Barriers to Help-Seeking in Gender-Based Violence against Women: A Research Study

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Background

• This research was carried out by the Department of Gender Studies, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta.

• It is part of a national project entitled ‘Full Cooperation Zero Violence’ and is co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union.

• The project is being managed by the Human Rights and Integration Directorate within the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality.
Research Purpose

This research attempts to identify and explore the barriers being faced by:

• **Survivors** of gender-based violence against women in Malta and Gozo when seeking help at the various state and voluntary services as seen from their perspective,

• **Professionals** when delivering a service to the survivors as seen from the professionals’ perspective.
Definitions

Violence against Women

‘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;’

(Istanbul Convention, Article 3a).
Definitions

Gender-based Violence against Women

‘violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately’.

(Istanbul Convention, Article 3 (d)).
Design

• A **qualitative** research design

• Data collection strategy - **16 qualitative interviews** and **6 focus groups** with both survivors and professionals.

• A total of **50 participants** took part in the study - 23 survivors and 27 professionals.

• The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed; the transcripts were subjected to rigorous coding following the **Constant Comparative Method**.

• A strict adherence to the principles of research **ethics** was crucial given that participants included vulnerable persons.
Limitations

• The participants are not representative of the whole population of GBV survivors and the professionals who work with them. In view of this, generalizations have to be cautionary.

• The participants predominantly spoke about their experience of domestic violence which is only one manifestation of gender-based violence against women; other prevalent manifestations of violence such as FGM, trafficking and harassment did not emerge.
Limitations

• **Language barrier** with some foreign participants.

• The sample of professional participants did not include a **medical doctor** (general practitioner).

• Many equally important issues have emerged and though, at times, issues deserved more in-depth analysis, they were **discussed cursorily** due to space restriction.
Eight Categories of Barriers

The analysis identified eight main categories of barriers including:

(1) Cultural barriers
(2) Socio-economic barriers,
(3) Survivor-related barriers,
(4) Perpetrator-related barriers,
(5) Offspring-related barriers,
(6) Informal networks (family and friends) barriers
(7) Psychosocial / health care / education provision barriers and
(8) Justice system barriers (including police and courts).
Cultural Barriers

• The predominantly *patriarchal Maltese society* remains an underlying and ubiquitous barrier.

• Gender *inequality* still manifests itself in social attitudes, gender roles and dominant discourses.

• Survivors experience shame mainly due to the resounding social expectation that *(‘good’) women* should remain with their male-partners at all costs and that their primary role is to care for the family and keep it together.
Imbagħad meta tiġi għalfejn inti ma titlaqx... għax jiena nvestejt u għandek ix-shame... ‘hhhh u din ĥa titilqu għadha tiżżewġu, għax it-tfal tallum m’għandhomx valuri ta!’” (FCS01:90).

And then, when you look at why you don’t leave ...because I’ve invested, and there’s shame... ‘hhhh she’s going to leave him, she’s just got married to him, because today’s young people have no values, you know’ (FCS01: 90).
Socio-economic Barriers

• Survivors’ difficult financial situation exacerbates the help-seeking process.

• Unaffordable rent conditions seem to be one of the major concerns for survivors, especially if they need to leave their home and find alternative accommodation.

• Job maintenance may be challenging due to other pressing commitments related to the experienced violence such as court sittings, which are also often deferred.
Survivor-related Barriers

• Some barriers appear to be internalised by survivors in the context of the patriarchal Maltese society.

• Prolonged use of defence mechanisms, such as denial, minimisation and rationalisation, together with negative emotions such as shame, shock, fear and confusion seem to block survivors from adopting help-seeking behaviour.

• Moreover, survivors tend not to report or seek help if they somehow assume the responsibility for the perpetrator's violence and blame themselves for it, believing that the abuse is their fault.
I became totally financially dependent on him. Everything in his name, everything, that was another issue I had (IS06: 106).

