13. I have been provided with a copy of the information and recruitment letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form, which includes the contact details of the researcher.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's name

Participant's signature

Date

Name of Academic researcher: Dr Roberta Attard

Contact: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt) Tel no: 2340 3518

Researchers: Ms Graziella Vella

Email: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)



**FORMOLA TA' KUNSENS – Intervisti ma' professjonisti dwar is-sigurtà tal-minorenni onlajn**

Il-Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn l-użu tal-internet fost il-minorenni. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li niġbru għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal, filwaqt li nesploraw azzjonijiet li għandhom jittieħdu biex it-tfal jinżammu sikuri onlajn u neżaminaw in-natura tal-esperjenza onlajn għat-tfal.

Grazzi talli qed tikkunsidra tiegħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka. Jekk jogħġbok imla dil-formola wara li taqra l-folja tal-informazzjoni u l-informazzjoni inkluża hawnhekk. Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet, jekk jogħġbok staqsi lir-riċerkaturi qabel tiddeċiedi li tiffirma dil-formola tal-kunsens u tipparteċipa fir-riċerka.

Jiena, is-sottoskritt/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi sabiex nipparteċipa fir-riċerka immwettqa minn Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa. Din il-formola ta' kunsens tispeċifika t-termini tal-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju ta' riċerka.

1. Irċevejt, qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' informazzjoni bid-dettalji ta' dan l-istudju; staqsejt għall-informazzjoni kollha li għandi bżonn biex nkun parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju u li l-mistoqsijiet kollha ġew risposti.
2. Jien qed nifhem illi l-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi hija b'mod volontarju u għandi d-dritt illi nagħżel illi nipparteċipa jew nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi mingħajr bżonn illi nagħti raġuni u mingħajr penali. F'każ illi nagħżel illi nirtira l-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi, d-data tiegħi ser tiġi mħassra sa fejn hu teknikament possibbli u sa fejn it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel b'mod drastika il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka u nista' nirtira l-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi sa mhux aktar tard minn xahar mid-data tal-intervista. Jekk ikun teknikament impossibbli li tħassar id-dejta tiegħi, din tinżamm f'forma anonima.
3. Jekk nagħżel illi nipparteċipa, nista' nirrifjuta li nwieġeb għal kwalunkwe mistoqsijiet magħmula lili.
4. Jien konxju/a li l-parteeċipazzjoni tiegħi se tikkonsisti f'intervista li ser issir f'darba, sabiex niddiskuti l-fehmiet professjonali tiegħi dwar l-użu tal-internet fost il-minorenni. Nifhem illi din l-intervista ser tiegħu madwar siegħa. Nifhem ukoll illi din ser issejtni online fuq Zoom, f'hin konvenjenti li jkun miftiehem qabel.
5. Jiena konxju/a li, jekk nagħti kunsens, l-intervista li ssir fuq Zoom tkun awdjo rreġistrata għal analiżi għall-iskop tar-riċerka u li din ser tiġi transkritta. Reġistrazzjoni ta' intervisti fuq Zoom tagħmel użu mill-karatteristiċi ta' sigurtà ta' Zoom, bħal 'encryption end-to-end'. Ir-reġistrazzjoni tal-awdjo se tkun maħżuna f'fajl encrypted fuq kompjuter protett minn password. Se titħassar mill-cloud onlajn hekk kif tinħażen

fuq il-fajl encrypted. Ir-reġistrazzjoni salvata fuq il-kompjuter ser tiġi mħassra fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka, bejn wieħed u ieħor f'Settembru 2025.

6. Jiena konxju/a li fit-traskrizzjoni, d-data tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi u tal-organizzazzjoni tiegħi ma tkunx innotata fuq traskrizzjonijiet jew noti mill-intervista bl-użu ta' kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jgħaqqdu d-data tiegħi mal-identità tiegħi ser jinħażnu b'mod sigur u separat mid-data, b'mod kriptat (encrypted) fuq kompjuter tar-riċerkatur protett b'password u r-riċerkaturi biss ser ikollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat ser jinżamm f'post imsakkar u sikur separatament minn kwalunkwe informazzjoni ta' identifikazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal li jista' jidentifikani bħala parteċipant f'dan l-istudju ser jinħażen b'mod sikur sa tmiem l-istudju u ser jinqered fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka.
7. Nagħti kunsens sabiex siltiet mill-intervista jistgħu jiġu riprodotti fil-pubblikazzjoni tas-sejbiet b'mod anonimu, bl-użu ta' psewdonimu (isem magħmul jew kodiċi eż. parteċipant A).
8. Jiena konxju/a li l-identità tiegħi, tal-organizzazzjoni tiegħi u informazzjoni personali mhux ser jiġu żvelati fl-ebda publikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tirriżulta minn din ir-riċerka.
9. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat.
10. Nifhem ukoll illi ma hemmx benefiċċji diretti marbuta mal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju iżda l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ser tikkontribwixxi lejn il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal onlajn.
11. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha li tiġi miġbura se tiġi mmaniġjata skont il-proviżjonijiet tal- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) u leġiżlazzjoni lokali, u għandi d-dritt li naċċessa, nirrettifika u fejn applikabbli nħassar data dwari nnifsi, sakemm it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka.
12. Nifhem illi d-data miġbura ser tiġi miżmuma b'mod psewdonimizzata u li ser ikollhom aċċess għal data mhux ipproċessata r-riċerkaturi biss. Id-data mhux ipproċessata ser tiġi mħassra fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka.
13. Jiena ġejt ipprovdut/a b'kopja tal-ittra ta informazzjoni u nifhem li ser ningħata kopja ta din il-formola ta' kunsens, li tinkludi d-dettalji tar-riċerkaturi.

Jiena qrajt u fhimt id-dikjarazzjonijiet ta' hawn fuq u naqbel illi nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem tal-parteċipant

Firma tal-parteċipant

Data

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## Appendix K



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08/09/2022





### Information letter to take part in a study

#### Focus Group about use of the internet

	<p>We are Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa and we are researchers at the University of Malta. We are writing to invite you to take part in a project that we are doing. In this letter, you will find all the information about this project and about how you can take part.</p>
	<p>This project is about how children make use of the internet. We are doing this project to learn more about how children use the internet in their everyday lives and what they do to keep themselves safe from internet dangers while doing so.</p>
	<p>To do this project, we would like to hold a meeting, which we call a focus group, with a group of about 6 other children in a comfortable room.</p>

	<p>The group meeting will not last more than an hour and a half</p>
	<p>We would like to audio record the focus group because otherwise it will be very difficult for us to remember all that you tell us. Only us 3 researchers, Roberta, Graziella and Olga, will be able to listen to the recording. After we finish the project, we will erase the recording..</p>
	<p>If you ask us to, at the focus group, we can send you a copy of what you said so that you can see if you want to change, add or remove anything. If you want, you can also check what you said with someone you trust. You can do this up to a month after the day the focus group is held. .</p>
	<p>When we write about the study, we will use parts of what you said but we will never use your real name. You also can choose what you want to be called instead of your real name. On our part we will make sure that we don't use information that can allow people to know what you said.</p>
	<p>You do not have to take part in this study if you don't want to. If you first agree to take part and then you change your mind, it will not be a problem. You can stop any time before and during the focus group and you can ask us to take off what you said up to a month from the focus group. You do not have to give reasons for stopping and nothing bad will happen to you or anyone else.</p>
	<p>We will do what the law in Malta tells us to do to take care of the information that we have about you and from you. This means that we will keep the information in a safe place and no one will be able to find it except for us, Roberta, Graziella and Olga. We will also erase all the information from the focus group, including the</p>



	recordings, after we finish the project, and this will happen for sure by September 2025.
	If you take part, you will have a chance to talk about what is important to you about how children use the internet. You will also be helping others learn more about this topic.
	We do not think that taking part in the focus group will cause problems for you. But if something happens that upsets you, we can help you sort out the problem. If you need to speak to someone else about what happened in the focus group, or about something that you remembered during or after the focus group, we can help you do this. All you need to do is ask us. You and those taking care of you will not need to pay anything for the help that you receive.
	This letter of information is for you to keep just in case you want to check anything out.
	If you want to take part or if you have any questions, you can contact us on <a href="mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt">roberta.attard@um.edu.mt</a> , <a href="mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt">graziella.vella@um.edu.mt</a> , or <a href="mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt">olga.formosa@um.edu.mt</a> or telephone number: 2340 3518.
	Please let us know by [DATE] if you would like to take part.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and we hope to see you at our meeting.

