

WOMEN VICTIMS OF CRIME IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MALTA

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Up to quite recently criminology was almost exclusively concerned with male criminality, however slowly the criminal careers of women are today even in Malta also being addressed. Women and crime is now in fact part of the research agenda in various social science disciplines including that of history. This paper is exploring another facet of crime, this time from the perspective of women as victims rather than perpetrators of crime in eighteenth century Malta, a study falling within the area of victimology. While women in general commit less crimes in all societies past and present, as victims their numbers are high. By 'victims' in this paper it is meant women who suffered harm, including physical injury, emotional suffering, economic loss and in one case even death.

Most of the women mentioned in this paper, who lived in Malta around 300 years ago, came from an urban environment and they lived in a society, which similar to many other European countries, had witnessed an outstanding growth in population. Malta's population had increased from 20,000 before the Knights' arrival in 1530 to 100,000 by the end of the eighteenth century. Culturally by this time the transition from the Islamic way of life of the Middle Ages to a Christian society was complete and all evidence seems to show that the attitude of Maltese society towards women with regard family honour, social and legal status, position in the family and in religious matters was no different from any other South European country.

Theft

Several women in the eighteenth century filed accusations against various individuals who had allegedly stolen things from them. Maria Ottiavano¹ of Senglea in 1798 accused two men, Vincenzo and Felice from Cospicua, of stealing several sums of money from her. They had pretended to be negotiating the freedom of her son who was a slave in Algiers while in fact they were pocketing the money for themselves.

1 MAR Ms. Misc. 27: Dictum Maria Ottaviano

Maria Reno² was informed by her slave that her wardrobe had been opened and cleared of all valuables, similarly Gratia Habejer³ reported that her linen had gone missing while in 1724 Magdalena Biriero's linen was stolen by, according to her,⁴ Joseph 'Lutuzu' Rimigerio. She suspected he had stolen her linen after entering through the courtyard of her house in Vittoriosa. Robberies on a large scale from women were usually committed to women shopowners like Maria Caruana who claimed to have suffered the theft of one thousand scudi in gold jewellery and unworked silver from her shop.⁵

Injury and murder

Violence against women occurred quite frequently in eighteenth century Malta. Some women were appallingly injured; they suffered broken bones, knife wounds and severe bruising; some were hit on the head with furniture, others were whipped, thrown to the floor or bashed against the wall. Women were attacked by relatives, neighbours and sometimes by strangers, the attackers tended to be male and the ones mentioned in this paper are all men but at times women could also fall victims to physical attacks by other women too.⁶

Most frequently much of the suffering was inflicted on the women by their own husbands. It seems that for a large number of Maltese wives beatings were part and parcel of married life and nobody thought it too strange that it should occur once in a while. However, sometimes things were carried too far even for the mentality of that time and one finds several cases of women accusing and reporting husbands for severe maltreatment.

In 1792 Felicita Zammit⁷ of Vittoriosa retold what she had been going through

2 MAR Ms. Misc. 40: Dictum de Maria Reno

3 MAR Ms Misc. 28: Dictum Gratia Habejer 1787

4 MAR Ms Misc. 20: Dictum Magdalena Biriero Cro Joseph 'Lutuzo' Rimigerio

5 Y.Vella, 'Women and Work in 18th Century Malta' *Women's History Notebooks*, Vol 6 N.1, 2-9

6 Y.Vella 'Earthly Madonnas? 18th century Women Trouble-Makers' *Storja 98 Malta University Historical Society* 33-40

7 MAR Ms. Misc. 34: Dictum Felicita Uxoris Francijis Zammit de Victoriosa 1792

because of her husband's beatings and mistreatment. She said that she could bear them no longer. Francesco, her husband, was described by neighbours as a man dedicated to wine and of an ill temper. Her neighbour Giorgio Busuttill testified that he had lived near the Zammits for three years and Francesco was a savage and violent man who would hit and beat his wife at the slightest excuse. Giorgio said that the neighbourhood felt sorry for Felicita, a quiet and honest woman. But they were all afraid of Francesco who on several occasions was heard saying that woe befalls anyone who interfered between him and his wife.

Occasionally however neighbours did interfere and in this way several battered wives were saved. In 1714 Catherina Bonare⁸ of Valletta demanded justice against her husband Giacomo Natalino. One day he beat her up so badly that had it not been for the neighbours who entered their house in Strada Stretta and stopped him in time, he would have killed her.

