

EY2010 Journalist Award MALTA

Winner print/online

Fiona Galea Debono

Article title: “Married to a drunk, beaten poor”

Published in: The Sunday Times, 27/06/2010



Fiona Galea Debono has been a journalist for The Times since 1998 after she completed her second university course – a three-year scholarship in journalism in Italy. Prior to that, she graduated Bachelor of Arts in English and Italian at the University of Malta, and also attended courses in language, culture and history of art in Florence and Paris. For the last six years, she has also juggled the job of executive editor of Pink, a monthly, women’s magazine, distributed with The Times, which she created from scratch. She has been working in the newsroom of Malta’s leading newspaper for the past 12 years, covering a broad range of subjects. Fiona has a particular interest in human-interest stories and interviews that offer insight into people, personalities and their particular situations. She has also taken on several freelance copywriting jobs for a variety of media, including international publications, books and the internet.

Married to a drunk, beaten, poor...

It is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion... and suddenly, poverty exists in Malta. **Fiona Galea Debono** speaks to a poor woman who emerged from the woodwork.

Those at risk of poverty are blamed for bringing on their own dire circumstances, for being lazy, abusing social benefits and opting for the worst life choices. Those who toil to improve their status are not impressed by the fact that entire families are on welfare, producing more and more offspring to aggravate their problems.

But Jenny* does not fall into this stereotype. She is living proof that poverty does exist and is not always self-inflicted. She may not be begging on the streets and does her utmost to disguise her status out of embarrassment, but she ticks most of the boxes concerning what doctors a human can face in a lifetime.

Jenny's life has been riddled by a series of situations that are more the stuff of movies. Being married to a drunk in denial and a victim of domestic violence, subject to beatings for five solid years, would have been enough.

She did not legally separate from her husband in the hope that he would clean up his act and return. She always believed marriage was for better and for worse, and tried to make it work. She did not taint his image in the eyes of her four children either, hiding the abuse from them during 23 years of marriage.

"I never wanted them to hate him; the fight was between us. When I asked him to leave, to protect them I told them he was working nights to earn money for them. It is only recently that they came to know the real situation."

But the truth is that when Jenny finally plucked up the courage to stop forgiving her husband and ask him to leave, things took a turn for the worse and her financial situation slid further down the drain.

Of her four children, one has mental problems and regular fits, but Jenny nurses him herself, refusing to ever send him to Mount Carmel Hospital.

"When he loses control, I am the buffer who tells him to take it out on me."

Jenny may have undergone nine operations, some major; she may have a mysterious medical

condition that could have grim consequences and is on morphine to numb the pain. But what she is really drowning in is her debt with the government, which she wants to pay off.

"I am tired of going to the banks to try and borrow money to clear what I owe," she says, resisting the temptation to fall into the usury trap.

Jenny pulls out other 'bugle' outstanding bills that give her a fright each time. She lives off about €430 a month in social benefits, but owes over €1,000 in bills for the phone, which she has now removed; almost the same amount for water and electricity, which she will soon be cut off; and owes arrears on rent, which the government has now slashed considerably.

"When he loses control, I am the buffer who tells him to take it out on me"

"I simply cannot pay them... If I could, my problems would be solved," says the woman who is content with life, and lives it day by day, making no demands.

Jenny is 44 years old, but even when she says she is already an old woman due to her life's experiences, she is not seeking pity. And the fact that she has no bottom teeth somehow does not age her more.

She cannot afford a denture, she says, revealing unabashed a toothless mouth, and only eats liquid foods. But that is the least of her problems and it is another thing she has managed to hide.

"I am a fighter," Jenny insists repeatedly. Maybe the trait is the remnant of her five years as a soldier - the only job she ever had.

And the only thing she wants now is to find another, unhindered by the fact that she is illiterate and has health problems. One of eight children, she was constrained to start working at 15 when her father fell ill.



"I am a fighter"... Jenny is not seeking pity.

Jenny is taking an ETC course to be a care worker - of all things. Just when you'd think she needed to be cared for, she is planning to get a job to look after the elderly, who she has a particular soft spot for.