---

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa

Dr Roberta Attard [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt) / 2340 3518

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Ms Olga Formosa [olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

## Appendix L



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08/09/2022

### Ittra ta' informazzjoni biex tieħu sehem fi proġett

#### Focus Group dwar l-użu tal-internet

Three portrait photographs of women: Dr. Roberta Attard, Ms. Graziella Vella, and Ms. Olga Formosa.	Aħna Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa riċerkaturi fl-Università ta' Malta. Qed niktbu biex nistiednuk tieħu sehem fi proġett li qed nagħmlu. F'din l-ittra ssib l-informazzjoni dwar dan il-proġett u dwar kif tista' tieħu sehem.
A photograph of a young child sitting at a desk, looking at a laptop screen.	Dan l-iproġett hu dwar kif it-tfal jużaw l-internet. Aħna qed nagħmlu dan l-iproġett biex nitgħallmu aktar dwar kif jużaw l-internet it-tfal fil-ħajja ta' kuljum u x'jagħmlu biex ikunu siguri (safe) minn perikli ta' fuq l-internet waqt li jkunu qed jużawh.
An icon depicting two people sitting at a table, with speech bubbles above them, representing a focus group discussion.	Biex nagħmlu dan l-iproġett, aħna nixtiequ nagħmlu laqgħa ma' grupp, li ngħidulha 'focus group' ma' bejn wieħed u ieħor 6 itfal, ġo kamra komda.

	<p>Il-laqgħa tal-grupp ma għandiex iddum aktar minn siegħa u nofs.</p>
	<p>Aħna nixtiequ li nirrekordjaw il-laqgħa tal-grupp fuq awdjo għax inkella jkun diffiċli għalina li niftakru kull ma tgħidilna. Aħna t-3 biss, Roberta, Graziella u Olga, se nkunu nistgħu nisimgħu dak li jiġi rikordjat. Wara li nispiċċaw il-proġett, dak li jkun irrikordjajt neqirduh (niddeletjawh).</p>
	<p>Jekk titlobulna, wara li nagħmlu l-laqgħa, aħna nibgħatulek kopja ta' dak li tkun għidt inti biex tara jekk tixtieqx tbiddel, iżżid jew tneħhi xi ħaġa. Jekk trid, tkun tista' wkoll tiċċekkja dak li għidt. Tista' tagħmel dan sa xahar wara minn meta jkun sar il-focus group.</p>
	<p>Meta niktbu dwar l-iproġett, se nużaw partijiet minn dak li għidt inti, imma qatt mhu se nużaw ismek ta' veru. Tista' anke tagħżel dak li tixtieq tissemma minflok ismek. Minn naħa tagħna, ser nassiguraw li ma nużawx informazzjoni li biha xi ħadd jista' jkun jaf dak li għidt int.</p>
	<p>Ma hemmx għalfejn tiegħu sehem f'dan l-iproġett jekk ma tridx. Jekk l-ewwel taċċetta li tiegħu sehem u wara jerga' jibdielek, ma jkunx jimporta. Tista' tieqaf meta trid qabel u waqt il-focus group u tista' titlobna biex inneħhu dak li għidt int sa xahar wara l-focus group. Ma jkunx hemm għalfejn tgħid għaliex trid tieqaf u mhu se jiġri xejn jekk tagħmel dan.</p>
	<p>Aħna se nagħmlu kif tgħidilna l-liġi ta' Malta biex niehdu ħsieb l-informazzjoni li għandna dwarek u dak li tgħidilna. Dan ifisser li nżommu l-informazzjoni f'post sigur u ħadd ma jkun jista' jsibha ħlief aħna Roberta, Graziella u Olga. Ifisser ukoll li neqredu (niddeletjaw) l-informazzjoni mill-laqgħa, inkluż dak li nkunu irrikordjajna meta nispiċċaw il-proġett u dan se jkun żgur qabel Settembru 2025.</p>

	<p>Jekk tieħu sehem, inti jkollok iċ-ċans titkellem fuq dak li hu importanti għalik dwar kif it-tfal jużaw l-internet. Tkun qiegħed/qegħda wkoll tgħin lil haddieħor jitgħallem aktar dwar dan is-suġġett.</p>
	<p>Ma naħsbux li se jkun hemm problemi għalik jekk int tieħu sehem. Imma jekk tiġri xi ħaġa li ddejtek, inkunu nistgħu ngħinuk issolvi l-problema. Jekk ikollok bżonn tkellem lil xi hadd dwar dak li jkun ġara waqt il-focus group jew dwar xi ħaġa li tkun ftakart waqt il-focus group, inkunu nistgħu ngħinuk tagħmel dan. Kull ma trid tagħmel hu li ssaqsina. La int u lanqas dawk li jieħdu ħsiebek ma jkollhom għalfejn iħallu għall-kwalunkwe għajna li tirċievi.</p>
	<p>Din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni hi għalik biex iżżommha ħalli tkun għandek jekk ikollok tiċċekkja xi ħaġa minnha.</p>
	<p>Jekk tixtieq tieħu sehem, jew jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet, tista' tikkuntatjani fuq <a href="mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt">roberta.attard@um.edu.mt</a>, <a href="mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt">graziella.vella@um.edu.mt</a>, jew <a href="mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt">olga.formosa@um.edu.mt</a> jew numru tat-telefon: 2340 3518.</p>
	<p>Jekk jogħġbok għidilna sa [DATA] jekk tixtieq tieħu sehem.</p>

Grazzi talli qrajt din l-ittra u nittamaw li narawk fil-laqgħa.

---

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa

Dr Roberta Attard [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt) / 2340 3518

Ms Graziella Vella [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

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## Appendix M



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### **Assent Form Focus Group about use of the internet**

'Assent' means that you agree with everything that is written below.  
If you agree with everything that is written, please sign your name in the last part.

Three portrait photographs of women: a woman with dark hair and a green patterned top, a woman with curly brown hair, and a woman with dark hair smiling.	I would like to take part in the project that Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa are doing about how children use the internet in their everyday lives and what they do to keep themselves safe from internet dangers while doing so.
A photograph of a young child with blonde hair sitting at a desk, looking at a laptop screen displaying a website.	I have been given information about the project and had the chance to ask any question. I also got a reply that I was happy with if I asked questions.
An icon showing two stylized figures sitting at a table, representing a focus group or meeting.	I know that I will take part in a group meeting which is called a focus group.
An icon of a round analog clock with a wooden frame, showing the time as approximately 1:50.	I know that the group meeting will not be longer than one and a half hours.

