

By Raphael Vassallo



We need to stop and think

CONTROL

Yesterday, the University of Malta announced it would be hosting the first 'European Observatory on Femicide'. The launch took place against the backdrop of a number of much-publicised (often very violent) crimes perpetrated against women in Malta, as well as a global campaign against violence on women in general. Why is there so much of a spotlight on this issue now? Is it because of a reported increase in actual cases?

There is no evidence for any increase in the numbers of women killed. But there is more awareness today. What is so upsetting, or heart-breaking, to me is that femicide is often so preventable. Femicide is the killing of a woman because she is a woman. The vast majority of cases – though not all – concern intimate partner violence. It can also refer to deaths caused by FGM (female genital mutilation) or sexual assault: as in, not by an intimate partner. Nonetheless, the vast majority of cases are intimate-partner killings. Women who live in an abusive relationship, and are then murdered by their intimate partners. And it's so preventable, because... we know what happens: it's not as though suddenly, out of the blue, a woman gets killed. We know that there are these abusive relationships, and that a number of them are going to end in murder. We need to take steps before. One good thing that is happening, however, is that the media seems to be finally paying the issue the attention it deserves...

At the risk of widening the discussion beyond domestic violence, would political assassinations targeting women also be included in the definition? To mention one case: British MP Jo Cox was stabbed to death shortly before the UK's Brexit referendum in 2016...

[Nodding] ... Yes, and she was stalked by her murderer before. Stalking is one of the forms of violence against women that is specifically mentioned in the Istanbul convention. For while violence against women has always been a reality... the 'methods' have changed. Partly as a result of social media. As times change, the number of ways in which I can hurt you... that I can cause you pain, suffering, torture, whatever... have changed. It's still the same thing. It's still violence against women. But the methods have changed, and we have to keep up with them.

Sticking to 'intimate-partner violence' for now: we've seen a few local cases and they seem to follow a certain pattern: often, for instance, the murder would be occasioned by jealousy of a very possessive nature... Indicating that the killer somehow perceives the victim as his 'property'. Would you agree?

Sadly, a lot of the cases of intimate-partner femicides occur when the woman leaves, or is in the process of leaving. We recognise that there

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is this coercive pattern: people don't wake up one morning and say, 'Oh I think I'll kill my wife today'. There is a pattern of control and coercion. Often, the most dangerous time is when the 'controller' – in 99% of cases, the man – is about to lose that control. And the ultimate form of control is, well... [trails to silence]

On the subject of 'control'... traditionally, women in Malta tended to be completely dependent on their husbands until fairly recently. So could it be that part of this violence could be explained by a 'refusal' to accept changes that allow women to take more control of their lives?

You used the word 'dependent'...

another word is 'submissive'. I'm sorry to have to say this, but our culture is still a patriarchal culture, and generally – generally, let me stress – still attaches more importance, validity and worth to men than women. I say 'generally' because there are situations, in a relationship between a man and a woman, where the woman will have more power. She might have a higher level of education, independent wealth, etc. But generally, our society gives power to the man. We have been brought up in this, whether we like it or not. As I tell my students: we have absorbed it, by virtue of being brought up in this society. And to be perfectly clear: it's not just in Malta. It's not because we're backward, or anything like that. I'm a member of WAVE [Women Against Violence in Europe], which is a Europe-wide network, and vice-President of the monitoring committee of the Istanbul Convention, so my experience is wider than Malta. We – society in general – have absorbed this. I, as a woman, will 'act like a woman' in certain circumstances. And 'acting like a woman' means certain things. And you, as a man – even if you resist it, like I do – will 'act like a man' in certain circumstances. You will find yourself just slipping into the role that society told you you should be taking. So in many relationships, there is still this feeling that, in order to 'fit', you have to act the role given to you by society: as a man, or as a woman. Both of these roles have to change. One cannot change without the other.

What sort of effect does this society-imposed gender role have in cases of domestic violence?

That women would be submissive or passive, for instance. They'd say: 'What can you do? Doesn't everyone have a cross to bear?' etc. Then they'd get together and grumble – 'Look what he did to me', etc. – but take no action. Why? Before, it was because in most cases, women were entirely dependent on men. What could they do? And before, there was nowhere to go. And before, there was no awareness: no voice telling people: 'Hey! You don't deserve to be treated this way. You have rights. You are worthy of being a human being. And human beings should not be treated in this way'. There was none of that...

This was, as you say, 'before'. But a lot has surely changed since then (if not in attitude, at least in recognition and rights)...

We just published a report, and one of the things we found in this research – done now: not 20 or 40 years ago – was that we still have women saying things like: they were raped by their intimate partner, and they didn't realise it was rape. They were forced to have sex when they didn't want to, but they didn't consider it 'rape', because: well, he was their husband or the boyfriend. [Pause] Of course it's rape! But still, to this day, there

is this misconception. Many women have absorbed it. Now, we tell them: No. You have a right to say: 'Not tonight, Josef'... ('au lieu de Josephine', in case I'm misunderstood). You have the right to say no, and it should be respected. You have the right to go out and meet your friends. You have the right to meet your mother or your sister, or whatever. You have a right to have a mind of your own, an opinion of your own... to be financially independent, if circumstances permit... you have a right to these things.

'Financial independence' is in fact one of the areas where cultural perceptions of women have changed. But isn't it also true that 'financial control' is another form of bullying/abuse directed at women?

