

What happens when silence has a price? And that price is your safety, the safety of your loved ones, banishment, or disgrace?

Welcome to the quiet history of omertà in the Mediterranean. A history of silence, and of being silenced.

A millennial silent scream, with gendered dimensions, intersecting with conquest, exploitation, oppressive patriarchy, colonisation, and today's post-colonial and oppressive legacies, that are complexified with new challenges such as climate change, surveillance societies, and radicalization, amongst others.

The Mediterranean and Malta can be a hall of mirrors that distorts humanity, and womanhood. Thus, the Mediterranean - the womb of civilisation - manifests autoimmune collateral. Through these legacies and dynamics, silence is not cowardice. It is by design.

Dynamics and Impacts of Omertà in the Mediterranean

Colonisation didn't merely redraw borders; it rewired dignity. It taught entire societies — and especially women — that silence was virtue.

As Nawal El Saadawi (1975, 1983), Egyptian feminist and revolutionary, narrates in her novel, *Woman at Point Zero*: They said, 'You are a savage and dangerous woman.' I am speaking the truth. And the truth is savage and dangerous (pp. 109-110).

Across the Mediterranean today, omertà mutates in many ways. I will focus on the following three:

- Gender-Based Violence and Underreporting
- Political and Economic Underrepresentation
- Cultural Silencing Through Tradition

Through such gendered mutations, the silence and silencing persist. Can they end?

The Data: Substantiating the Silent Scream:

Gender-Based Violence and Underreporting:

- Approximately 31% of women aged 18–74 in the EU have experienced physical violence, sexual violence, or threats in their adulthood. Only about 14% of these women report such incidents to the police. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, European Institute for Gender Equality, & Eurostat, 2024).
- Stigma, shame, and fear actively discourage reporting of gender-based violence (Shaibakova, 2020).
- Femicide remains chronically underreported (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) & UN Women, 2023), with initiatives like the European Observatory on Femicide beginning to systematically track

Political and Economic Underrepresentation:

- Among the 21 countries in the Mediterranean region, only 7 have close to 0 gender gap in labour force participation between women and men (International Labour Organisation, 2025).
- Globally, 26.9% of members of parliamentary seats are held by women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024, p. 14).
- In Malta, up till 2021, only 13.4% of parliamentary seats were occupied by women (IPU, 2019). The recent Gender Balance in Parliament Reform has increased representation in Parliament of the under-represented sex. Yet, by omitting political parties' financing to attract more candidates from under-represented genders on the ballot sheet (Bezzina et al., 2021), the implemented version of the reform shifted the onus from the political class on to the voter and taxpayer.

Cultural Silencing through Tradition:

- 65% of women cite traditional gender norms as limiting their public participation (Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation, 2019).
- Intersections with education levels are nuanced and non-linear. It is not to be assumed that women with higher education level are not silenced. In a recent study that I co-

produced, early career researchers across Europe narrate stories of precariousness and abuse (Külcür et al., 2024). Experience which these research participants have shared with us include,

I have...noticed that there remains a tendency to value men's voices and opinions more than women's ... it is obvious how the system is still in favour of masculine ideas... (p. 18). ...you need to struggle on a daily basis as a young woman researcher. The mildest one you are facing every day is not being taken seriously. 'Adult' male researchers treat you like 'you cute little thing, tell me what you have done with your research'... (p. 19).

Meanwhile, in a recent research study by Cutajar & Vassallo (2024), women students at the University of Malta reported:

You kind of expect it (with reference to sexual and gender-based harassment and specifically, groping and inappropriate touching) – it's not necessarily ok, but at the same time, I've gotten used to it (p. 114).

My Vision: Reforms Needed Internationally, Nationally, and Glocally

It's time we commit to international, national and local reforms. At international and national levels countries need to commit to:

- A Mediterranean Women's Freedom of Expression Charter;
- Gender Impact Audits on Cultural and Educational Policy; and
- Whistleblower Protections for Women.

At local level, let's talk about glocal reforms and initiatives. Let's talk about Women's Public Archives, Storytelling Projects, and Creative Expression Curricula

The Call for Action: Bel Espoir and Beyond

Moving forward, can we vessel the spirit of the Bel Espoir mission that is connecting you, young people, across nationalities, cultures, and religions (Bel Espoir, 2024), to launching a sailing observatory of women's lives in the Mediterranean?

A sailing observatory with qualitative data collection itineraries; in the form of life stories, photo journals, video diaries, travel logs. The Bel Espoir Project and Legacy could amplify women's voices across shores, complementing important initiatives that are more focused on statistics and numbers, Such as the European Observatory on Femicide (COST Action, 2024).

In the process it would build capacity, from journey to journey, from research crew to research crew.

In the Mediterranean, and beyond, we must document not only deaths and numbers, but also lives and life-stories.

Not only statistics, but also journeys! Journeys that go beyond electoral cycles, and partisan self-serving agendas. We must speak of new horizons, itineraries, connections, and destinations.

To conclude, my appeal is:

- Develop sustainably — and hence, equitably.
- Speak respectfully — and hence, unapologetically.
- Rebuild audaciously — and thus, without resentment.

Dr Maria Brown

References:

- Bel Espoir Association. (2024). Mediterranean project: Bel Espoir.
<https://med25belespoir.org/en/>
- COST Association. (2024). Creating a European Observatory on Femicide.
<https://www.cost.eu/creating-a-european-observatory-on-femicide/>
- Bezzina, F., Brown, M., & Marmarà, V.A. (2021). Gender balance in national parliament: Voters' perceptions towards the gender corrective mechanism in Malta. Democratization.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1995859>
- Cutajar, J.A. & Vassallo, R. (2024). 'YOU KIND OF EXPECT IT – IT'S NOT NECESSARILY OK, BUT AT THE SAME TIME I'VE GOTTEN USED TO IT'. TACKLING SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. In Brown, M., Hoxha, G., & Mortier, A. (eds.) (2024). Postcolonial Directions in Education, 13(1), 98-141.
- El Saadawi, N. (1983). Woman at point zero (S. Hetata, Trans.). Zed Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation. (2019). Women's voices and roles in Euro-Mediterranean societies. <https://www.euromedwomen.foundation/pg/en/documents/view/9234/womens-voices-and-roles-in-euro-mediterranean-societies>
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, European Institute for Gender Equality, & Eurostat. (2024). EU gender-based violence survey – Key results: Experiences of women in the EU-27. Publications Office of the European Union.
<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/eu-gender-violencesurvey-key-results>
- International Labour Organization. (2025). ILO modelled estimates database. ILOSTAT.
<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sl-tlf-actizs?age=15-64&gender=gender-gap>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2024). Women in politics: 2023. Geneva: IPU.
<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2024-03/women-in-parliament-2023>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2019). Women in national parliaments, February 1.
<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>
- Külcür, R., Bonello, K., Brown, M., et al. (2024). Voices in Academia and Beyond: An Exploration of European Researchers' Narratives Using a Decolonising Lens. <https://sustaila.org>
- Shaibakova, K. D. (2020). Gender-based violence: typology and solutions. International Journal of Criminology and Sociology 9, 1028–1032. doi: 10.6000/1929-4409.2020.09.114
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) & UN Women. (2023). Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide): Global estimates of female intimate

partner/family-related homicides in 2022. United Nations.

<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/genderrelated-killings-of-women-and-girls-femicide-feminicide-globalestimates-2022-en.pdf>