



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- A Brief Study on the Causes and Prevention of Women Battering

Introduction

Domestic Violence can be described as including any form of physical, sexual, psychological or emotional abuse between people in a close relationship (Tiffi, L. 1993: ix). Families are generally portrayed as shelter providers against the strains and stress of everyday life, and regardless of any problems and threats that might exist outside the home, each individual seeks, and hopes to find security with whom such person forms an intimate relationship (Berkowitz, L. 1993: 240). For many, however, this wish is far from realised, since the people with whom they live are a source of constant danger rather than security. Violence is generally directed against the weak

by the powerful in the family, and is basically a show of force. Violence can be directed against a wife, husband, child, parent, brother, sister or partner and can take various forms. Most types of violence are relatively of a minor nature, however some aggressive incidents are much more serious, leading to high incidence of grievous injury.

Families are highly interdependent and are bound to disappoint each other or come into conflict at one time or another. Fortunately enough however, quite a few number of families remain harmonious or at least do not develop their problems into open war against each other. Violence against intimates is more commonly inflicted by males on their female partners. This brief study shall discuss the phenomenon in detail. Although the author is studying female partner battering, it is worthwhile mentioning that women, like their male peers also face problems, and this sometimes contributes to female violent behaviour.

Whatever the specific source of discontent, bitterness sometimes leads to an argument where words are exchanged, tempers flare and a heated argument is transformed into a violent outbreak.

Malta, is not spared from domestic violence, however several cases remain unpublicised due to various reasons. These include the fact that victims tend to refrain from reporting their predicament to the authorities, either because they believe that their problem would not be given consideration, or due to embarrassment caused by publicity. These victims prefer to suffer in silence. Other reasons include financial and accommodation problems caused by separation, family pressure, profession of the abuser, the shame of facing friends, neighbours and children, and also the fact that victims strive to keep their family united.

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Cases which are actually reported rarely reach the Court since victims often refuse to press charges, hoping that their partners would regret their actions and reform themselves. Whenever a case ends up in Court, wives and partners generally pardon their aggressors. Few victims take the decisive step to separate from their partner and start a new life. In this brief study, the author will attempt to determine the extent of domestic violence against women. The author intends to interview parties presumed to be familiar with domestic violence. These include police and church representatives, a social worker, and one of the victims. Apart from determining the severity of the situation, possible remedies will also be discussed. The suffering of the silent victims of domestic violence should be addressed more efficiently and effectively.

