The Many Shades of Domestic Violence

Today, the 25th of November, is the international day for the elimination of violence against women, which would include domestic violence. And in Malta, as elsewhere, we have our fair share of violence occurring within the domestic sphere. Hence this article…. And hence me writing it, as the Chairperson of the Commission on Domestic Violence...

But what aspect of domestic violence can I write about in 800 words? The terrible trauma that it brings with it? The way the women feel when having to leave their own homes for their own safety? The effect on children of witnessing the abuse on their parent? The ‘system’ that they sometimes feel further abuses them? The problems they may encounter with the legal/judicial system? With the police? With their families? Their employers? Housing? Society?

For domestic violence is indeed a terrible thing! It involves being abused by someone you love, someone you have chosen as your life partner, someone you have chosen to trust. The betrayal felt by many women who experience this form of abuse is already pain enough. But of course that’s only the beginning…. Domestic violence takes various forms – there is the physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse… the list goes on. People on the receiving end of domestic violence are made to feel worthless, incapable, powerless, isolated, alone with their terrible secret. Their self esteem is destroyed, they lose their sense of self and their identity. Many women (for most of these injuries are inflicted by men on women) tell us that the emotional scars take even longer to heal than the physical ones… Domestic violence is connected to issues of power and control – one partner uses abuse to instill fear, thereby controlling the other...

As one woman once told me about four years ago: “We are terrified and we go into an institute to escape. The family end up not bothering with you because they say you forgive them. You can’t not forgive them because you have no choice. Even if you have hatred in your eyes and your heart you can’t not tell him you love him because you will be terrified. And you find no help from the justice system, from your family, the neighbours insult you. And your children grow up seeing their father abuse you and they start to do the same. These things are a very low priority… We are ignored. You are insulted from all sides.”

Or should I take a more positive angle and talk about all the services which exist and the advances that have occurred in this field since then?

For in Malta we do have various services which have developed over the years to help people in these situations, though, as always, there is still more to be done…. The first port of call is often Supportline 179, a free and confidential 24-hour telephone helpline that people can call for help and advice. From there, should they wish to be referred for further help, they are passed on to the Domestic Violence Unit within Agenzija Appogg, where social workers can give them the help and support they require. We also have 2 emergency shelters, Merhba Bik (run by the sisters of the Good Shepherd) and Ghabex (run by Agenzija Appogg) where women and their children can go for safety when escaping a violent home situation. Then there is a second-stage shelter, Dar Qalb ta’ Gesu (run by the diocesan Children’s Homes Office, Ejew Ghandi), where women can move on to should they require further support once the immediate danger has subsided. We also have a further shelter in Gozo, Dar Carolina (run by the Dominican sisters), which is currently partly out of use due to refurbishment (though they always accept Gozitan women in emergencies). Attempts are constantly being made by the shelters to improve the standard of accommodation offered, though resources are often scarce and whilst the security factor is never compromised, the comfort factor is unfortunately sometimes far from ideal. Nevertheless escaping to the shelters
often gives the women and children a breathing space to decide what to do next. And of course Appogg also have services to help the perpetrators change their attitudes and their behaviour...

Then there’s the Domestic Violence law and the Commission both of which have started to make a difference to the field. When a woman makes a report, the police now have to proceed against the alleged perpetrator. The Commission is constantly raising awareness about the issue, both with the general public and with specific professions that come into contact with the people experiencing or escaping domestic violence. But that’s another whole article on its own...

Or should I speak of the women as survivors? For indeed they are! It takes tremendous courage to escape domestic violence, to take those first steps of seeking help when you have been abused, and rendered powerless. It also takes tremendous courage to rebuild your life. And many women do this, slowly and painfully, taking their children along the path to a new life...

What aspect should I speak about on this international day for the elimination of violence against women ...?

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