	<p>I know that Roberta, Graziella and Olga will audio record the focus group. I also know that only they will be able to listen to the recordings. After the project is finished, Roberta Graziella and Olga will erase the recordings.</p>
	<p>I know that after we do the focus group, I can have a copy of what I said so that I can see if I want to change, add or remove anything and that I can do this up to a month from the day of the focus group. If I want, I can also check what I said with someone I trust.</p>
	<p>I know that when Roberta, Graziella and Olga write about the project, they will use parts of what I said but will not use my real name. I also know that they will make sure that they don't use information that can allow people to know what I said.</p>
	<p>I understand that if I take part in the focus group I will not talk to other people about who was with me in the group or what they said. Even though I might not agree with them, I will also respect what everyone has to say without telling them that what they are saying is wrong or judging them.</p>
	<p>I know that I do not have to take part in this project if I do not want to. If I take part and I want to stop, it will not be a problem. I know that I can stop any time before and during the focus group and that I can ask Roberta, Graziella and Olga to take off what I said up to a month from day the focus group is held. I know that I do not have to give reasons for stopping.</p>
	<p>I know that Roberta, Graziella and Olga will do what the law in Malta tells them to do to take care of the information that they have about me and that they got from me. This means that they will keep the information in a safe place, and no one will be able to find it except for them. They will also erase all the information from the focus group, including the recordings, after they finish the project, and this will happen for sure by September 2025.</p>

	<p>I know that if I take part, I will have a chance to talk about what is important to me about how children use the internet. I will also be helping others learn more about this subject.</p>
	<p>I know that there should not be a problem if I take part. But if something happens that upsets me, I can talk about it so that the problem is sorted. If I need to speak to someone else, I will be helped by Roberta, Graziella and Olga to do this. Neither I, nor those who take care of me will have to pay anything for the help I receive.</p>
	<p>I have received the information letter about the project, and I will also have a copy of this consent form just in case I need it.</p>

I have understood everything that is written here and if I had any questions they have been answered. I would like to take part in this project.

Please sign name and surname: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr Roberta Attard [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt) / 2340 3518

Ms Graziella Vella [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa [olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)



## Appendix N



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### **Formola ta' Assent Focus Group dwar l-użu tal-internet**




'Assent' ifisser li inti taqbel ma' dak li hawn miktub hawn taht.

Jekk taqbel ma' dak kollu li hawn miktub, jekk jogħġbok iffirma ismek fl-aħħar parti.

	<p>Jiena nixtieq li niehu sehem f'dan il-proġett li se jsir minn Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa dwar kif it-tfal jużaw l-internet fil-ħajja ta' kuljum u u x'jagħmlu biex ikunu siguri (safe) minn perikli tal-internet waqt li jagħmlu dan.</p> <p>.</p>
	<p>Jiena ġejt mogħti/jja l-informazzjoni dwar il-proġett u kelli ċans insaqsi mistoqsijet dwaru. Kelli wkoll risposta li kont kuntent/a biha dwar dak li staqsejt.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li se niehu sehem f'laqgħa ta' grupp li jgħidulha 'focus group'.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li l-laqqgħa ta' grupp mhux se ddum aktar minn madwar siegħa u nofs.</p>



	<p>Jien naf li Roberta, Graziella u Olga se jirrekordjaw il-laqqgħa ta' grupp fuq awdjo. Jien naf ukoll li huma biss se jkunu nistgħu jisingħu dak li ġie rekordjat. Wara li jispiċċa il-proġett, Roberta, Graziella u Olga se jeqirdu (jiddeletjaw) dak li ġie rekordjat.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li wara li nagħmlu l-laqqgħa, nista' nitlob kopja ta' dak li nkun għidt biex nara jekk nixtieqx inbiddel, inżid jew inneħhi xi haġa sa xahar minn wara d-data li fiha jkun sar il-focus group. Jekk inkun irrid, nista' wkoll niċċekkja dak li għidt ma' xi hadd li nafda.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li meta Roberta, Graziella u Olga jiktbu dwar il-proġett, se jużaw partijiet minn dak li għidt jien, imma mhux se j/tuża ismi ta' veru. Naf ukoll li huma ser jassiguraw li ma jużawx informazzjoni li twassal biex xi hadd ikun jaf x'għidt jien.</p>
	<p>Nifhem li jekk nieħu sehem fil-focus group mhux se nitkellem ma' nies oħra dwar min kien miegħi fil-grupp jew x'qalu. Anke jekk forsi ma naqbilx magħhom, se nirrispetta wkoll dak li kulhadd għandu xi jgħid mingħajr ma ngħidilhom li dak li qed j/tgħid huwa hażin jew niġgudikahom.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li ma hemmx għalfejn nieħu sehem f'dan l-iproġett jekk ma rridx. Naf li nista' nieqaf f'kwalunkwe mument qabel u waqt il-focus group u li nista' nistaqsi lil Roberta, Graziella u Olga biex ineħhu dak li nkun għidt jien sa xahar wara minn meta jkun sar il-focus group. Naf li ma jkunx hemm għalfejn ngħid għaliex irrid nieqaf.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li Roberta, Graziella u Olga ser jagħmlu kif tgħidilhom il-liġi ta' Malta biex jieħdu f'siebi l-informazzjoni dwari u dak li nkun għidt. Dan ifisser li ser iżommu l-informazzjoni f'post sigur u li hadd ma jkun jista' jsibha flieghom. Huma ser jiddistribwgu (jiddeletjaw) l-informazzjoni kollha mill-focus group, inkluż dak li jkun ġie awdjo rekordjat, wara li jispiċċaw il-proġett u dan ikun żgur qabel Settembru 2025.</p>

	<p>Jien naf li jekk nieħu sehem, ikolli ċ-ċans nitkellem fuq dak li hu importanti għalija dwar kif it-tfal jużaw l-internet. Inkun qiegħed/qegħda wkoll ngħin lil ħaddieħor jitgħallem aktar dwar dan is-sugġett.</p>
	<p>Jien naf li mhux suppost ikun hemm problemi għalija jekk nieħu sehem. Imma jekk tiġri xi ħaġa li ddejaqni, ikolli l-għajnuna biex nkun insolvi l-problema. Jekk ikolli bżonn inkellem lil xi ħadd dwar dak li jkun ġara, ikolli l-għajnuna mingħand Roberta, Graziella u Olga biex nagħmel dan. La jien u lanqas min jieħu ħsiebi ma jkollna għalfejn inħallsu għall-għajnuna li nirċievu.</p>
	<p>Jien irċevejt ittra ta' informazzjoni dwar dan il-proġett u se jkolli wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens filkas li jkolli bżonnha.</p>

Jiena fhimt dak kollu li hawn miktub, u jekk kelli xi mistoqsijiet dawn ġew imwieġba. Jien nixtieq nieħu sehem f'dan l-iproġett.

Jekk jogħġbok iffirma ismek u kunjom: \_\_\_\_\_

Data: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr Roberta Attard [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt) / 2340 3518

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## Appendix O



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### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS – Focus Group with minors regarding use of the internet

#### Principal Researcher

Name: Dr Roberta Attard

Email: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Contact no: 2340 3518

#### Research Support Officers

Name: Ms Graziella Vella

Ms Olga Formosa

Email: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

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1<sup>st</sup> August 2022

Dear parents/guardians,

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research looking into the prevalence and impact of abuse on children. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse, while exploring actions to be taken to keep children safe online and examining the nature of the online experience for children.

As part of this study, we would like to carry out a focus group in order to discuss children's experience online. We would therefore like to request your consent in order for this to be held. Below you will find information about what your child's involvement would entail, should they and yourself decide for them to take part. Their participation would help contribute to bring insight on the protection of children and the further understanding of online usage for minors.

During the focus group, the group of participants will be asked to participate in a discussion about their views and experience with online usage. The focus group will be held at a convenient time and previously agreed location and should take approximately 1 and a half hours. The focus group will be audio recorded for the purposes of transcription and data analysis. The names and surnames and any other personally identifiable details of your child and all participants will not be used in the study or disseminated in any way.

Since the focus group involves a discussion within a group, other participants who are also minors will also be present. While all participants will be asked to declare that they will not to divulge details about other participants, the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality in this regard. Should your child participate, their participation in the focus group should be considered confidential and they are therefore expected not disclose details of those participating and/or of the nature of discussions to others. Furthermore, as there will be other participants present, participants will be identifiable to each other.

Following the focus group, the researchers will transcribe and code the data gathered. This will be pseudonymised upon transcription and end-to-end encrypted, so that your child and their family's personal data and identification will remain confidential. The data will be used for the purpose of this study and any research outputs from this study, will be stored in an pseudonymised form and raw data will only be accessed by the named team of researchers directly involved in the project. Any data gathered will be destroyed within 2 years of completion of the study: any recordings on a password-protected computer will be deleted, and any transcribed material will be deleted and shredded if this is hard copy. Until then, any printed material will be stored in a locked, safe location separately from any identifying information.