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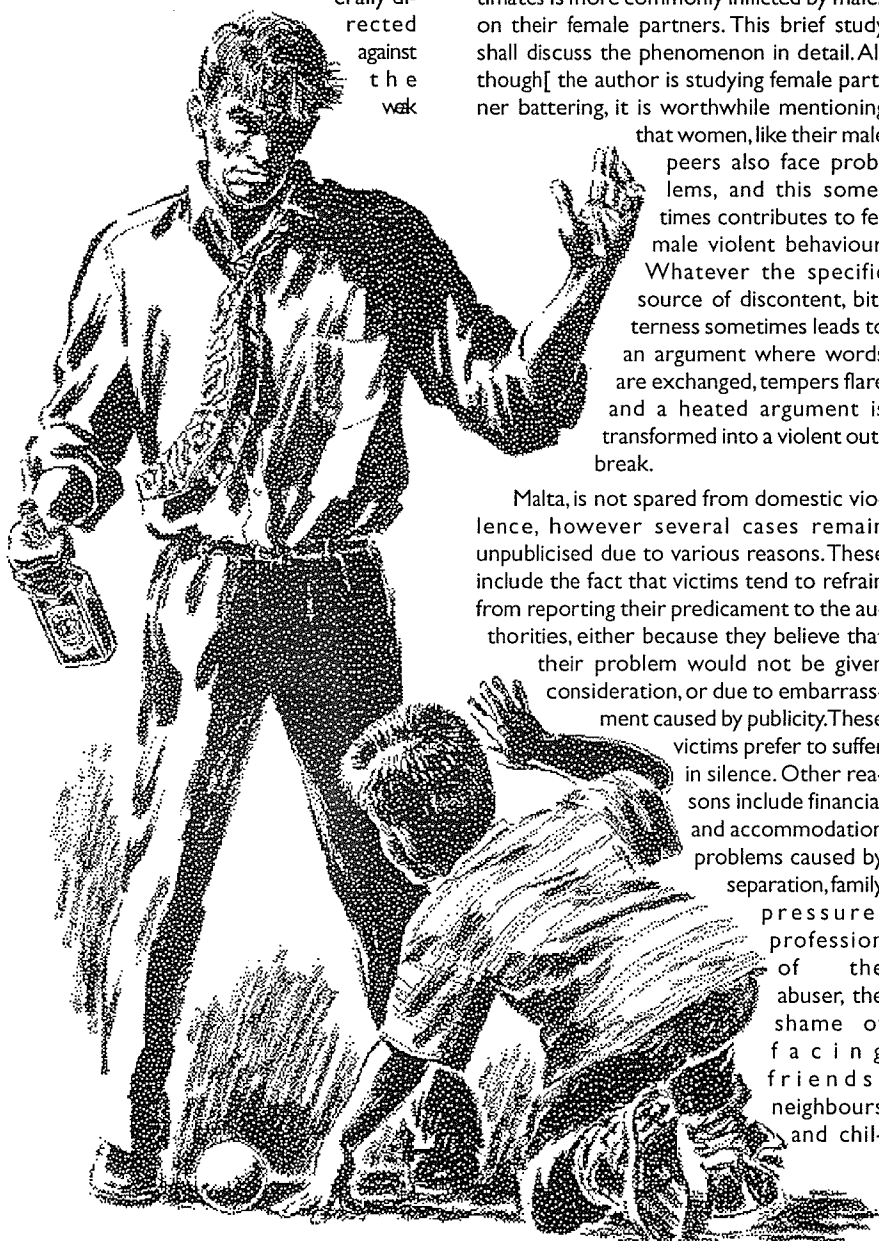
Literature Review

Domestic abuse concerns the domination and control of a person by another using force. Generally, battered women do not respond negatively to their partner's aggression, contending only in defending themselves and trying to cope with the situation. They might either act so passively to prevent another beating, or as a consequence of their minds having been manipulated by the aggressor into believing that they themselves are to blame for such punishment.

The interviews conducted by the author indicate that the majority of domestic violence cases involve married couples. This brief research points out that the women who seek shelter are generally married women. There are other cases, where violence occurred before marriage, however women chose to maintain their relationship, either out of fear of their partners, or else to escape the constraints imposed by their parents. In such cases, battered women do not seek refuge in a home, but they stay with their families. Thus these types of cases are usually kept secret.

This idea is corroborated by the study conducted by Gelles and Straus (1970) where it was stated that for many men "the marriage license was a hitting license". Another study conducted by Straus and Associates

(1985) - The Second National Family Violence Survey - showed that violence





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between unmarried couples was higher than between married couples. (Berkowitz, L. 1993: 246)

Domestic violence can be attributed to various factors. Among the most accepted facts is the evidence that long term violence affects victims and young children. That violence adversely affects victims is indisputable, but more worrying is the impact left on young children. In various cases men who hit their partners had witnessed or suffered violence during their childhood, and thus started accepting aggression as a normal way of life. There are two studies, among others, which strengthen this theory. The first is the 1975 National Family Violence Survey which states that it was two and a half times more likely for men to be abusive when they had watched their parents fight, than men who hadn't witnessed parental aggression. Another survey is the Hotaling - Sugarman research, which states that according to 90% of studies, wife-battering men were more likely than their non-abusive counterparts to have witnessed violence in their families during their formative years. (Berkowitz, L. 1993: 257). Furthermore, this characteristic is referred to as 'intergenerational transmission of violence' (Herrenkohl, E. et al 1983: 305).

