

## **Call it by its name - femicide**

We find ourselves, for the third time this year, mourning the death of a woman who was murdered because she was a woman. Calling these murders by their name – femicide – is of utmost importance if we want to truly address the root causes of violence against women, that in its most extreme form ends in their killing.

It cannot be a coincidence that the absolute majority of persons grievously harmed or murdered by their intimate partner or former partner are women. Even if uncomfortable or unsettling, for both women and men, we have to face reality: we still live in a patriarchal society that instils the perception, sometimes even the expectation, that men are to exert power and control over women. These ideas permeate all levels of society, from the individual to the family, to the media, the workplace and the different institutions.

Blaming patriarchy is not the same as collectively blaming men for the murder of Bernice Cassar and for violence against women more generally. It is about firmly pointing to the need for societal, systemic and structural changes in order to prevent more femicides and violence against women. Unfortunately, expressions of national grief and strong condemnations alone won't cut it.

The experiences of women going through varying degrees of violence and abuse, and often not finding the support they desperately need, have always been there for us to listen to and learn from. However, the reactions to these experiences are sometimes a continuation of the same pattern of violence and abuse – the stories of women are minimised, ridiculed or dismissed.

It is heart wrenching to think that Bernice Cassar passed the last months of her life pleading for help. She was scared that her estranged husband could harm her or her children. Multiple reports had been filed up to the day before her murder, and a protection order issued by court was ignored, seemingly with impunity.

Something went very wrong and, alas, it was no exception. Following the femicide of Bernice Cassar, social media was awash with stories of women recounting similar experiences. They had asked for support and for actions against perpetrators but hit a wall made of legal and administrative obstacles. From painful delays in courts and by law enforcement, to reports not being taken with the seriousness they merit, women are made to feel powerless by the same system that should be empowering them to leave abusive situations and continue with their life peacefully.

It would not be correct to say that nothing has been done. There have been notable legal improvements along the years, such as strengthening of laws against gender-based violence via the transposition of the Istanbul Convention and the introduction of the concept of femicide following the murder of Paulina Dembska last January. Generally, the political message has also been one of unequivocal condemnation of violence against women.

Clearly, this is not enough. Although much has been done to strengthen the institutions, there are still glaring deficiencies in the implementation of the law and gaping fissures in the resources and knowledge of institutions such as social support services, the police force and the judiciary, particularly in the need for them to work together and support each other to reach the common goal. Investing in these institutions and equipping them with the tools needed to collaboratively and effectively prevent and address violence against women is crucial to making Malta a safe place for women. There is need to collectively guide women in these difficult situations through the process of regaining a peaceful life. To this end, an external audit of the processes, procedures and approaches employed by these different institutions responsible for tackling violence against women, could go a long way in identifying what exactly needs to change and how. The implementation of a holistic approach to eradicating this scourge from our society is vital.

However, it cannot stop at that. Fully resourced, knowledgeable, and efficient institutions, whilst essential, will still not eliminate violence against women and femicide. Society, meaning each and everyone one of us, needs to change too. To tangibly understand how a patriarchal social system works we can simply take a quick look at social media since it opens a window onto some of the most negative expressions of power and control that exist in our society. Although not exclusively suffered by women, women in particular face regular harassment, attempts at public humiliation, insults and threats on social media platforms. On the same day that Bernice Cassar was murdered, a female sports journalist shared the sexist and disgusting insults thrown at her by mostly male commentators. All this is, of course, not confined to social media. Social media mirrors, and conceivably exacerbates, the patriarchal attitudes that exist on the ground, in the lived experiences of women and men in our country.

Change is possible, but only after we recognise the problem and confront it. With deep and holistic institutional changes, together with a widespread political, social, and cultural commitment against abuse and in favour of equality, we can defeat violence against women. Only then will justice for Bernice and all other victims of femicide and domestic abuse be served.