In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and national legislation, yourself and your child will have the right to access, rectify and erase any information pertaining to you. In addition, you could decide to withdraw your consent for your child's participation, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for either. Should you choose to withdraw their participation, any data collected from your child will be deleted, if this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives. Withdrawal can be carried out by not later than one month from the date of the focus group. This is acknowledged in point 2 of the consent form and is in line with the exemptions provided for in GDPR Article 17(3)(d).

Should your child participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to them other than contributing to the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse, and that their participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. Nevertheless, the researcher will have available a list of support services that can be made use of should this possibility arise. In order for your child to participate them and you will need to sign a consent form. Moreover, your consent provided by signing the consent form also implies guaranteeing that any other parent/guardian is also in agreement.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us by phone or email. Thank you for your time and consideration. Your contribution is of great value to this study. Whilst thanking you in advance, we look forward to your participation.

Yours Sincerely,  
Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa

## Appendix P



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**ITTRA TA' INFORMAZZJONI GHALL-ĠENITURI/KUSTODJI –  
Focus Group (Diskussjoni fi Grupp) għat-tfal dwar is-sigurtà tal-minorenni onlajn**

**Riċerkatriċi Akkademika**

Isem: Dr Roberta Attard

Emejl: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Tel: 2340 3518

**Riċerkaturi**

Isem: Ms Graziella Vella

Emejl: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

1 ta' Awwissu 2022

Għeżież ġenituri/kustodji,

Il-Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn il-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li niġbru għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal, filwaqt li nesploraw azzjonijiet li għandhom jittiehdu biex it-tfal jinżammu sikuri online u neżaminaw in-natura tal-esperjenza onlajn għat-tfal.

Bħala parti minn dan l-istudju, nixtiequ norganizzaw focus group (diskussjoni fi grupp) sabiex nesploraw l-esperjenza tat-tfal onlajn. Għaldaqstant, nixtiequ nitolbu il-kunsens tiegħek sabiex il-wild tiegħek i/tkun j/tista' j/tipparteċipa b'mod volontarju f'dan il-focus group dwar l-esperjenza tagħhom onlajn. Il-parteeipazzjoni hija b'mod volontarju u għandek id-dritt illi taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li l-wild tiegħek j/tiehu sehem, mingħajr bżonn li tagħti raġuni. F'din l-ittra għandek issib l-informazzjoni dwar x'tinvolvi l-parteeipazzjoni tal-wild tiegħek, fil-każ illi inti u huma tagħżlu illi j/tipparteċipa. Il-kontribut tagħhom jista' jgħin sabiex iġib għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal kif ukoll l-użu tal-internet (online) għat-tfal.

Waqt dan il-focus group, ser jiġu diskussi l-fehmiet u l-esperjenza tat-tfal rigward l-użu tal-internet (onlajn). Il-focus group isir f'darba f'hin u post konvenjenti u għandu jiehu madwar siegħa u nofs. Il-focus group jiġi awdjo rreġistrat sabiex jiġi traskritt għall-analiżi. Isem u kunjom il-wild tiegħek u kwalunkwe dettalji personali oħra mhux ser jintużaw fl-istudju jew ikunu mxerrda bl-ebda mod.

Peress li l-focus group jinvolvi diskussjoni fi grupp, ser ikun hemm parteċipanti oħrajn preżenti. Filwaqt illi l-parteċipanti ser jiġu mitluba jiddikjaraw li mhux ser jiżvelaw dettalji dwar parteċipanti oħra, ir-riċerkatur ma jistax jiggarrantixxi kunfidenzjalità f'dan ir-rigward. Jekk il-wild tiegħek j/tipparteċipa, il-parteċipazzjoni fid-diskussjoni fi grupp (focus group) ser tkun kunfidenzjali, għaldaqstant huwa/hija mistenni/ja ma j/tiżvelax id-dettalji tal-parteċipanti l-oħrajn u/jew in-natura tad-diskussjoni ma' terzi persuni. Barra minn hekk, minhabba li ser ikun parteċipanti oħra preżenti, il-parteċipanti jistgħu jkun identifikkabli minn xulxin.

Wara l-focus group, l-informazzjoni miġbura tiġi traskritta u kodifikata mir-riċerkatriċi. Id-data miġbura ser tkun psewdonomiżzata waqt it-traskrizzjoni, jiġifieri ser jintużaw psewdonimi (ismijiet fittizji) sabiex id-data u identifikazzjoni tal-wild u tal-familja tiegħek tibqa' kunfidenzjali. Kwalunkwe data miġbura ser tiġi użata biss għall-iskopijiet ta' din ir-riċerka u kwalunkwe riżultat tar-riċerka minn dan l-istudju, ser tkun miżmuma b'mod psewdonomiżzat u d-data mhux proċessata ser tkun aċċessibbli biss għar-riċerkaturi imsemmija involuti direttament f'dan l-istudju. Kwalunkwe data miġbura ser tiġi distrutta fi żmien sentejn minn tmien ir-riċerka: kwalunkwe reġistrazzjonijiet salvati fuq kompjuter protett bil-password u kwalunkwe materjal traskritt se jiġihassar u jitqatta' jekk din tkun kopja stampata. ser jiġu mħassra u materjal traskritt ser jiġihassar u jitqatta' jekk din tkun kopja stampata. Sa dakinhar, kull materjal stampat ser ikun miżmum f'post imsakkar u sikur separatament minn kwalunkwe informazzjoni ta' identifikazzjoni.

Kif skont il-liġi tal- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, il-wild tiegħek ikollu/ha d-dritt li taċċessa, tirrettifika u tħassar kwalunkwe informazzjoni li tappartjeni lilu/lilha. Barra minn hekk, il-wild tiegħek kif ukoll inti, tistgħu tiddeċiedu li tirtiraw l-kunsens biex j/tipparteċipa, mingħajr bżonn li tiġi pprovduta ebda spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni negattiva. Jekk tiġi rtirata l-parteċipazzjoni tal-wild tiegħek, kwalunkwe data miġbura mingħandu/ha titħassar, sakemm dan ikun teknikament possibbli, sakemm it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixxkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka. Il-parteċipazzjoni tista' tiġi rtirata sa mhux aktar tard minn xahar mid-data tal-focus group. Dan huwa rikonoxxut fil-punt 2 tal-formola tal-kunsens u huwa konformi mal-eżenzjonijiet previsti fl-Artikolu 17(3)(d) tal-GDPR. Jekk ikun teknikament impossibbli li tħassar id-data tiegħek, din tinżamm f'forma anonima.

Mhux ser ikun hemm kumpens għall-parteċipazzjoni, ħlief li tgħin biex iġib għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-użu onlajn tat-tfal. Il-parteċipazzjoni ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. Madanakollu, ir-riċerkaturi ser ikollhom lista ta' servizzi ta' support disponibbli li jista' jsir użu minnha jekk jinqala l-bżonn. Sabiex tipparteċipa ser ikollok bżonn tiffirma formola ta' kunsens. Barra minn hekk, il-kunsens tiegħek ipprovdut billi tiffirma l-formola tal-kunsens jimplika wkoll li tiggarrantixxi li kwalunkwe ġenitur/tutor ieħor huwa wkoll fi qbil ma' din il-parteċipazzjoni.

Qed tiġi pprovdut/a b'kopja ta' din l-ittra ta' informazzjoni sabiex iżżommha għal referenza fil-futur. Jekk tkun meħtieġa aktar informazzjoni, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntattjana permezz ta' ittra elettronika jew b'telefonata.

Grazzi għall-attenzjoni mogħtija. Il-kontribut tiegħek huwa ta' valur għal dan l-istudju. Filwaqt li nirringrazzjawk bil-quddiem, nittamaw il-quddiem għall-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa



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### CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS – Focus Group with minors regarding use of the internet

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta will be conducting research looking into the prevalence and impact of abuse on children. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse, while exploring actions to be taken to keep children safe online and examining the nature of the online experience for children.