Another reason for violent behaviour concerns people who watch lots of televised aggression (Berkowitz, L. 1993: 257). As a result, these individuals may become relatively indifferent to violent behaviour. They believe that it is not bad to attack others in order to further their own interests. Many battered women have also reported that their partners are avid consumers of pornography (Stordeur, R.A. & Stille, R. 1984: 23). The cause of domestic violence may also be attributed to unemployment, low income and cultural beliefs and values (Berkowitz, L. 1993: 243). All forms of abuse appear to be more common in families where unemployment and economic deprivation are serious problems (Finkelhor, D. 1983: 21). Obviously, economic problems lead to unhappiness, and this causes aggressors to hit their partners, since they are upset by their own inability to provide a comfortable life.

The victim's behaviour can also influence on attacker's conduct. Violent reactions may be provoked through constant fault finding, especially when the eventual aggressor is under a lot of stress. This is referred to as 'victim - precipitated violence' (Wardell, L. et al 1983: 73).

Another factor which may be related to the occurrence of domestic violence concerns habitual drinkers and drug abuser (Walker, L.E. 1983 :39). The majority of domestically violent men resort to drinking alcohol in order to forget their problems but instead their senses are clouded, and when they return home after a drinking

bout, violence may generally erupt since emotional turmoil increases rather than ceases. Drugs, which are modern societies' scourge, also play a negative role in domestic abuse, and an ever increasing number of cases involve drug abusers.

Although all the above mentioned factors may influence the occurrences of domestic violence, they are not necessarily the cause of, and may not form a relationship to such abuse. Whatever cause is attributed to domestic violence, battering in a relationship will not improve or remedy itself. Intervention is imperative to curb the suffering of those involved, since the consequences which may result due to inefficiency in addressing this problem can be distressful. A joint programme between state and private institutions already exists, however more energy should be spent on furthering the resources available to victims together with harsher laws which punish the abusers. The justice system should therefore be actively involved.

Types of Abuse

Domestic violence is a crime where police officers should play an active and positive role in protecting the victims, and response to calls for help should be speedy and effective. Therefore law enforcement personnel should have an understanding of the types of abuse they may encounter.

- Physical battering includes a range of behaviour from less severe acts such as spitting, pinching and slapping, to more severe assaults, including choking, punching, biting, hair-pulling, stabbing or even shooting.

- Sexual violence is characterized by physical attacks on the sex organs, coerced sexual activity accompanied by threats of violence, sexual assault or rape. The victim may also be treated like a sex object.

- Psychological battering involves all the characteristics of emotional abuse and also include at least one episode of violence on the victim in order to maintain the imminent threat of forthcoming assaults. Destruction of personal and sentimental belongings constitute another form of this type of violence, even though no physical contact occurs. This destruction is intentional, and the psychological effect on the victim may be as devastating as a physical attack.

- Emotional abuse takes the form of a systematic degrading of the victim's self-worth. This may be caused by calling the victim names, making undignifying comments, forcing the victim to perform humiliating and degrading acts, threatening to kill the victim or family members, suicide threats, controlling monetary access, sleeping and eating and threats to take or harm children. (Stordeur, R.A.- Stille, R 1989: 20)

Characteristics of Batterers

Most aggressors are masters of deception. Few display violent behaviour to anyone other than their victims, and often exert violence on weaker persons, usually their partners, since they are afraid to challenge other men due to fear of being beaten up themselves. As stated personally by one such type of batterer:

"I couldn't beat anyone else up, so then when I got angry, I had to take it out on my family.... She was the only type of person that I could beat up."

(Tifft, L. 1992: 48)

Often aggressors possess winning personalities and are well liked in the community. However, they frequently lead a Jekyll and Hyde life style, exhibiting vastly different public and personal behaviour. In the event of a violent domestic abuse incident, batterers often attempt to convince responding police officers that the victims are insane. This type of deception was experienced personally by the author during his tour of police duties. A hysterical woman entered the police station where the author served and reported that she had been physically abused by her husband. A few minutes later, her husband was apprehended in the vicinity of the police station, in the company of their three young children. It was evident that this abuse had even terrorised the youngsters, since when asked by their father who was to blame for this incident, they pointed accusingly at their mother, even though this was highly doubtful. The incident ended there since the complainant refused to take further action, and simply lodged a report for further references.