At least Catherina Bonare survived. Teresa Lavi⁹ was not so lucky, she was murdered by her husband Gerolamo in 1742. He had done this by mixing poison with her pills. They used to live in one room in a building in Valletta. Other people who lived in the building came forward as witnesses. These included Maria Galea, the owner of the place. They recalled how they heard Gerolamo forcing her to swallow the pills. Teresa was crying out that she did not want any more and she shouted for help twice. The five doctors who later operated on Teresa's corpse reported that in their opinion, the colour and the smell of the material found in Tersa's stomach corresponded to poison, which she must have been given in the few days before her death.

Elisabetta Cupilion¹⁰ of Senglea in 1725 accused her uncle Paolo Lucara of mistreating her and her sister. She pleaded that they could tolerate him no longer and were in danger of losing their lives due to his rough treatment. At one time he even threatened to push them off the roof of their house and he kept molesting them in public while brandishing a sword and shouting that one day he would kill them both. Theresa Moro¹¹ of Valletta was beaten up badly in 1786 by a group of Venetian and

8 MAR Ms. Misc. 35: Pro Catherina Bonare Cro Jacobo Nataleo cuis virum scavi con pleggieria 1714

9 MAR Ms. Misc. 35: 1742 De veneno Cro Hieronjmun Saver

10 MAR Ms. Misc. 20: Suppo Pro Elisabetta Cupilion Cro Paulum Lucara 1725

11 MAR Ms. Misc. 24: Dictum Theresia Moro 1786

Greek sailors led by a Maltese sailor named Stivala. While punching Theresa, Stivala was heard saying that he hated her bitterly and would make her pay for giving evidence against his lover Giulia. He grabbed Theresa from the scarf she had around her neck and threw her onto the ground. She was then hit with an iron instrument under her eye. Her daughter, who tried to stop them was also given a beating.

Some of the attacks on Maltese women in the eighteenth century were very serious and violent indeed. One evening in 1796 Maria Bardon¹² was talking peacefully with her neighbour Lorenzo Borg; when all of a sudden a man with an axe appeared before them. Maria was hit with the axe which left her permanently disfigured. No explanation was given as to what might have provoked this incident by a man who Maria said she only knew by sight.

An interesting case is that of Maria Mizzi¹³ who accused Albimo Vassallo in 1715 of repeatedly taking men to her house for sexual favours. What prompted Maria to bring a case against Vassallo was the fact that she could not refuse anyone, for Albimo forced her every time even against her wishes. When answering the charge, Vassallo the accused pleaded, "but Maria is a public prostitute!" To him this justified everything he had done.

Women were physically abused by men who felt they could do what they liked because they owned their women. Rosa Pierri¹⁴ of Valletta in 1745 accused Giovanni Poverel of hitting her three times with a cane in such a violent manner that she ended up covered in blood. Poverel pleaded that Rosa had been his mistress for the previous fourteen months and that he had become very angry when he learnt in the tavern that she had taken another man into her house. He justified his right to beat her up by saying that she should not have behaved that way for to use his very words "wasn't he paying her one scudo a week in order for her to remain his lover?"

Rape

A serious crime committed against women is that of rape, eighteenth century court records reveal the thoroughness with which the investigations of rape cases were

¹² MAR Ms. Misc. 40: Dictum Maria Bardon

¹³ MAR Ms. Misc. 1: De Vulnere Dictum Maria Mizzi Cro Albimo Vassallo

¹⁴ MAR Ms. Misc. 35: Dictum Rosa Pierri Cro Joannem Poverel 1742

carried out. Witnesses were brought forward and most of the cases were accompanied by a doctor's report which confirmed or denied that rape had taken place. Checks were also done to see whether the victim was pregnant or had contracted any venereal disease. For this paper at least a dozen cases where rape undoubtedly occurred were found. These may not sound like many for an entire century but in fact I believe this to be quite high when various factors are considered. First one must keep in mind the smaller population that existed at the time while it is also most likely that in reality the number of actual rape cases was far larger. The records belonging to the eighteenth century in one archive alone, in the Archive of the Tribunal number over 3000. Naturally records of many more cases besides those found by the author might very well exist. One must also consider the fact that a rape female victim would have been treated as a "fallen" woman with all the social implications this brings with it hence most probably as still happens even today rape victims never reported the attack.

In many cases the rapist was known to the victim and was often a neighbour, fiancé or even a relative. In 1782 Margarita Minuti¹⁵ was attacked by her fiancé Joseph Lopez who denied everything. Stephano Bugeja,¹⁶ a butcher, was accused of sexually assaulting his daughter Vincenza together with the help of another man.