Thank you for considering allowing your child to take part in this research. Please fill in this form after reading the Information Sheet and the information listed here. If you have any questions, please ask the researchers before you decide to sign this consent form and participate in this research.

I, the undersigned, give my consent for my child to take part in the study conducted by Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept for my child to participate, or to refuse or stop participation without giving any reason and without any penalty. In the event that I choose to withdraw my child's participation from the study, any data collected from them will be erased if this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives and that withdrawal can be carried out by not later than one month from the date of the focus group. These rights also apply to my child's decision regarding their participation. If it is technically impossible to delete your child's data, this will be retained in an anonymised form.
3. Should my child participate, they may choose to decline to answer any questions asked.

4. I understand that I have been invited to give my consent for my child to participate in a one-time focus group in order to discuss their views and experience regarding online usage. I am aware that the focus group will take approximately one and a half hours and that it will take place at a convenient time and at a previously-agreed location. Furthermore, as this is a focus group, I understand that other participants will be present and that therefore participants will be identifiable to each other.
5. I am aware that, if myself and my child give our consent, the focus group will be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed). The audio recording will be stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer. The recording saved on the computer will be deleted two years from completion of the study, in approximately September 2025.
6. I am aware that upon transcription, any data will be pseudonymised, that is, my child's identity and that of my family will not be noted on transcripts or notes from the focus group, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my child's data to their identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researchers will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be stored in a secure place. Any material that identifies my child as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and destroyed within two years of completion of the study.
7. I give my consent for extracts of the focus group to be reproduced in the study outputs in a pseudonymised form (made-up name/code e.g. respondent A).
8. I am aware that my child's identity and that of my family and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
9. I am aware that my consent provided by signing this consent form also implies guaranteeing that any other parent/guardian is also in agreement.
10. I am aware that focus group discussions should be considered confidential and that my child should not disclose details of those participating and/or of the nature of discussions to others.
11. I understand that my child's participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. Notwithstanding, the researcher will have available a list of support services that can be made use of should this possibility arise.
12. I understand that there are no direct benefits to myself or my child from them participating in this study but that their participation can contribute towards the protection of children and the further understanding of online usage for minors.
13. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, myself and my child have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data that concerns my child to be erased, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives.
14. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a pseudonymised form and only the research team will have access to the raw data. Raw data will be erased within two years of completion of the study.
15. I have been provided with a copy of the information and recruitment letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form, which includes the contact details of the researcher.



I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Child's name

Parent/Guardian's name

Parent/Guardian's signature

Date

Name of Academic researcher: Dr Roberta Attard

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## Appendix R



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### FORMOLA TA' KUNSENS GHALL-ĠENITURI – Focus Group (Diskussjoni fi Grupp) għat-tfal dwar is-sigurtà tal-minorenni onlajn

Il-Fakultà għat-Tiżni tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta, qiegħda taħdem fuq riċerka bil-għan illi tħares lejn il-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li niġbru għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal, filwaqt li nesploraw azzjonijiet li għandhom jittieħdu biex it-tfal jinżammu sikuri onlajn u neżaminaw in-natura tal-esperjenza onlajn għat-tfal.

Grazzi talli qed tikkunsidra illi l-wild tiegħek j/tieħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka. Jekk jogħġbok imla dil-formola wara li taqra l-folja tal-informazzjoni u l-informazzjoni inkluża hawnhekk. Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet, jekk jogħġbok staqsi lir-riċerkaturi qabel tiddeċiedi li tiffirma dil-formola tal-kunsens u tipparteċipa fir-riċerka.

Jiena, is-sottoskritt/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi sabiex il-wild tiegħek j/tipparteċipa fir-riċerka immwettqa minn Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa. Din il-formola ta' kunsens tispeċifika t-termini tal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju ta' riċerka.

1. Irċevejt, qrajt u fhimt l-ittra ta' informazzjoni bid-dettalji ta' dan l-istudju; staqsejt għall-informazzjoni kollha li għandi bżonn biex nkun parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju u li l-mistoqsijiet kollha ġew risposti.
2. Jien qed nifhem illi l-għażla tiegħi dwar il-parteċipazzjoni tal-wild tiegħi hija b'mod volontarju u għandi d-dritt illi nagħzel illi j/tipparteċipa jew nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni mingħajr bżonn illi nagħti raġuni u mingħajr penali. F'każ illi nagħzel illi nirtira l-parteċipazzjoni, d-data tagħhom li tkun ingabret ser tiġi mħassra sa fejn hu teknikament possibbli u sa fejn it-tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel b'mod drastika il-kisba tal-għanjet tar-riċerka u nista' nirtira l-parteċipazzjoni sa mhux aktar tard minn xahar mid-data tal-focus group. Jekk ikun teknikament impossibbli li tħassar id-dejta tal-wild tiegħi, din tinżamm f'forma anonima.
3. Jekk nagħzel illi j/tipparteċipa, nifhem illi l-wild tiegħi j/tista' j/tirrifjuta li j/twieġeb għal kwalunkwe mistoqsijiet.
4. Jien konxju/a li l-parteċipazzjoni tal-wild tiegħi se tikkonsisti f'focus group li ser isir f'darba, sabiex jiġu diskussi l-fehmiet u l-esperjenza tagħhom dwar l-użu tal-internet (onlajn). Nifhem illi dan l-focus group ser jieħu madwar siegħa u nofs. Nifhem ukoll illi dan ser issejtni f'hin post konvenjenti li jkun miftiehem qabel. Barra minn hekk, peress

- illi din hija diskussjoni fi grupp (focus group), nifhem illi ser ikun hemm parteċipanti oħrajn preżenti u li għalhekk il-parteċipanti jistgħu jkunu identifikabbli minn xulxin.
5. Jiena konxju/a li, jekk nagħti kunsens, l-focus group jkun awdjo rreġistrat għal analiżi għall-iskop tar-riċerka u li dan ser tiġi transkritt. Ir-reġistrazzjoni tal-awdjo se tkun maħżuna f'fajl encrypted fuq kompjuter protett minn password. Se titfassar mill-cloud onlajn hekk kif tinħażen fuq il-fajl encrypted. Ir-reġistrazzjoni salvata fuq il-kompjuter ser tiġi mħassra fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka, bejn wiehied u ieħor f'Settembru 2025.
  6. Jiena konxju/a li fit-traskrizzjoni, d-data tal-wild tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tagħhom u tal-familja tagħhom ma tkunx innotata fuq traskrizzjonijiet jew noti mill-focus group bl-użu ta' kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jgħaqqdu d-data tiegħi mal-identità tal-wild tiegħi ser jinħażnu b'mod sigur u separat mid-data, b'mod kriptat (encrypted) fuq kompjuter tar-riċerkatur protett b'password u r-riċerkaturi biss ser ikollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat ser jinżamm f'post imsakkar u sikur separatament minn kwalunkwe informazzjoni ta' identifikazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal li jista' jidentifika lill-wild tiegħi bħala parteċipant f'dan l-istudju ser jinħażen b'mod sigur sa tmiem l-istudju u ser jinqered fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka.
  7. Nagħti kunsens sabiex siltiet mill-focus group jkunu jistgħu jiġu riprodotti fil-pubblikazzjoni tas-sejbiet b'mod anonimu, bl-użu ta' psewdonimu (isem magħmul jew kodiċi eż. parteċipant A).
  8. Jiena konxju/a li l-identità tal-wild tiegħi u tal-familja tiegħi u informazzjoni personali mhux ser jiġu żvelati fl-ebda publikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tirriżulta minn din ir-riċerka.
  9. Jiena konxju/a li l-kunsens tiegħi ipprovdut billi niffirma din il-formola jimplika wkoll li niggarrantixxi li kwalunkwe ġenitur/tutur ieħor huwa wkoll fi qbil ma' din il-parteċipazzjoni.
  10. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. Madanakollu, ir-riċerkaturi ser ikollhom lista ta' servizzi ta' support disponibbli li jista' jsir użu minnhom jekk jinqala l-bżonn.
  11. Nifhem ukoll illi ma hemmx benefiċċji diretti marbuta mal-parteċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju iżda l-parteċipazzjoni ser tikkontribwixxi lejn il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-għarfien dwar l-użu tal-internet (onlajn) għal-minorenni.
  12. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha li tiġi miġbura se tiġi mmaniġjata skont il-proviżjonijiet tal- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) u leġiżlazzjoni lokali, u jiena u l-wild tiegħi għandna d-dritt li naċċessaw, nirrettifikaw u fejn applikabbli nħassru data dwar il-wild tiegħi, sakemm it-tfassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka.
  13. Nifhem illi d-data miġbura ser tiġi miżmuma b'mod psewdonimizzata u li ser ikollhom aċċess għal data mhux ipproċessata r-riċerkaturi biss. Id-data mhux ipproċessata ser tiġi mħassra fi żmien sentejn minn tmiem ir-riċerka.
  14. Jiena ġejt ipprovdut/a b'kopja tal-ittra ta informazzjoni u nifhem li ser ningħata kopja ta din il-formola ta' kunsens, li tinkludi d-dettalji tar-riċerkaturi.