[...] jiena fejn ser immur b’żewġt itfal u bla xogħol u bid-dejn? Allura jkollok tibqa’ tissaporti (IS07: 67).

[...] where am I going with two children, unemployed and in debt? So you have to put up with it (IS07: 67).
[...] kont nibża’ minnu, anke sakemm telaq, kont nibża’ minnu, fil-fatt kont inqum bil-lejl kif jidħol id-dar [...] (IS07: 182).

[...] I used to be afraid of him, even until he left, I used to be afraid of him, in fact, I used to wake up during the night the minute he used to return home (IS07: 182).

[...] tant ikun vjolenti l-bniedem, tant ikun jheddek, tant ..... li meta jispičċa jiġi lura u jghidlek ‘jiena hawn irrid noqghod’, Inti tbaxxi rasek għax tibża’ minnu (IS08: 64).

[...] the man is so violent, so threatening, so… that when he returns and tells you ‘I want to stay here’, you have to accept it because you are scared of him (IS08: 64).
Intersectionality

• Survivors may encounter other barriers due to additional challenges such as **immigration status, disability, mental health and advanced age**.

• Such additional structural variables intersect to make the survivor’s journey even more difficult.
Perpetrator-related Barriers

• Perpetrators presented as one of the major barriers to help-seeking behaviour because of their manipulative and controlling behaviour.

• Perpetrators' ‘charm’ tends to deceive not just mutual friends but even professionals.

• The perpetrators’ seem to use these to institutionalise their control over them (including litigation abuse).

• Parental alienation which is the result of psychological manipulation of a child (by the father) into showing unwarranted fear, disrespect or hostility towards a parent (in this case the mother).
‘These people are really charming!’ (FCS01:70).

‘[...] they are charming, and they know how to turn people around' (FCS01: 420).

[a session with the mediator] And halfway through the session, he told her, ‘I know you somewhere’, before I know it, they had a full blown conversation of when they used to go to Gozo, they were old friends and I am looking at them, and I was thinking ‘intom bis-serjeta'? (Are you serious?). You know I was horrified, to be honest, jigifieri (so to speak) (IS06: 132).
Off-spring-related Barriers

• Children seem to be the primary motivating factor for the survivor to leave an abusive relationship acting as ‘push factors’.

• However, in other instances, children are the ‘pull factors’ impeding the survivor from moving away from the abusive situation.
U l-affarijiet li kien qed jagħmel quddiem it-tfal... it-tfal kienu jkunu mwerwrin... ma stajtx nibqa’ (IS03: 108).

And the things he used to do in front of children... the children used to be terrified... I couldn’t stay (IS03: 108).

It was a general comment. The people, sorry not in court, no, sort of hmm, you’re made to feel like ‘ghax dan (because) you can’t let your children to see you are to send their father to prison.’ You know what? He does something bloody wrong.... actions have consequences (IS06: 237).
Informal Network-related Barriers

While informal support may **facilitate** a survivor’s process to access services and receive the necessary assistance, this study shows that there are instances where the **non-involvement** of an informal support network may be the **better option**.
Psychosocial / Health care / Education Provision Barriers

• Survivors report that they find **effective help** from the supportive system including public agencies and NGOs.

• However, survivors felt that they were not sufficiently **informed** about the available **services, resources** and their **rights**, which hindered them from seeking help.

• Psychosocial services are sometimes **perceived as inaccessible**, with participants in this study mentioning long waiting lists, limited or lack of placements in the emergency shelters and the issue of distance, particularly for Gozitan residents, as barriers.
[...] li s-servizzi li hemm Malta ta’ l-inqas ikunu GĦawdex... bħal xelters sura ta’ nies, bħal terapija sura ta’ nies, terapija anke għall-perpetrators (IP04: 391).

