

Naming, Counting and Ending Femicide

In a span of a few weeks, two femicides happened in Malta. Paulina Dembska, a 29-year-old Polish woman, was sexually abused and murdered, allegedly by a man unknown and unrelated to her, while feeding cats in Sliema, and Rita Ellul was killed, allegedly strangled by her partner in Gozo. This is in addition to the 10 female victims of homicide, of whom 60% were victims of intimate partner femicide between 2014 and 2018, according to the Malta Police Force.¹

*“Femicide is the killing of women and girls because of their gender. It can include intentional homicides, such as the killing of women by their current or former partners, as well as unintentional killings, such as the death of a woman undergoing an unsafe abortion.”*² In 2020, 444 women across 10 EU Member States were killed by their intimate partners, according to official data gathered by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).³

In order that this scourge is recognised and addressed there is a need to collect all relevant data. In fact, the 2011 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, raised public awareness on the need for data collection on femicide in EU countries. Although there is no specific definition of femicide in the Istanbul Convention, *“Article 11 requires states to collect disaggregated statistical data on all forms of violence against women”*, while *“Article 46 also defines aggravating circumstances or contexts that might lead to femicide in intimate partner violence.”*⁴

In this context, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) outlined a set of variables for EU member states to gain more understanding on the subject and the context behind it. Such variables include demographic information on victims and perpetrators, the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the context of the killing, such as whether there were any

¹ EIGE, 2021 - Measuring femicide in Malta

² <https://eige.europa.eu/news/femicide-name-it-count-it-end-it>

³ Ibid

⁴ EIGE, 2021 - Measuring femicide in the EU and internationally: an assessment

child witnesses, and the presence of any gendered risk factors such as dependence or previous violence.⁵

In addition, the EIGE provided recommendations for the European Commission, for the EU Member States, and the UK. The EIGE advised that a common EU-wide definition of femicide would help to formally identify gender-based killings, which currently vanish into female homicide statistics. Moreover, knowing the motivations and circumstances behind killing women and girls, can help protect potential victims and punish and deter perpetrators. Besides, the more data available on the killings of women and girls, the more likely it is to identify femicides. The more EU Member States collect the same type of data, the more information can be gathered on the motivations and circumstances behind these femicides.

Malta has recognised this requirement and more in that work is under way to strengthen the recognition of femicide in the Maltese Criminal Code and protect the dignity and rights of all women. This initiative was undertaken one month after the death of Paulina Dembska and two years after the death of Chantelle Chetcuti with the drafting of a bill that was discussed in Parliament. This bill aims to include 'femicide' in the criminal code and encourage the judiciary to take into account violence against women, because they are women, when handing down sentences for the already-existing criminal offence of wilful homicide.

This development is in line with the report published by the Women's Rights Foundation and the University of Malta, as part of the FEM-UNITED project which brings together organisations from Cyprus, Malta, Spain, Portugal, and Germany, to improve the response to domestic violence and intimate partner violence. The comparative report highlights key findings across the five EU countries, including the fact that while 60% of all identified victims were killed by a current or former intimate partner.⁶

As stated in the text of the Istanbul Convention, violence against women is the consequence of historical discrimination against women and persisting inequalities between women and men in society. In order to raise awareness on this fact and in the context of the murder of Paulina Dembska, in January 2022, the NCPE organized an online forum to discuss the

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/news/femicide-name-it-count-it-end-it>

⁶ https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/490110/FINALREPORT-FEMUnitedCountryReport-MALTA.pdf

different forms of gender inequality and the link between violence and inequality. This forum was broadcasted on the NCPE Facebook Page. Throughout the past years, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) also addressed the scourge of gender-based violence by carrying out various awareness-raising campaigns on both traditional and social media.

Moreover, the NCPE is empowered by Chapter 456 of the Laws of Malta to investigate complaints of alleged sexual harassment in the workplace. In this regard, victims are also encouraged to report their cases to the NCPE to curtail such inequalities and violence.

Furthermore, the NCPE assists organisations in drafting their sexual harassment and equality policies and awards the NCPE Equality Mark Certification to organisations that safeguard gender equality and make the workplace safe for all employees.

Sexual abuse is an area of great concern to all and thus it is the responsibility of all of us, male or female, to work to eradicate such a scourge from our society.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2276 8200 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.

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