Jiena qrajt u fhimt id-dikjarazzjonijiet ta' hawn fuq u naqbel illi nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem tal-parteċipant

Firma tal-parteċipant

Data

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## Appendix S

### Interviews with Professionals re: convicted child abusers - Interview Guide

1. How are you are involved with people convicted of child abuse from a professional perspective?
2. Approximately how many clients convicted of child abuse get referred to your organisation over a period of for instance, a year?
3. With reference to the clients referred to your organisation, what type of abuse would they generally have been convicted of by Court?
4. How are your services accessed by persons convicted of child abuse? Are they referred by others or self-referred?
5. When someone is convicted of child abuse, which interventionst or rehabilitation is offered to them? What do you believe works most effectively?
6. Have you had clients who were unresponsive to the intervention and services given? If so, what factors do you think contributed to the lack of response to the intervention given?
7. What is done to address relapse? Once the programme is completed, are these services ended or are there follow-ups?
8. How would you improve on the current services given to persons convicted of child abuse?

### Intervisti ma' Professjonisti dwar persuni kkundannati li jabbużaw mit-tfal - Gwida għall-Intervisti

1. Kif int involut ma' nies misjuba ħatja ta' abbuż tat-tfal minn perspettiva professjonali?
2. Bejn wieħed u ieħor kemm-il klijenti misjuba ħatja ta' abbuż tat-tfal jiġu riferuti lill-organizzazzjoni tiegħek fuq perjodu ta' pereżempju, sena?
3. B'referenza għall-klijenti riferiti lill-organizzazzjoni tiegħek, għal liema tip ta' abbuż kienu ġeneralment ikunu nstabu ħatja mill-Qorti?
4. Kif jiġu aċċessati s-servizzi tagħkom minn persuni misjuba ħatja ta' abbuż tat-tfal? Huma riferuti minn oħrajn jew jirreferu lilhom infushom?

5. Meta xi hadd jinstab hati ta' abbuż fuq it-tfal, liema intervent jew riabilitazzjoni jiġi offrut lilhom? X'taħseb li jaħdem bl-aktar mod effettiv?
6. Kellek klijenti li ma rrispondewx għall-intervent u s-servizzi mogħtija? Jekk iva, liema fatturi taħseb li kkontribwew għan-nuqqas ta' rispons għall-intervent mogħti?
7. X'isir biex tiġi indirizzata r-rikaduta? Ladarba l-programm jitlesta, dawn is-servizzi jintemmu jew hemm segwitu?
8. Kif taħseb li jista' jittejjeb is-servizzi attwali mogħtija lil persuni misjuba hatja ta' abbuż fuq it-tfal?

## Appendix T

### Focus Group with Professionals re: Children Online Usage - Question Guide

1. Do you feel children are familiar with internet security and what behaviours are appropriate online?
2. What threats do you see in relation to children's use of the internet?
3. Do you feel parents are aware of how to be involved in their children's online usage to ensure safety?
4. Are you aware of any distressing experiences that children you have come across in your professional capacity may have had online? Are these frequent?
5. How do you feel that children can be better prepared on how to make healthy use of the internet?

### Focus Group ma' Professjonisti dwar l-Użu tat-Tfal Onlajn - Gwida tal-Mistoqsijiet

1. Tħoss li t-tfal huma familjari mas-sigurtà tal-internet u liema mgieba huma xierqa onlajn?
2. Liema theddid tara fir-rigward tal-użu tal-internet mit-tfal?
3. Tħoss li l-ġenituri huma konxji ta' kif għandhom ikunu involuti fl-użu onlajn tat-tfal tagħhom biex jiżguraw is-sigurtà?
4. Int konxju ta' xi esperjenzi ta' dwejjaq li t-tfal li ltqajt magħhom fil-kapaċità professjonali tiegħek setgħu kellhom online? Dawn huma frekwenti?
5. Kif tħoss li t-tfal jistgħu jkunu ppreparati aħjar dwar kif jagħmlu użu tajjeb mill-internet?

## Appendix U

### Focus Group with Children regarding Online Usage – Question Guide

Researcher:

Thank you agreeing to take part in this group. If you are here both you and your parents have agreed that you are happy to take part in this conversation about how young persons use the internet. I will be asking a few questions and anyone in the group can answer. I will give time to everyone who wants to give their opinion. I have to remind you about something important before we start. The most important rules of this group are that no one says who they saw taking part in this group or talks about what other people said outside this group. In fact, you have already signed a form about this. Another is that everyone has the right to their opinion and experience without the risk of being judged. So, what we ask of you is to respect others when they speak and not judge what they are saying. You are here to help us understand more how young persons use the internet and also what is positive and perhaps not so positive about this use. It is also really important for me to say that if you decide to talk about something that could be a crime, especially if this is something that is still happening now, I will have to report it to people in authority who can help us with it. Does anyone have anything they would like to ask? ... Okay we can start.

1. Do you have internet access at home? And out of home? Where (e.g. library, school)?
2. What devices do young people use most to access the internet?
3. What do young people use the internet for? (Motivations to use the internet)
4. In a day, how much time would you say people your age spend online? Do find that to be a reasonable amount?
5. How much time do you think young people spent on chat or instant messaging on a typical day, such as, for instance, yesterday? Why do they do this?
6. Which games do you think people your age like playing? Do they need to ask for they parents' consent to download them/play them?
7. How often do you think young people give out personal (self and parental) information on the internet? (Willingness to disclose information via internet) What kind of information may they be asked for?
  - full name, home address, date of birth, email address, school name, parents' names, parents' phone number, etc.
8. How probable do you think it that young people would be willing to give personal details if they were asked in order to access a social media page or read an article or proceed to the next level of game or if the right incentive came up? What details would they be willing to share? (Influence of an incentive on disclosure)



9. Did you ever see any posts or videos that shocked you or made you feel anxious? What were they about? How common do you think that this experience is with young people?
10. Cyberbullying is when someone did something online that was hurtful towards someone else. Over the last year, do you know of anyone who has been a victim of behaviours like these over the internet (e.g. lies or rumours being told about them, photos or videos of you that they posted or photoshopped without your consent, being told, being sent dirty things [embarrassing pictures such as private parts] to annoy you, etc.)? What happened and how do you think it affected them?
11. Sometimes, young people are exposed to pics and videos which are really sexual or very violent or they are made to take part in sexual conversations or requested to expose certain parts of their body over the internet? Have you heard about this and how do you think this affects young people?
12. Do you think that in general parents are involved in their children's use of the internet?
13. What do you think needs to happen for young persons to have a safer experience with the internet?

