

VIOLENCE IN MALTESE SOCIETY



The Signs of the Times

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Violence

in

Maltese Society

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It is an ever growing concern that violent behaviour in Malta and Gozo is on the increase. Although crime rate in Malta is not comparable in terms of numbers to that of the advanced countries, it nonetheless constitutes a preoccupying phenomenon. It is a clear indicator of a change in one of the most significant values: sanctity of life and limb. Very often this disregard for the value of life is preceded by violent acts against animals and property.

Thus, one can define violence¹ as crime that by its nature poses a substantial risk or actual use of force against a person, animal or property. Violent crimes against the person may be physical - such as assault, battery, sexual, and homicide – or psychological – such as harassment and denigration. Violent acts against animals include cruelty, abandonment, and forced animal fights; while violent acts against the environment involve such acts that destroy natural or man-made habitat.

The use of physical force to control the behavior of another is the most brutal assertion of power. Manifestly or latently, the purpose of a violent act is to exercise control and compel another person to follow, against his own free will, a certain

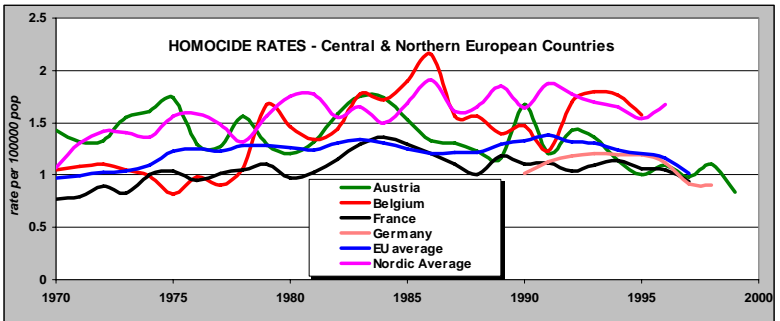
¹ Latin *vis* meaning strength

course of action or enforced inaction. It is intended to coerce the victim into acting and/or thinking in whatever way the *source of power* (i.e., individual, institution, organization) dictates and to leave the victim with no alternative except compliance. A crude power strategy created a structure of dominance and subordination.

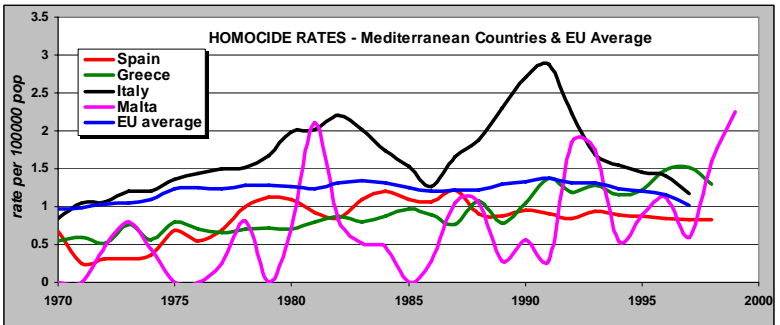
It is an alarming observation that crimes of violence are generally on the increase in most developing and developed countries particularly in the Mediterranean region including Malta. For obvious reasons, many crimes of violence against the person, particularly psychological ones, and crimes against animals and property remain unreported; hence, no statistical data is available and if available it is often misleading. Perhaps, the most regularly recorded data refers to the prevalence of deaths resulting from homicide. The parameters of the W.H.O. “Health-for-all programme” include the mortality rates resulting from homicide². Mediterranean countries – Italy, Greece, Albania, and Malta – all show a variable but sustained rise in the number homicide since 1970. The EU average exhibits only a slight rise [Figure 1].

² WHO: *Health Service Indicators*. WHO database program, Copenhagen, 1997

Figure 1: Homicide Rates: European Countries



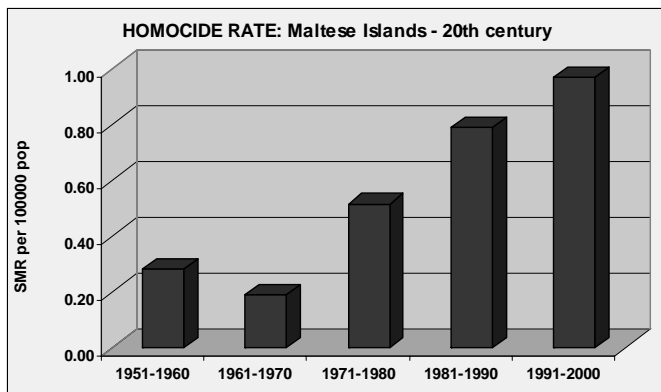
Source: WHO: Health Service Indicator, 1997



Source: WHO: Health Service Indicators, 1997

The increase in homicide mortality in Malta can best be demonstrated by decennial mortality rates published in the annual demographic data figures for causes of mortality in the Maltese Islands³. This data clearly demonstrates that overall there has been a definite increase in the homicide rate in Malta in the last five decades [Figure 2].

