

Empowering survivors of violence

The roots of violence against women lie in the historical imbalance of power between men and women in society. Inequalities between genders may thus increase the risk of acts of violence against women and inhibit the ability of those affected to seek protection. In effect, the European Commission points out, that gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of inequalities between women and men.

In order to further awareness on gender-based violence, since 1991, the 16 Days of Activism campaign has been internationally organised between 25th November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and 10th December, Human Rights Day. A wide range of initiatives are carried out to reiterate the message of zero tolerance to domestic and gender-based violence. Various activities have also been organised in Malta to support this initiative on a national level.

The main focus has been on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the subsequent work being undertaken to implement its provisions. This Convention defines violence against women as *“a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”*. Statistical data shows that one in three women in the EU has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15.

The states that have ratified the Convention are bound to offer protection and support to survivors of violence and their families for them to continue with their life in a safe environment. This is where professional support and empowerment have to be available for both the survivors of domestic violence as well as their families who are striving to protect themselves and their children on a daily basis.

Deciding to report incidents of violence to the police is not easy, especially in cases of domestic violence. In many cases, it can take years for a victim to draw enough courage to go to report abuse to the police. Doing so, is to admit that the person close to you, instead of loving you, is abusing you. On the other hand, it can be one way of starting on a new life path away from such a harmful relationship. The police officer at the station can truly prove to be the much needed support for the abused woman.

Reporting to the police means court proceedings and for a woman financially dependent on her aggressor, legal fees can be unaffordable. Access to and provision of, legal aid are imperative for the survivor to seek redress in court.

Staying in or leaving an abusive relationship is a complex decision for both the victims as well as their family. In cases, where the survivor, together with her children, has to leave

the home, shelters can be the space they need to find peace and safety; and start working on rebuilding their lives with the support of the social workers.

Survivors may find it challenging to cope with intense, often negative, feelings that can plague them long after the abuse has ended, and their ability to find peace and happiness in life may be affected. The NGOs working in this field are doing sterling work by offering advocacy services and support to empower survivors to secure their rights in a community context and to make them feel that they are not alone. The end goal is to enable survivors to make sound personal decisions for themselves and their children. Therapy helps survivors express and process difficult emotions associated with the abuse, develop self-care strategies for managing moments of emotional overwhelm, and learn to trust again.

Research shows that survivors of domestic violence can face tremendous barriers to achieve financial literacy and security, especially upon leaving the protection of a shelter. This is why fostering economic empowerment for women is essential to be better able to establish the stability and independence needed to detach themselves from abusive relationships and move forward. Through professional support offered in the shelters and by social workers at Agenzija Appogg, survivors are given information on how to enhance their economic independence, by seeking further education and training to upgrade their skills to be in a position to pursue employment. Economic independence does not only give survivors economic freedom but it also enhances their dignity and self-esteem, and enables them to take control over their lives working for a better future.

It is in this context that the state has recognised its obligation to protect victims of violence concretising its commitment in 2014 by ratifying the Istanbul Convention and enacting it as part of domestic law. The inter-ministerial committee, subsequently set up, identified the provisions that needed to be amended or introduced, and presented a set of vast legislative amendments in 2015.

The Government thus embarked upon a process towards an overhaul of the legislative and structural framework regarding domestic violence and violence against women and girls. A Bill, recently presented in Parliament, will repeal and recast the Domestic Violence Act into the Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence Act, in order to strengthen the Domestic Violence Commission and establish the basic principles against domestic violence. This Bill, spearheaded by the Ministry for Social dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties, will amend a number of laws, including the Criminal Code, Civil Code and the Police Act, amongst others, to ensure that the crimes contemplated by the Istanbul Convention are adequately reflected in national legislation and the appropriate remedy specified.

Such legislative developments as well as the services offered to survivors of domestic violence are fundamental to further empower them to leave abusive relationships. However, these developments will prove stronger still if embedded in a wider campaign and initiatives to bring about equality between women and men in Maltese society.

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