In many cases, similar to the one just described, officers are fooled into believing these versions and leave without conducting a proper and thorough investigation. Developing a deeper understanding of the characteristics of batterers would enable police officers to realise when they are being manipulated. To help identify potential batterers, officers should be aware of common habits which aggressors generally possess. These include:

- The need to control their partners through abuse. In order to make their partners comply with their wishes, abusers use, attempt or suggest violence.

- Denial of responsibility for their behaviour when abuse occurs. They also minimise their behaviour's impact or blame their partners for causing the incident.

- Low self-esteem usually reflects the abuser's childhood. This could include physical or sexual abuse, neglect or disapproval by parents or even teachers.



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• Extreme insecurity and lack of trust in others. Here, batterers have great difficulty establishing close friendships and tend to be jealous of their partners.

incident. The abused woman may refuse to cooperate with police officers due to fear of retaliation or loss of financial support that she receives from the abuser.

der to discourage her from filing a complaint or testify in Court.

The Local Scene

As indicated at the beginning of this study, the author conducted interviews with persons directly involved in domestic abuse cases. The following interviews were conducted with Inspector Sharon Tanti, Sister Maria Farrugia, a social worker and a victim, who requested to remain anonymous.

The Police

Inspector Sharon Tanti heads the Vice Squad section of the Malta Police Force. Under her

charge are two sergeants and two constables. One member from either rank are female while the other two are male. The vice squad was formerly the Victim Support Unit. However, victim support is not actual police work but concerns social workers and family counsellors. These should be a different entity from police work. Inspector Tanti believes that the least cooperative are the victims themselves, since after all the work done into securing a conviction, women forgive their aggressors and choose to return home, probably to suffer other sessions of battering.

Throughout investigations certain factors are brought to light. These include the fact that although women sometimes present themselves bruised and battered, they were initially the instigators of hostile actions and their partners were merely de-

Abusive men should be taught to challenge their sexist beliefs and attitudes, give up their controlling and violent behaviours, confront their defences and take full responsibility for their violence. They should also be lectured on how to identify and express their emotions appropriately. (Stordeur, R.A. & Stille, R. 1989: 54).

Cycle of Violence Theory

Through familiarisation with the features of the cycle of violence, which occurs during one of three phases, police officers can assist victims to understand that abuse is likely to continue if nothing is done to address the underlying causes.

The first stage is the tension building phase. This is usually the longest phase. Various factors may lead to hostility between the couple. Several women feel that it is their responsibility to keep violence under control, and should they fail, the resulting violence is their fault. Unless some type of intervention occurs at this stage, the second phase of the cycle is inevitable.

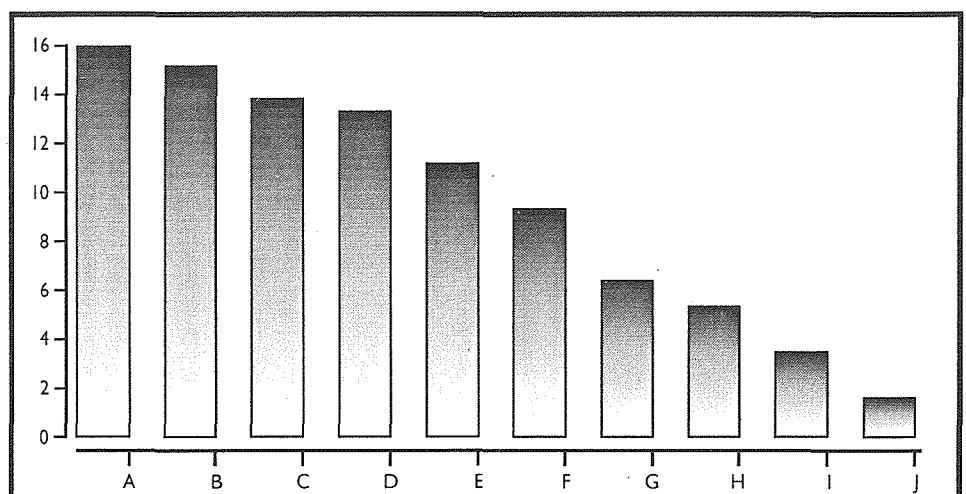
The second stage is called the acute battering phase, where the abuser loses physical and emotional control. Violence may last a few minutes or hours. After a battering episode, most victims consider themselves lucky that the abuse was not worse, no matter how severe their injuries are. The calm appearance of the aggressor, who had just vented his anger at the victim, is deceptive and he may even blame the agitated or hysterical victim for the outbreak of the