Some women were persuaded into collaborating by promises of marriage. This happened to Catherina Frendo¹⁷ who later complained that the man had not kept his promise. One cannot help drawing a comparison with the rape case of a famous woman in history, Artemisia Gentileschi, the great 17th century artist,¹⁸ she lived during a time period very close to the time these Maltese women victims lived. She was raped in her father's art studio when a young girl and her father brought a suit against Agostino Tassi. In her highly publicised trial Artemisia said that Tassi after his brutal attack had told her not to worry because he would marry her. Artemisia was willing to do this but it was not possible since Tassi was already married. Not all women agreed to marry their assailant after being raped even if he was available. Very

¹⁵ MAR Ms. Misc. 10: De Stupro Margerita Minuti Cro Joseph Lopez

¹⁶ MAR Ms. Misc. 29: De Stupro Stephanum Bugeja

¹⁷ MAR Ms. Misc. 9: Catarina Frendo deflora.

¹⁸ Mary D.Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi - The image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* Princeton University Press

interestingly Giovanni Maria¹⁹ of Qormi explained in court how he thought that if he raped Gratia Psaila she would be obliged to marry him, he no doubt calculated that after the rape she would not be able to marry anyone else and her only choice would be to accept him as her husband. The rape occurred but Gratia still refused to marry him. In 1766 one woman managed to fight off a rape attempt. Ignazio Cardona,²⁰ a Gozitan, entered without knocking Teresa's house and tried to rape her. Teresa, wife of Giuseppe Buhagiar also of Gozo, fought off Ignazio and scratched his face as she shouted for help. She managed to resist him long enough for people to enter her house and apprehend him before the rape occurred. Cardona had long been menacing Teresa as well as her family and after the attempted rape he was exiled from this island.

Some of the rape female victims were still children when the crime was committed. For instance, in 1722 Maria de Balzan reported that her four year old Annuccia²¹ had been sexually assaulted on her way home from school where she had been going to learn how to make socks and in 1796 Lorenzo lured nine year old Catharina to his house by telling her that he had a nice present for her. Angelo Ventura, a doctor, later confirmed that a sexual violation had taken place on the person of Catherina.²² Another rape case was that of ten year old Graziulla Cilia²³ however in this case in 1791 Sapientia Xicluna, herself not a doctor reported that after examining Graziulla there were no signs of venereal disease or of a rape having taken place at all. In 1781, Rosa Zahra of Citta Rohan (Zebbug)²⁴ accused Pawlu Gatt of attacking and raping her six year old sister. Gatt was sentenced to one year of imprisonment together with twenty strokes of the cane. He was also obliged to pay 100 scudi as dowry money to Rosa.

19 MAR Ms. Misc. 1: Dictum Gratiae Psaila Cro Jo Mariam di Cas. Curmi 1705

20 MAR Ms. Misc. 64: Dictum Teresa Buhagiar

21 MAR Ms. Misc. 20: De Stupro Annuccia de Balzan

22 MAR Ms. Misc. 32: empty cover

23 MAR Ms. Misc. 29: De Stupro Dictum Iacunda Schembri 1791

24 MAR Ms. Misc 9: De Stupro Imp Dictum Rosa Zahra Cro Paulu Gatt

Conclusion

There is an uncomfortable feeling of familiarity in these 300 year old cases, unfortunately not so dissimilar cases still make the headlines today and it is not difficult to recognise similar women victims in our society. It is also obvious that these are the very few who made it to court and there must have been many more women victims of crime in Maltese eighteenth century society who like today we will never know about. However, if one can perhaps make a positive observation from these cases, it would have to be that very often it was the women who took their aggressors to court, they are the ones instigating the court case. Women like Maria Ottaviano, Maria Reno and the jewellery shopowner Maria Caruana started the legal proceedings against the thieves who had stolen their goods. While it certainly took courage for women like Felicita Zammit and Catherina Bonare to accuse their husbands or in Rosa Pierri's case her lover of beating them, and one especially appreciates the risk Maria Mizzi, a prostitute, took when she started a court case against such a dangerous man as Albino Vassallo, a man who solicits clients for sex. It was also brave of the several raped women who reported their attackers and one cannot not admire the audacity of Gratia Psaila who refused the option of marrying her assailant. These women showed that they were definitely not passive victims, on the contrary they were willing to risk social stigmas, to face their aggressors and seek justice.