

Men, equality and violence

As Malta reels from the brutal murder of Paulina Dembska, society has been forced to ask itself uncomfortable questions about what could have led to such a horrific act. Opinions differ. Attempted explanations ranged from blaming mental health to substance abuse to inquiring about the alleged murderer's upbringing and past experiences. Undoubtedly, there are often multiple factors that come together in episodes of extreme violence. It would, however, be a grave mistake to overlook the social and structural factors that result in the murder of women by men.

The discussion on whether we can define Paulina's murder as femicide reveals how hard it is for many to accept that gender inequality and misogyny exist, and that they have a real, sometimes tragic, impact on our lives. Paulina was not only murdered by a person totally unknown to her, but she was also allegedly sexually assaulted and raped by a perpetrator with a history of sexual harassment on other women, as reported in the media. This does not preclude that mental health or substance abuse could have contributed to this specific act of extreme violence, but it does show that this was a clear-cut case of femicide. Indeed, cases of violence against women are frequently compounded by mental health issues and substance abuse. However, no amount of contributory factors can erase the unambiguous reality that this was a femicide – Paulina was murdered simply because she was a woman.

And Paulina was not alone in experiencing violence because of her gender. We know that the absolute majority of victims of rape, sexual and domestic abuse are women and girls, most often at the hands of men who are their relatives, partners or friends. We know that most women, at some point in their life, are victims of sexual harassment and sexist abuse at the workplace and in public spaces. Attempting to explain all this by looking at the individual experience of the perpetrators will certainly not suffice to explain why it is primarily women who are victims and men who are perpetrators. This can be no coincidence. That's why we are compelled to look at gender inequality in our society to understand and address violence against women.

Notwithstanding the legal, economic and social advancement of women, our society remains a patriarchal one. Men have more resources, more power and a higher status, from politics to the economy and media representations, to peer groups and the family. Gender roles and stereotypes are still prevalent in both formal and informal settings, and models of manhood and womanhood serve as blueprints to what men and women should be like – with manhood often associated with power and domination, and womanhood associated with caring for others and pleasing men.

It is precisely the theme of power and control that underpins femicide and beyond. Dynamics of power and control are present in cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexist abuse, which is most often behaviour by men who think they have a right to exercise power and control over women. This is also closely linked to misogyny, the hatred or contempt of women. Historically, unequal power relations between different social groups – such as racism, sexism or homophobia – have been

accompanied by feelings of hatred and contempt against people in groups experiencing inequality. Femicide is only the extreme end of this wide spectrum where power, control and misogyny manifest themselves in a myriad of ways.

Recognising that Paulina's murder was femicide, and recognising that gender inequality exists, is not the same as collectively blaming men. Patriarchy is built on ideas and structures of inequality that transcend the individual, but which individual men and individual women absorb and reproduce. In practice, this leads to women experiencing various forms of inequality, including gender-based violence, but it also leads to many men being pressured to conform to an idea of manhood that they are not comfortable with.

Bringing down patriarchy is about challenging gender inequality in all its forms rather than apportioning blame. I am convinced that almost all men are totally appalled at Paulina's murder and that most men maintain respectful and loving relationships with women. But gender inequality has deep roots. It is so woven in our worlds and lives that we often find it hard to identify and tackle such roots. Both women and men, but especially men, need to question, identify and publicly challenge ideas, practices and roles that grant men certain privileges, but also place on them certain pressures and expectations. Ultimately, patriarchy prevents all of us from living in a society that allows us to feel free, safe and fulfilled.

To win against violence on women, we need men as partners, be they fathers, husbands, brothers, relatives, friends, in the fight for gender equality.

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