The third stage is referred to as the loving contrition stage. This involves a period of calm and loving behaviour. The aggressor may genuinely feel sorry for his actions, and the thought that his partner would leave him instills a sense of fear. He attempts to make up for his actions, and believes that he can control himself. On the other hand, the victim tries to believe that her partner can really change, and it is usually at this stage that charges are dropped. Police officers should explain that the aggressor's calm behaviour may not last for long, and that a new cycle of violence may occur. (Walker, L. E. 1983: 43)

Although most domestic abuse cases follow the above mentioned pattern, there are instances where the batterer never expresses any remorse, and in fact continues to threaten and intimidate the victim, in or-

A	B'Kara, Mosta, Mellieha, Naxxar	16
B	Hamrun, Marsa, St. Venera, G'Mangia	15
C	Zabbar, Cospicua, Senglea, Kalkara	14
D	Pembroke, Slierna, Gzira, Msida, San Gwann, Ta' Giorni, Bahar ic-Cag[aq	13
E	Siggiewi, Qormi, Zebbug	11
F	Paola, St. Lucia, Fgura, Tarxien	9
G	Zejtun, B'Bugia	6
H	Zurrieq, Safi, Qrendi, Luqa, Ghaxaq	5
I	Valletta	3
J	Gozo*	1

* During the time of this survey Gozo has not yet opened the home for victims of domestic violence.





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fending themselves. It is therefore important to distinguish between cases where women are genuine victims, from those where women invent a story which is intended to deprive the partner of the house, belongings and custody of the children. There are other cases where women provoke their husbands. They in turn beat their wives, who then have a perfect alibi to leave their home.

Inspector Tanti stated that domestic violence does not particularly involve a specific class of women. Unmarried women also report cases of violence, however for reasons best known to themselves they choose to maintain their relationships. Victims often suffer from low self-esteem and believe that they are worthless, and that only their husbands matter for them. According to Inspector Tanti, without their husbands they would not survive.

Finally Inspector Tanti believes that abusers witnessed or experienced abuse as children. However there are cases where men either have a relationship with other women, are drug abusers or gamblers, heavy debtors, or else they fail to settle in their married lives and try to dissolve their marriage by every means at their disposal in order to return to bachelorhood.

The Church

There are three homes in Malta which provide shelter for victims of domestic violence. These are 'Dar Merhba Bik' situated in Balzan, Cini Institute in Hamrun and another home is located in Gozo. The latter shelter's name and whereabouts are unknown, in order to maintain absolute privacy, which is vital in the best interest of the residents. A crisis intervention centre is also being planned by Caritas for Cospicua and the Cottonera area.

'Dar Merhba Bik', where the interviews for this case study were held, was founded in 1858 by a French congregation, however the name was adopted in 1980. Sister Maria Farrugia, who runs the home with the help of her colleagues and other volunteers explained that initially, the home catered for all types of problems which women encountered. However the ever increasing number of women who sought shelter led to the decision that the home should only provide refuge for battered women. Accompanying children are only accepted when they had not attained the age of nine years in cases of boys, and eleven years for girls.

Victims participate in group work in order to learn how to live with others. This is not easy, since during discussions, past problems generally re-surface. In such cases therapy is provided. Group work also allows victims to enhance community living. Success for the victims' future happiness de-

pends on cooperation with the staff and termination to overcome their problems.

Although [there were frequent cases where men used to call at the centre to provoke incidents, this has been lately checked through] extended police presence. Sister Farrugia stated that women are often neglected by their husbands, and sometimes are reduced to a level of servitude. Before marriage, men show signs of violence, however, women tend to be unaware of these instincts, or else they believe that their partners might change their ways after marriage. It is difficult to make these women realise that such behaviour is unlikely to improve.

Higher class women generally do not seek shelter at the home since they could afford to move to another house, including summer residences. Domestic violence among lower class women also exists, however, since they live on emotional feelings, they either forgive their partners and remain at home, or else go back a short while after leaving, when their aggressor shows signs of repentance.