Figure 2: Homicide rates: Maltese Islands 1951-2000



³ Department of Health: *Report on the Health Conditions of the Maltese Islands and on the work of the Medical and Health Department for the years 1950-1960*. Department of Health, Malta, 1952-1963; Central Office of Statistics: *Demographic Review of the Maltese Islands for the years 1960-2000*. Central Office of Statistics, Malta, 1962-2001

The Maltese Police Force Annual Reports published the statistics related to violent crime. The use of varying classifications in these reports makes reliable comparison of the figures difficult. However, a review of the number of criminal offences registered by the Maltese Police Force for the beginning [1910/1911] and end [1999/2000] of the twentieth century suggests that violent crime has been a standard characteristic of Maltese society [Table 1]. The pattern of the crimes of violence appears to have shifted from crimes performed directly against the person [homicide or bodily harm], which appear to have been more prevalent in the earlier part of the century, to an increase in violent crime against property in the later years of the century⁴. This shift probably reflects the wider spread of property ownership during the latter part of the century. If I cannot beat you, I will beat your dog!

⁴ *Reports on the Working of Government Departments during the Financial year 1911-12*. Government Printing Office, Malta, 1912, I:14-17; *Reports of the Malta Police Department for the years 1999 and 2000*. Malta, 2000-2001

Table 1: Crimes of Violence 1910-1911 and 1999-2000

❖ CID Investigations	1910	1911	1999	2000
❖ Murders	3	0	4	5
❖ Attempted murders	7	6	8	12
❖ Bodily harm	140	102	19	6
❖ Illegal hunting for birds of prey	-	-	1	-
❖ Violation of property	3	4	2	-
❖ Willful damage - arson	-	-	93	109
❖ Infringement of telephone act / malicious calls – anonymous letters	-	-	9	5
❖ Possession of firearms or other arms	3	1	119	58
❖ Violence or threats against public officials – violent resistance	7	1	-	32
❖ Threats	13	8	21	13

Source: Reports on the Working of Government Departments during the Financial year 1911-12. Government Printing Office, Malta, 1912, I:14-17; Reports of the Malta Police Department for the years 1999 and 2000. Malta, 2000-2001

Domestic violence is also alarmingly common both in the form of spouse abuse and child abuse. Spouse abuse is by no means a recent problem in Malta; it has been documented even in the late eighteenth century as a common cause for conjugal separation. Between 1780-1798, there were 36 applications for injunctions against husbands

molesting their wives⁵. The statistics available for the last decade of the twentieth century suggest that the average number of cases of wife battering reported to the Police Authorities during 1989-92 averaged 165 annually; a figure which amounts to about 2.06 per 1000 marriages. The figure was similar [annual average 29 cases: 3.44 per 1000 marriages] during 1995-99 based on the cases reported to the SWDP/Appogg⁶. This rate can only be considered as the tip of the iceberg, since only the severe long-suffering cases present themselves either to the Police Authorities or for support services. From an anonymous questionnaire on 393 pregnant women, it results that spouse abuse in the Maltese community has a prevalence of about 11.7%, with physical abuse being reported in 2.3% of women. It seems that those who have been exposed to domestic abuse during childhood have a greater disposition for abuse⁷.

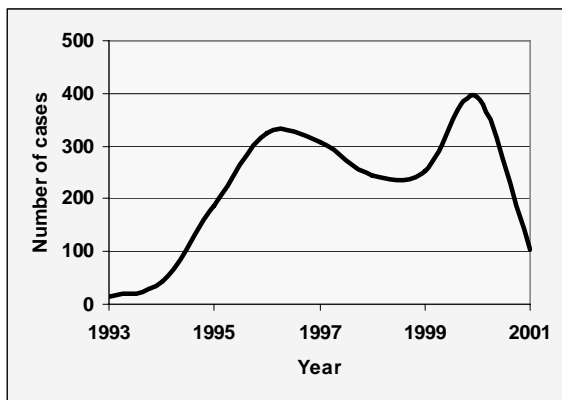
In 1993, the AGENZIJA APPOGG set up the Child Protection Services with the aim of protecting children aged 0-18 years from

⁵ F. Ciappara: *Marriage in Malta in the Late Eighteenth century*. Associated News (M) Ltd.; Malta, 1988, p.72-75 [quoting data in Curia Episcopalis Melitensae, AO 693-707]

⁶ *Parliamentary Question MHASD/PQ/543/93* of 3rd May 1993; *APPOGG Biennial Report 2000-2001*. APPOGG, Malta 2002; DVU-SWDP: *Domestic Violence in Malta*. Presentation given at the 6th Mediterranean Medical Congress, September 2000

situations of physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect. There has since been an upsurge of referrals from 13 cases in 1993 to 104 cases in 2001 [Figure 3]. Child Protection service users come from various localities on Malta with a greater predominance coming from the inner harbour and south-eastern region. The major form of child abuse reported was physical abuse [1993-2001 referrals = 839] followed by neglect [referrals = 610] and sexual abuse [referrals = 451]⁸.