[...] that the services that are available in Malta at least, they should be in Gozo... such as adequate shelters, effective therapy, therapy for the perpetrators as well (IP04: 391).
Inter-agency Collaboration

- **Poor inter-agency collaboration** (in some instances) and the lack of specialisation are considered service-related barriers.
- There seems to be a **lack of specialised services** (such as an emergency shelter in Gozo), specialised professionals and professionals specifically trained on matters of gender-based violence against women.
Justice System Barriers

• Survivors’ re-victimisation through the justice system is a real concern.
• Survivors feel that the justice system is insensitive and inflexible. 
• Perpetrators tend to use the justice system to institutionalise their control over the survivor.
The Police

• Survivors and professionals highlighted the **crucial role** of the police in protecting the survivor, investigating the abuse, collecting evidence and prosecuting the perpetrator.

• The study results indicate some instances of the **police being helpful** and understanding.

• It seems that generally, the police are perceived as needing to **increase their competence** in dealing with such situations.

• Survivors and professionals further claimed that some police officers do not deal with domestic violence as **ex-officio cases**, as required by law.
Specjalment meta jidħlu l-pulizija li sfortunatament ma tantx ikun hemm awareness jew training kif għandhom jirrelataw mal-persuna u flok jgħinuha, ifixkluha u tispiċċa tmur lura d-dar (FCP03: 18).

Especially, when the police are involved, which unfortunately there is not much awareness and training on how to relate with persons and instead of helping her, they confuse her and she ends up going back home (FCP03: 18).

‘Le m’għandek xejn, mur id-dar... issa mur laħlaħ wiċċek u jgħaddilek!’ (IP04:227).

‘No, you’re okay, go home... now go and wash you face and you’ll feel better!’ (IP04:227)
The Judiciary Process

The judiciary process is another source of re-victimisation for the survivor.

• The process is too **lengthy** and **slow**.

• While legal aid is generally **helpful**, survivors and professionals commented that good lawyers are **expensive**, **unavailable** and **inaccessible**.

• The fact that the court asks the survivor whether she wants to **forgive** the perpetrator puts the survivor in an awkward and possibly in a dangerous position.

• Judiciary members’ **sensitivity** towards survivors and their situation is deemed essential.
If you had to tell me ‘what did you really want to come out of it?’

Acknowledgement! Someone understands that these things aren't right. You know, I don't want the police to do the same to another .... You know it’s fine, he got away with it. It’s that attitude, you know, you are going to court knowing li (that) nothing happens (pause), I think that is the most frustrating bit (pause). (IS06: 251)
Prevention

• Concerted **awareness campaigns** should be held on a regular basis.

• Campaigns should sensitise **target audiences** on gender-based violence against women (including immigrants, persons with disabilities and older persons).

• Awareness campaigns should address the **public in general**, and children and adolescents in schools.

• Women at risk and survivors can be further empowered through targeted awareness campaigns informing them about different types of abuse (including **emotional**), available **services** and their **rights**.
Protection

A systematic programme is needed to eradicate the masculinist police culture which appears to currently dominate the police corp. Five measures are being recommended.

1. Recruiting more female police officers;
2. Giving heightened visibility to women in the police corps by assigning them more central roles as front-liners;
3. Promoting more female police officers to higher ranks;
4. Recruiting police officers (men and women) who are gender-sensitive and respect women; and finally,
5. Providing effective gender sensitivity training to all police officers including high ranking officials.
Prosecution

• Professionals in the justice system are to be more **survivor-centred** in their approach to reduce the likelihood of further victimisation.

• **On-going specialised** training to such professionals is crucial to this effect.
Integrated Policy

• Effective **protocols** on inter-agency collaboration (including communication and training) should be in place.

• **Training** for professionals should also include workshops on such specialist protocols.

• An **inter-ministerial committee** can be set up to enhance and monitor effective inter-agency collaboration and the effective implementation of such protocols.
Further research

• Research, particularly prevalence studies, on gender-based violence against women should take place on a regular basis.

• A question on child witnesses should be included in prevalence studies in order to estimate the number of children affected by domestic violence
Thank You