Ever since the law of equality came into force in 1993, higher class men generally refrain from physically battering their partners, however psychological abuse remains. Recently, police officials, lawyers, doctors, social workers and church representatives joined forces in order to draw up a white paper intended to defend the rights of domestic violence victims. The church is also changing its views regarding domestic violence, since the trend was that victimised women should bear their cross. Men who encountered abuse during childhood, or when they are unable to challenge life's difficulties are more likely to become abusive than their otherwise normal peers. This conclusion has been reached since victims' husbands generally belong to this class of persons. The worrying fact is that aggressors often fail to admit their shortcomings, thus the chances of solving domestic problems are minimal.

A geographical statistic for the period January - July 1997 shows the particular areas and the number of victims who sought refuge at 'Dar Merhba Bik'

The Social Worker

According to the social worker, psychological violence is worse than physical violence. Women often lose self-confidence due to constant fault finding by their partners. There are instances where victims seek shelter in their parents' home, however, owing to the abuser's frequent calling at their house in order to provoke an incident, parents sorrowfully advise their distressed daughters that it would be better to seek refuge in a home for battered women.

Several women chose to return home after a few days since rearing a child on their own living with complete strangers after leading a personal life poses severe suffering for them. Victims who seek shelter at the home had generally suffered various episodes of abuse at the hands of their partners. However their others who leave their homes after a single incident.

To add to their suffering, abused women not only fail to find compassion, but they usually end up as victims of society. This reason mainly contributes to women preferring to suffer in silence. Another factor is the belief in male dominance. Although [at face value women have rights, unfortunately these are often ignored. It is evident that women require protection, both in private life and also during Court sittings. It was suggested that a telecare service be set up in order to assure rapid police response to calls concerning domestic violence. Furthermore, considering the lack of privacy in Court, women are often confronted and threatened by their aggressors prior to testifying. This leads to either the victim forgiving the abuser, or insufficient evidence leading to acquittal. Therefore, both parties should be kept separated at all costs. Hopefully, these requirements would be realised in the near future.

In certain cases, aggressors are referred to Mount Carmel Mental Hospital for treatment. This is usually done on the insistence of their wives. However these men are generally kept for only forty-eight hours under observation, when they are then discharged. Since these aggressors appear mentally unstable only during a violent episode and are normal afterwards, they are not considered by medical staff as being in need of treatment. Once released, they often return home, where another violent outbreak is inevitable.

Another worrying factor concerns the lenient punishments awarded to abusers. This sends a negative message to both habitual and potential abusers that their actions are somehow accepted and tolerated. Furthermore, victims find themselves abandoned and unjustly treated by one of the country's highest institutions, whose duty is to observe and protect the rights and freedom of others.

The Victim

The interviewed victim started by stressing the fact that the legal system often operates slowly and unfairly when treating with problems of domestic violence. Husbands often receive only a warning to



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change their behaviour, and are thus able to continue their lives as before. This often leads to continued abuse. Apart from this, Court sittings are generally held three or four months after the incident. She also feels that police fail to seriously address such delicate situations.

Having clarified this point, the interview continued on a more personal note. The victim stated that she had already stayed at the home for one week on a previous occasion. This was about three years ago. Her marital problem started soon after her marriage. She was pregnant at the time. She tried various times to keep her marriage from collapsing, however, owing to her husband's recurring abuse, she feels totally helpless. Since her husband leads a carefree life, often in the company of other women, the victim believes that in his eyes she has outlived her usefulness. Her husband's aggressive behaviour reached the climax when a few months ago he stabbed her, thus rendering her paralysed for several weeks. Nonetheless, after all these incidents which have been spread over six years, she still hopes to maintain a united family.

Discussing her pre-marriage years, she said that there were no problems, or else she would not have married. The woman also believes that her husband's job was mainly to blame for his change in character. His aggression could not be traced to his upbringing since there were no violent traits in his family's background. The woman confessed that she married against her true wish, since she only wanted to move out of her grandparents' home where she lived for several years ever since her parents separated.