Figure 3: Child Protection Services: 1993-2001



Source: APPOGG Biennial Report 2000-2001

⁷ C. Savona-Ventura et al: Domestic Abuse in a Central Mediterranean pregnant population. *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Biology*, Sep. 2001, 98 (1):p.3-8

⁸ APPOGG Biennial Report 2000-2001. APPOGG, Malta 2002

Why is human society so inclined to violence? Instinct seems to dictate that violence is a mechanism for survival of the fittest. However, in nature violence is very often restricted to inter-species relationships where the carnivores feed on the herbivores and insectivore that in turn feed on plants or insects. Thus, a food-chain pyramid is established. Intra-species violence in the animal kingdom is often restricted to the mating period where the male members of the species attempt to assume superiority over other members of their community. It is clear that this instinct exists also among humans.

Violence in the light of the Word of God made its appearance with the sin of jealousy, when Cain murdered his brother Abel. Man is different from animals by virtue of his capacity to reason and assume moral responsibility for his actions. Violence in the human species is thus a moral evil reflecting uncontrolled passion, avarice, power or hate towards ones' neighbours. Violence in human society is a direct contravention to the Gospel of Love that was preached by Our Lord Jesus Christ, who went further to instruct his followers to "turn their cheek" to those who persecute them. The only occasion in the New Testament that Jesus reacted with some form of force was when he overturned the tables of the moneylenders in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). His stance was pacifistic to the extent of stopping his disciples from using force to protect him during his unjust arrest.

(Matthew 26:47-52). Finally, the basic message was "So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12). The culture of non-violence and respect for life, which encourages us to be concerned for others and ready to help one another, is not restricted to the Christian tradition, but the same message is likewise found in other major religions.

Islam (<i>Sunnah</i>)	"No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself"
Jewish (<i>Leviticus 19:18</i>)	"You will not harbour hatred for your brother.... will love your neighbour as yourself"
Buddhism (<i>Udana-Varga, 5:18</i>)	"Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful"
Hindu (<i>Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8</i>)	"Do not to others what you do not wish done to yourself"
Confucius (<i>Analects 5:11</i>)	"Do not to others what you do not want done to yourself"

The apparent rise of crimes of violence in Maltese society reflects the trends evident in most developing and developed countries. The reasons for this rise is multifactorial, but the consumer society and its underlying philosophy are definitely contributing to the creation of attitudes demanding "instant gratification". Man in today's society is

continuously being “sold” the concept by the advertising industry that life is “not worth living now” without the availability of some or other product: “you are what you possess”! These so-considered essential products must be obtained instantaneously at all costs. These demands are further strengthened by social pressure to the extent of pushing individuals to commit crimes of violence against person or property simply to attain these goals.

The multimedia is also an important contributing factor in the promotion of violence in society. The real (e.g. wars) or make believe violent (e.g films) message which is being consistently transmitted by these media helps to de-regulate the horror and evil of violence, and hence, making it more acceptable to both the individual and social conscience. Because of the easy availability of these media, modern families are exposed to a highly significant degree of violence that was unimaginable to previous generations.

It has been argued that televised imaginary violence does not make people violent nor does it make people callous to suffering. However, if media messages have no effect on human behavior, why do producers make such a wide-ranging use of media advertising? What we see and what we think about affects our actions.

Violence has always been a part of movie making. However, in the past, when a bad guy was shot in a black-and-white Western, the most

one saw was a puff of smoke and a few drops of blood. Even this was sufficient to popularize toy guns among children. In today's movie violence, the sights, sounds, and special effects often shock us more than the real thing. Slow motion, pyrotechnics, and a penchant for leaving nothing to the imagination all conspire to make us view gruesome scenes of violence, the like of which most of us would never encounter in our lifetime.

Media-depicted violence has a greater influence on children who form the backbone of tomorrow's society. It is unfortunate that children are nowadays exposed to violence in a pervasive manner. Their innocence has been replaced by the very real threat of violence. They see violence in schools, neighborhoods, and homes. The daily news is rife with reports of child molestation and abductions. Until a few decades ago, rape was hardly publicized; today it is making headlines. War was considered a distant tragedy; now we see it in all its crude horror in our sitting rooms. All this is heightening both children's and adults' perception of violence.

The impact on behavior is not only predictable but also real. A number of studies have linked aggressive behavior among children and teenagers to TV violence. Long-term studies are even more disturbing, and it has been shown that children who watched significant amounts of TV violence at the age of 8 were consistently

more likely to commit violent crimes or engage in child or spouse abuse at the age of 30. Violent images on television and in the movies are thus contributing to an increase of violent behaviour in society.

Christians must address this issue of violence in our society. Here are a number of specific suggestions for dealing with violence.

1. Learn about the impact of violence in our society and share this material with your community.
2. Create a safe environment so that the child should feel that his or her world is safe. Providing care and protection are obvious first steps. But parents must also establish limits, provide emotional security, and teach values and virtue in the home.
3. Parents should limit the amount of media exposure in their homes. Set limits to what a child watches, and evaluate both the quantity and quality of their media input.
4. Watch TV with children, and encourage discussion with children during the programs. The discussion could focus on how cartoon characters or TV actors could solve their problems without resorting to violence; and on the

consequences of violence in real life. Control the use of the Internet.

5. Develop children's faith and trust in God.

Violence is the scourge of our society, but we can make a difference. We must educate ourselves about its influence and impact on our lives.