

Femicides

Within the space of a few weeks Malta has witnessed the tragedy of a second femicide, and both reported as having occurred within the context of domestic violence. Both femicides were allegedly carried out by 'ex'-partners. One of the female victims was the intimate partner of the alleged perpetrator, and the other was a female relative of the intimate partner, who was the potential victim, and who also suffered serious injuries but survived. These females were allegedly victims of violence enacted by some-one whom they had been in a relationship with, either by virtue of a marriage/relationship or as a family member. These were not homicides carried out by criminals who were strangers to these women. These women were allegedly attacked by the very men that they had been involved with closely in relationships, in which relationships these women should have been treated with respect, equality and trust.

Femicides are one of the extreme forms of Domestic Violence. They are about a man having power and control. Studies have shown that in the majority of femicide cases there was some form of physical domestic violence, including threats in the relationship prior to the murder. The perpetrator had control over and dominated the victim. There may also be substance abuse involved on the part of the perpetrator which increases the risk factors. The perpetrator also had access to a weapon, and in the latest femicide, it was reported in the media that the perpetrator had stalked the victim; we hear that he had waited two hours for her until she arrived at the bus stop. Femicides are NOT a matter of just marital disputes where there is usually an equal relationship between the partners, or a 'build up from years of ill feeling and frustration in an unhappy marriage', as one writer wrote in the 'Comments' section of *The Times* of Tuesday 14th July.

It is tragic enough when victims fall prey to murder or death as a result of an attack by a stranger, or as a result of an accident or an act of nature. But the tragedy has an extremely ironic and more morbid twist when the killing is committed by a partner who is supposed to show reciprocal caring and protection towards you, as well as the other above-mentioned qualities, in an intimate relationship. These perpetrators have deprived these women of a fundamental human right-the right to life and the right to live in safety and security. These tragedies have a further manifold when you consider the far-reaching effects, such as the psychological trauma and shock they have on the children and relatives of these victims. These perpetrators have deprived these children of a mother, or as in one case a grandmother, to grow up with, to love them, care for and nurture them; and of a father to be able to do these things as well-but the fathers end up in jail. The relatives of the victims are also deprived of a daughter, granddaughter, sister, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, niece, cousin, or wife, mother, grandmother, as the case may be, to relate to for the rest of their lives.

And yet, in spite of all this, no-one in the media or in authority, nor the public have made an outcry against these killings to say 'zero tolerance to violence'. Out of approximately 11 readers who sent in their comments in relation to Monday's and Tuesday's *The Times* of last week, only one acknowledged these two incidents as 'acts of violence'. These femicides must not occur - they must be prevented. Why has there not been such

a reaction? Is it because there is a lack of awareness as to what these crimes really were, or because of the old myth that these occurred in a 'private' context, a 'family dispute' and so it is not a matter of public concern?

One wonders if these women had sought protection before and didn't receive it. One of the most effective ways to prevent femicides is early intervention with victims of violence who are at risk. Therefore it is imperative that law enforcement authorities act on the reports of victims. One also wonders if there are discussions out there amidst the public to the effect of "I wonder what these women did to provoke these men doing such things". I truly hope that this is not the case, but if it is, the message needs to continue to be given loud and clear to Maltese society and society at large that the victims are NOT to blame. It is the perpetrators that need to take responsibility and seek help for their controlling violent behaviour.

What both cases also had in common was that both females who were targeted to be the victims were estranged from their partners-they had separated. Research and statistics show that femicides as an extreme form of domestic violence mainly occur during the phase of separation or divorce. This is because, as stated before, the perpetrators in such abusive relationships have issues of control, and they may also 'suffer' from morbid jealousy; and so the motive for the killing can be, 'if I can't have her no-one else can'. They cannot accept that these women no longer want to be in a relationship with them due to the violence and control they have experienced in some form or other in the relationship. These perpetrators may also have some form of psychopathic tendencies, or borderline personality disorder. Whatever the reason or motive for the murders, they needed help, and they needed to have taken the responsibility for seeking this help. Had they done this, these femicides may also have been prevented.

If you are a man who feels that you might be a perpetrator-who has controlling behaviour towards your partner through physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and or financial abuse, you need to seek help. You may start by talking to your Doctor or going to see a Psychologist or Psychiatrist who may refer you to the Perpetrators' Services of Agenzija Appogg, or you can call Agenzija Appogg on 2295 9000 or come yourself and ask to be seen by someone from this service.

For the victims of violence, if you feel at risk or in danger you must tell someone-a trusted member of the family and/or a close friend and seek immediate help, and make a report to the Police. You can also call on the above-mentioned number or come to Agenzija Appogg and ask for someone from the Domestic Violence Service.

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