Although[the home provides good shelter and security for herself and her two young children, this in no way helps the youngsters, since they have been so negatively influenced by their parents' constant fighting, that her daughter even has to undergo mental treatment. The child also has communication problems. However, one major problem which the victim faces is that the children miss their father, even though[they have repeatedly witnessed their mother being abused by him. The victim said that in various cases she responded to her husband's aggression, and this probably aggravated her situation.

Finally, she stated that she believes in divorce and would resort to it, although[she may still be haunted by her husband. Should divorce be granted she definitely does not plan to remarry. Apart from wishing to reunite her broken family, she hopes that womens' rights are honoured by all and sundry.

Conclusion

Having briefly analysed these disturbing facts, victims of domestic violence should be made fully aware of the urgent need to develop an emergency safety plan for themselves as well as their children. Advance planning can prevent unnecessary hardship or even serious injury. No woman, and indeed no individual, deserves to be battered or threatened. They have a right to protect themselves if they are in danger. This safety plan should be divided into three:

Safety at Home

Plan should be discussed with children and reviewed as often as possible. If possible, locks should be changed and safety devices installed. Trusted neighbours should be informed that should the aggressor be seen in the vicinity of the victim's house, the police are to be called immediately. Before resuming a potentially abusive relationship, this step should be discussed with a trusted person.

Safety in Public or at Work

Victims should inform close friends, together with security personnel of their situation. If possible, a photograph of the abuser should be provided. The route to and from work should be varied, and in certain cases, victims should arrange for someone to escort them to their cars, or other means of transportation. A plan should also be formulated about measures which should be taken when victims are confronted by the abuser.

Safety during Domestic Violence Incident

Whenever an argument seems unavoidable, victims should move to a place with easy access to an exit. Escape route should be practised. A small piece of luggage should be made readily available and kept in an undisclosed but accessible place from where it could be quickly retrieved. Neighbours who have no friendly ties with the aggressor should be informed that in the event of a violent act, the police are to be immediately informed. Victims should consider giving the abuser what he wants in order to defuse a volatile situation. Finally victims should decide where to go if they have to leave their home, although[they do not think that the argument would lead to such a step being taken.

In recent years, domestic violence awareness has been greatly enhanced, and women are more conscious that they are victims. Therefore they are more eager to leave abusive relationships. However, they are generally sceptical about whether the

system will protect them. For example, there is a scarcity of shelter protection for battered women, although[those existing homes are doing their utmost to cope with the situation.

Furthermore, the legal system is far too lenient when punishing offenders. Abusers need stricter sentences from the judiciary, so that offenders realise that crimes of domestic violence are unacceptable. There should also be counselling of abusers, in order for them to change their ways. Police Officers should undergo, as part of their training, courses on domestic violence. It is also evident that the Malta Police Force requires more staff to complement the existing handful of personnel who have to investigate all cases of domestic abuse, absences and prostitution. District police should seriously address reported cases of domestic abuse, thus partly relieving the suffering of victimised women.

Education about the moral and social unacceptability of abuse has to be taught in schools and at home, just as one would teach about the dangers of smoking, drugs or drunken driving. Literature about the victims' rights should be issued and distributed, thus allowing women more access to the information they need to leave or alter an abusive relationship.

Although[alcohol and drugs have been cited as the primary causes of domestic violence, they are only symptomatic of the underlying problems related to the psychology of an abuser, such as the need to control or have power.

More co-ordination and dialogue are needed among the police, judges, teachers, religious leaders, medical personnel social workers and victims themselves, in order to reduce the incidence of domestic abuse.

The media, especially television, contributes to domestic violence as witnessed by the frequent programmes showing abuse of women and other violence. Therefore, there should be more programmes, including discussions, which condemn such forms of abuse.

Finally, any attempt to understand domestic violence should recognise that such aggression is accelerated by conflicts between assailant and victim. Although[this fact is hardly given sufficient attention, it should be safely assumed that fighting frequently leads to more fighting, and that generally, aggression by one part is likely to be followed by counter-aggression from the other. There are various situations where violence begets violence. Most importantly, therefore, those involved should be made aware that such actions are intolerable, thus avoiding further problems for themselves and for future generations.