There is what is known as 'economic' or 'financial' abuse – it's called by various names, but basically we're talking about money – in that, sometimes, women will have no idea what their family's financial situation even is. They are given so many euros a month, and that is what they deal with. They don't know if they have a million euros in savings somewhere; or if they have 100 euros. They know nothing about that, because the husband keeps the information from them. And when they try to get it, they are told to shut up. That is a form of abuse, because if you are living in a partnership with somebody, you have a right to know these things...

Coming back to something you said earlier: about how 'preventable' femicide is... what could be done about it in practical terms? The Observatory launched yesterday, for instance: how will it function?

This is the European Observatory on Femicide, which the University Rector very kindly accepted to have hosted within our University. It is the result of a four-year EU Cost Action: a source of EU funding for networking of researchers. One of the objectives of this Cost Action was to launch an observatory at the end of it. We're starting very small: there's me, and a part-time researcher. We also have an advisory board which is made up of members from various European countries where the research was conducted. The idea is to have a focal point in every EU country, in order to gather data, harmonise data... because one of the problems we face is that different countries supply different data relating to homicide. All countries report homicides, and almost all countries segregate cases by gender. But they don't all give you the context. They might not specify whether the killer was an intimate partner, because they don't specify the relationship to the perpetrator. You will know, for instance, that '12 women were killed in four years'... but it's not enough to draw too many conclusions. Where were they killed? How? We know that most femicides occur indoors rather than outdoors, whereas many other categories of

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arms in the house, for instance... in case of a shooting, naturally? Was the victim known to social services? In the UK, for example, they have 'domestic homicide reviews'. Every domestic violence fatality will be reviewed: they will go through it, bit by bit: how did it happen, where did it come from, what was the history of the people involved... to learn. To be able to say: 'If we had intervened better at this (or that) point, could this have been avoided?' This is what we want to do. We want to prevent by looking into what went wrong.

In the meantime there is a small paradox staring us in the face. We're talking about (let's face it) rather primitive cultural attitudes towards women, at a time when Malta is also trumpeting its huge advancements in gender equality and civil rights. So when it comes to domestic violence: could it simply be that we have not progressed as much as we think we have?

murder happen outdoors. But we don't have this kind of information, and we need it. In Malta, the situation is perhaps a little better because the numbers are small. The numbers... not the proportion per 100,000. But the actual figures are low, and this means we can research each case, insofar as the information is available.

How would you approach an individual case? What sort of data would you be looking for?

We would want to know: were there any reports to the police of previous violence directed at the victim? If so, did the police take any action? Were the police aware that there were fire-

I can't say that there hasn't been great improvement, because there has. We still have the old services, some of which were very good. And we now have new services which have cropped up, sometimes to cater for very specific, specialist needs. And yet, a piece of research I did in 2003/4, and a piece of research that was done in 2016, yielded the same results. In 2003/4, I was looking at the experiences of women who had experienced domestic violence. The '2013 report was by SOAR – a survivor-led service, which means that the research was actually carried out by survivors of domestic violence. And what emerges is that the things women were saying in 2003/4, were still being said in 2016. For example: with the police, it's pot luck. If you're lucky, you will get someone who is sensitive, able to listen and who will acknowledge your needs. Often, however, you will not be lucky. 'Pot luck' is not good enough. I praise those who are good, but it's not

enough to have to be lucky...

Other institutions could be cited at this point. The judiciary, for instance. I know it's a generalisation, but I get the impression that judges and magistrates tend towards leniency when sentencing domestic violence cases. You often see reports of suspended sentences (sometimes for quite serious offences) and – to generalise even further – I have noticed this tendency coming from women magistrates as much as from men. Is this a concern?

The judiciary is a concern. What you are implying without actually saying, is that: 'Hey, it's women, too, who discriminate against women in such cases'...

Yes, to be frank that was the intended implication...

... and the reality is that women judges – just like all women – have 'absorbed it', too. One thing I tell my students is that, part of what I think

is so important, is to make people stop and think. To make people not just replicate, and not just operate along the tracks they were set off onto... but to stop and think, and ask themselves: 'What am I doing here? Are these values I have absorbed valid for me today?' When I was a child, Baby Jesus used to give us presents at Christmas. We didn't have Father Christmas: that's how old I am. We had Baby Jesus, who gave us presents at Christmas. We knew this to be true. We would write little notes to Baby Jesus, put into the manger in the crib... and they would disappear, because 'angels' would come down from heaven and take our notes to Baby Jesus. Then he'd send the angels with our presents. We knew this was true. One year, we received a present that had 'Made in Sweden' stamped on it. We were a bit perplexed by this, because we thought our presents were made in Heaven, not Sweden. But we eventually figured it out: what really

happened was that Baby Jesus had sent his angels to Sweden to get the wood – because Sweden has trees – then they made the present with the wood from Sweden. OK? That was with the knowledge I had at the time. We made sense of it with what we had. Now, I'm older and I know that – obviously – my parents bought the presents. So with my broader understanding, things which were once understood one way, are understood in another, completely different way. And many things that have a huge impact on our lives – like gender: gender has a huge impact on our lives... and it has such a huge impact because we never stop to try and understand it. We just roll along with it. So we need to – each and every one of us, but especially those who wield influence – stop and think. To re-examine things that have always taken for granted... not because we're mean, horrible nasty people... but because we've never stopped to think about it.