Riċerkatur:

Grazzi talli qbilt li tipparteċipa f'dan il-grupp. Il-fatt illi qiegħed/qegħda hawn ifisser li kemm inti kif ukoll il-ġenituri tiegħek qablu li inti kuntent/a li tiegħu sehem f'din il-konversazzjoni dwar kif it-tfal jużaw l-internet. Se nagħmel ftit mistoqsijiet u kullhadd fil-grupp jista' jwieġeb. Ser nagħti ħin lil kull min irid jagħti l-opinjoni tiegħu. Nixtieq infakkarkom dwar xi ħaġa importanti qabel ma nibdew. L-aktar regoli importanti ta' dan il-grupp huma li hadd ma jgħid lil min ra jiegħu sehem f'dan il-grupp jew jittellem dwar dak li qalu nies oħra barra dan il-grupp. Fil-fatt, diġà ffirmajtu formola dwar dan. Oħra hija li kulhadd għandu dritt għall-opinjoni u l-esperjenza tiegħu mingħajr ir-riskju li jiġi ġġudikat. Għalhekk, dak li nitolbuk huwa li tirrispettaw lill-oħrajn meta jittelmu u mhux tiġġudikawx dak li qed jintqal. Intkom qegħdin hawn biex tgħinnuna nifhmu aktar kif it-tfal jużaw l-internet u wkoll x'inhu pożittiv u forsi mhux daqshekk pożittiv dwar dan l-użu. Huwa importanti wkoll li ngħid li jekk xi hadd minnkomp jiddeċiedi li jittellem dwar xi ħaġa li tista' tkun reat, speċjalment jekk din hija xi ħaġa li għadha qed issejtn bħalissa, ikolli nirrapportaha lill-awtoritajiet li jistgħu jgħinuna biha. Xi hadd għandu xi ħaġa li jixtieq jistaqsi? ... Okay nistgħu nibdew.

1. Għandek aċċess għall-internet id-dar? U barra mid-dar? Fejn (eż. librerija, skola)?
2. Liema apparat jużaw l-aktar it-tfal biex jaċċessaw l-internet?
3. Għal xiex jużaw l-internet it-tfal? (Motivazzjonijiet biex tuża l-internet)
4. F'gurnata, kemm tgħid li n-nies tal-età tiegħek iqattgħu online? Taħseb li huwa ammont raġonevoli?
5. Kemm taħseb li ż-żgħażaġh iqattgħu fuq iċ-chat jew messaġġi istantanji f'gurnata tipika, bħal pereżempju, il-bieraħ? Għaliex jagħmlu dan?
6. Liema loġġob taħseb li n-nies tal-età tiegħek iħobbu jilagħbu? Jeħtieġ li jitolbu l-kunsens tal-ġenituri tagħhom biex iniżżluhom/jilgħabuhom?
7. Kemm-il darba taħseb li t-tfal jagħtu informazzjoni personali (tagħhom jew tal-ġenituri) fuq l-internet? (Rieda li tiżvela informazzjoni permezz tal-internet). X'tip ta' informazzjoni jistgħu jintalbu?  
- isem sħiħ, indirizz tad-dar, data tat-twelid, indirizz elettroniku, isem tal-iskola, ismijiet tal-ġenituri, numru tat-telefon tal-ġenituri, eċċ.
8. Kemm taħseb li huwa probabbli li t-tfal ikunu lesti li jagħtu dettalji personali jekk jintalbu biex jaċċessaw paġna tal-midja soċjali jew jaqraw artiklu jew jipproċedu għal-livell ta' loġġba li jmiss

jew jekk johroġ l-inċentiv it-tajjeb? Liema dettalji jkunu lesti li jaqsmu? (Influenza ta' inċentiv fuq l-iżvelar)

9. Qatt rajt xi posts jew filmati li ixxukkjawk jew iġieghlek tħossok ansjuż? Xi kienu dwar? Kemm taħseb li din l-esperjenza hija komuni maż-żgħażaġh?

10. Cyberbullying huwa meta xi hadd għamel xi haġa online li tista' tkun ta' ħsara lil xi hadd ieħor. Matul l-aħħar sena, taf b'xi hadd li kien vittima ta' imġieba bħal dawn fuq l-internet (eż. gideb jew xnigħat li jingħadu dwarhom, ritratti jew vidjows tagħhom li ġew ippubblikati jew ħadlu ritratti mingħajr permess, jew inqalulhom affarijiet maħmuġin, eċċ.)? X'għara u kif taħseb li affettwahom?

11. Xi drabi, it-tfal jiġu esposti għal ritratti jew vidjows li huma verament sesswali jew vjolenti ħafna jew huma magħmula biex jieħdu sehem f'konversazzjonijiet sesswali jew mitluba jesponu ċerti partijiet ta' ġisimhom fuq l-internet? Smajt dwar dan u kif taħseb li dan jaffettwa it-tfal?

12. Taħseb li b'mod ġenerali l-ġenituri huma involuti fl-użu tal-internet minn uliedhom?

13. X'taħseb li jeħtieġ li jiġri biex it-tfal ikollhom esperjenza aktar sigura bl-internet?

## Appendix V



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

### **Faculty for Social Wellbeing**

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#### **Principal Researcher**

Name: Dr Roberta Attard

Email: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Contact no: 2340 3518

#### **Research Support Officers**

Name: Ms Graziella Vella

Email: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

#### **Title of Research Study:**

Protecting our Children: Exploring and Preventing Child Abuse

Dear Participant,

We hope you are doing well.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your participation in this study. We appreciate your involvement and cooperation throughout this entire process.

We would like to remind you of the aims of this study which is being carried out by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta to examine the prevalence and impact of abuse on children. Through this research, we are seeking to bring insight on the protection of children and the prevention of child abuse.

This study was not anticipated to cause distress and the research questions were formatted in as sensitive a manner as possible; however, if your participation has led you to experience any distress or discomfort for whatever reason, then below I have included some information about services that offer free professional support that you might find helpful.

If you require any additional information or wish to report any concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact us, at our email or telephone contacts as indicated above.

Kind regards,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa

## Support Services



Emotions Anonymous (Caritas Malta)

Contact: 2590 6627 / 2219 9000

*Emotions Anonymous brings together people who are working towards recovery from emotional difficulties. It welcomes members from many walks of life and of diverse ages, economic status, social and educational backgrounds. The only requirement for membership is a desire to become well emotionally. The service is free.*

Kellimni.com

Contact: [www.kellimni.com](http://www.kellimni.com)

*Kellimni.com offers emotional support, free therapy sessions, important articles and more to help when you are feeling helpless in a situation. The service is free and works via online chat, email or through the service's mobile app.*



Iklin Parish Counselling Support Services

Contact: 21423003 or [parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org](mailto:parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org)

*A service run between the Department of Counselling, University of Malta and the Holy Family Parish Centre at Iklin and provides free counselling and psychosocial support to persons of all ages and all religious denominations.*



Olli (Richmond Foundation)

Contact: Call 1770 or chat on OLLI.Chat

*Free helpline available to anyone experiencing mental health difficulties. The service is run by professionals who are able to offer emotional support as well as practical guidance. The service runs 24 hours a day.*

SupportLine 179

Contact: 179

*Free helpline providing support, information about local social welfare and other agencies, as well as a referral service to individuals who require support. It is also a national service to individuals facing difficult times or a crisis. The primary mission is to provide immediate and unbiased help to whoever requires it.*



## Appendix W



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

### **Faculty for Social Wellbeing**

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#### **Riċerkatriċi Akkademika**

Isem: Dr Roberta Attard

Emejł: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt)

Tel: 2340 3518

#### **Riċerkaturi**

Isem: Ms Graziella Vella

Emejł: [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt)

Ms Olga Formosa

[olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

#### **Titlu ta' l-Istudju-Ricerka:**

Nipproteġu lit-tfal tagħna: Nesploraw u Prevenzjoni tal-Abbuż tat-Tfal

Għażiż parteċipant,

Nittama li tinstab tajba/tajjeb.

Nixtiequ niehdu din l-opportunità biex niringrazzjawk tal-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju. Napprezzaw l-involvement u l-kooperazzjoni tiegħek matul dan il-proċess kollu.

Nixtiequ infakruk l-għanijiet ta' 'dan l-istudju li qed isehh mill-Fakultà għat-Tisħiħ tas-Socjetà fl-Università ta' Malta sabiex tiġi eżaminata l-prevalenza u l-impatt tal-abbuż fuq it-tfal. Permezz ta' din ir-riċerka, qed infittxu li ngibu aktar għarfien dwar il-protezzjoni tat-tfal u l-prevenzjoni tal-abbuż tat-tfal.

Dan l-istudju ma kienx antiċipat li jikkawża diffikultà u l-mistoqsijiet tal-intervista ġew ifformattjati bl-iktar mod sensittiv possibbli; madankollu jekk id-diskussjoni wasslitek biex tesperjenza kwalunkwe tbatija jew skumdità għal kwalunkwe raġuni, hawn taħt inkludejna xi informazzjoni dwar servizzi li joffru appoġġ professjonali b'xejn li tista' 'ssib utli.

Jekk teħtieġ xi informazzjoni addizzjonali jew tixtieq tirrapporta kwalunkwe tħassib dwar dan l-istudju, jekk jogħġbok toqgħodx lura milli tikkuntattjana in-numri jew emejls indikati hawn fuq.

B'xewqat tajba,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa

## Servizzi ta' Sapport

Emotions Anonymous (Caritas Malta)

Kuntatt: 2590 6627 / 2219 9000



*Emotions Anonymous jiġbor flimkien nies li qed jaħdmu sabiex jirkupraw minn diffikultajiet emozzjonali. Huwa jilqa' membri minn bosta oqsma tal-ħajja u ta' etajiet, status ekonomiku, sfondi soċjali u edukattivi differenti. L-uniku rekwizit għas-sħubija hija x-xewqa li tħossok tajjeb emozzjonalment. Is-servizz huwa b'xejn.*

Kellimni.com

Kuntatt: [www.kellimni.com](http://www.kellimni.com)

*Kellimni.com joffri appoġġ emozzjonali, sessjonijiet ta' terapija b'xejn, artikli importanti u aktar biex jgħinu meta tkun qed issib diffikultà f'xi sitwazzjoni. Is-servizz huwa b'xejn u jaħdem permezz ta' chat online, email jew permezz tal-app tal-mobile.*



Servizzi ta' Sapport tal-Parroċċa tal-Iklin

Kuntatt: 21423003 / [parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org](mailto:parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org)



*Servizz immexxi bejn id-Dipartiment tal-Counselling, l-Università ta' Malta u ċ-Ċentru Parrokkjali Familja Mqaddsa fl-Iklin, li jipprovdi counselling u appoġġ psikosoċjali b'xejn lil persuni ta' kull età u kull denominazzjoni reliġjuża.*



Olli (Richmond Foundation)

Contact: Call 1770 or chat on OLLI.Chat

*Helpline b'xejn disponibbli għal kull min qed jesperjenza diffikultajiet ta' saħħa mentali. Is-servizz huwa mmexxi minn professjonisti li jistgħu joffru appoġġ emozzjonali kif ukoll gwida Prattika. Is-servizz disponibbli 24 siegħa kuljum.*

Linja ta' Sapport 179

Kuntatt: 179

*Din hija l-linja ta' għajnuna nazzjonali ta' Malta li tagħixxi biex ttiprovdi appoġġ, informazzjoni dwar il-benesseri soċjali lokali u aġenziji oħra, kif ukoll servizz ta' riferiment għal individwi li jeħtieġu appoġġ. Huwa wkoll servizz nazzjonali għal individwi li qed jiffaċċjaw żminijiet diffiċli jew kriżi. Il-missjoni primarja tagħhom hija li jipprovdu għajnuna immedjata u imparzjali lil kull min ikun jeħtieġha.*

fsws.gov.mt



## Appendix X



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

### **Faculty for Social Wellbeing**

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[www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing](http://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing)

### Places where you can find support

Thank you for your participation in this study.

We do not think that there will be any problems for you by taking part. But if something upsets you, we can help you sort out the problem. If you need to speak to someone else about what happened, we can help you do this. You will not need to pay anything for the help that you receive.

Best wishes

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella and Ms Olga Formosa

Email: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt), [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt) and [olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

Telephone no: 2340 3518

## Support Services



Emotions Anonymous (Caritas Malta)

Contact: 2590 6627 / 2219 9000

*Emotions Anonymous helps people who have difficulties with how they are feeling. It can help people of all ages and backgrounds. It offers free help.*

Kellimni.com

Contact: [www.kellimni.com](http://www.kellimni.com)

*Kellimni.com offers help to deal with feelings when someone is in a difficult situation. The service is free and you can use it via online chat, email or a mobile app.*



Iklin Parish Counselling Support Services

Contact: 21423003 or [parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org](mailto:parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org)

*A service that offers free counselling and support to persons of any age.*



Olli (Richmond Foundation)

Contact: Call 1770 or chat on OLLI.Chat

*This is a free helpline to help anyone with confusing difficulties. It can help deal with difficult feelings and is available anytime all day and night.*

SupportLine 179

Contact: 179

*Supportline is a free helpline that gives support and information places that can help handle difficult experiences. It offers immediate help to whoever requires it.*



## Appendix Y



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

### **Faculty for Social Wellbeing**

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[www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing](http://www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing)

### Postijiet fejn tista' ssib support

Grazzi talli pparteċipajt f'dan l-istudju.

Aħna ma naħsbux li se jkun hemm problemi għalik jekk int tiegħu sehem. Imma jekk hemm xi ħaġa li ddejjek, inkunu nistgħu ngħinuk issolvi l-problema. Jekk ikollok bżonn tkellem lil xi ħadd dwar dak li jkun ġara, inkunu nistgħu ngħinuk tagħmel dan. Ma jkunx hemm għalfejn tħallas.

B'xewqat tajba,

Dr Roberta Attard, Ms Graziella Vella u Ms Olga Formosa

Emejł: [roberta.attard@um.edu.mt](mailto:roberta.attard@um.edu.mt), [graziella.vella@um.edu.mt](mailto:graziella.vella@um.edu.mt) and [olga.formosa@um.edu.mt](mailto:olga.formosa@um.edu.mt)

Numru tat-telefon: 2340 3518

## Servizzi ta' Sapport



Emotions Anonymous (Caritas Malta)

Kuntatt: 2590 6627 / 2219 9000

*Emotions Anonymous jgħinu lil min għandu diffikultajiet dwar kif qed iħossu. Jgħinu lin-nies ta' kull età u sfond. L-għajnuna hija b'xejn.*

Kellimni.com

Kuntatt: [www.kellimni.com](http://www.kellimni.com)

*Kellimni.com joffru għajnuna meta tkun f'sitwazzjoni diffiċli. Is-servizz huwa b'xejn u tista' tużah permezz ta' chat online, emejll jew app tal-mowbajl.*



Servizzi ta' Sapport tal-Parroċċa tal-Iklin

Kuntatt: 21423003 / [parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org](mailto:parrocca.iklin@maltadiocese.org)

*Servizz li joffri pariri u appoġġ b'xejn lil persuni ta' kull età li jixtiequ sapport.*



Olli (Richmond Foundation)

Contact: Call 1770 or chat on OLLI.Chat

*Din hija helpline b'xejn biex tgħin lil kull min għandu diffikultajiet jew iħossu konfuż. Dan is-servizz jgħin biex jittratta sentimenti diffiċli u huwa disponibbli f'kull ħin il-gurnata u l-lejl kollu.*

Linja ta' Sapport 179

Kuntatt: 179

*Supportline hija helpline b'xejn li tagħti appoġġ u informazzjoni li jistgħu jgħinu biex timmaniġġa esperjenzi diffiċli. Joffru għajnuna immedjata lil min jeħtieġha.*