Aware that she would lose her monthly social benefits, and that her housing rent would go up again, Jenny knows a job would get the ball rolling, get her out of the house and, more importantly, out of her rut.

Jenny's caring side is evident from the off. She is tending to a toddler in the waiting room of Caritas, which recently launched its Stop Poverty - Act Now campaign.

To make matters worse, her 21-year-old son, the eldest, has a five-month-old baby with a 16-year-old girl. Jenny is not amused, but both the mother and the child live with her and her grandson is the apple of her eye.

It's a full house, with the females sleeping in one room and the males in another, with Jenny waking up to tend to the baby by night.

"I decided to take in my son's girlfriend when she turned to me because her parents demanded €200 of the benefits she receives as a single mother, leaving her unable to fend for the child with the remaining €111."

Jenny demands nothing from her - she just gives. "Instead of eating meat, we can have bread. It's not a problem. We support each other and as a mother, I know what it means."

Marriage is not on the cards because the girl is too young, and Jenny does not want them to tie the knot for the wrong reasons.

Her major concern is domestic violence and she warns her children that she would take their partners' side if she ever found out they were abusing anyone. They still cannot understand why it is such an issue.

To add to her plans, Jenny recently discovered that her eldest started dabbling in drugs and has made it her mission to clean him up. It is a tall order, but she won't give up, and

almost shoulders the blame for his weak character.

"When he was young, he was bullied. I had warned him that if he hit anyone back, I would beat him myself. I think it is unintentionally my fault that he is not strong like me."

Despite everything, Jenny's values and fighting spirit are unwavering. She has accepted her lot, resists her problems and, where she cannot, pushes them aside.

But despite her good intentions, the vicious circle may continue - education has not been a priority and they stopped studying as soon as they could, primarily due to financial reasons, narrowing their opportunities considerably.

"What can you do? Since we are poor, we cannot," she says, resigned and battling back in the same breath. "My future can only be better."

More information on dealing with poverty is available from Caritas at info@caritasmalta.org.



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Transcript

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Winner AV

Brandon Pisani

Report title: "Refuġjati Nisa" ("Immigrants and discrimination")

Published in: Favourite Channel, 18/07/2010

Brandon Pisani was born and raised in Toronto, Canada. He came to Malta with his family where he finished his studies.

In October 1995, he commenced his career in the print journalism field. When joining Union Press Co. Ltd., he worked as a journalist for its two Maltese leading newspapers – 'L-Orizzont' and 'It-Torca'.

After 14 years, he moved on to TV journalism. In 2009, he joined the private TV station, Favourite Channel, as a Senior Journalist. Currently he is also the Deputy News Manager. With this channel, he has had the opportunity to produce and present various current affairs discussion programmes.

In the course of his career, Brandon Pisani was an award winner in the Malta Journalism Awards in 2006. In other editions of these prestigious awards, he was repeatedly a finalist.

Throughout the years, Brandon has been volunteering in several NGO's. He used to be involved a lot in organising local and international activities and seminars for youths. In 1999, he was a finalist for the 'Malta Youth of the Year Award'.

For the past three years he has been a member in the 'Kare4Kenya' committee. 'Kare4Kenya' is a non-profit Non Governmental Development Organisation based in Malta, working to help Kenyan children reach their potential while working with youths and parents to help themselves build a better future. In 2007 he went for a whole month experience in the slum area of Kawangware, Kenya.

Summary: "Refuġjati Nisa" ("Immigrants and discrimination")

During the past few years, irregular immigrants were those mostly involved in cases of discrimination which were reported to the authorities. More than half of the immigrants living in Malta stated that since arriving in the country they have faced high levels of discriminatory treatment.

They claimed that they are facing difficulties in order to find decent jobs and are being forced into undeclared employment under poor conditions.

Presently, around 30 women and their children from Nigeria and Congo, who last year came out of an Open Centre for immigrants, are facing poverty due to the fact that they have not been accepted by society. Some of the women are married, but because of their health or other problems, they feel that they are being discriminated against. These women and their husbands are not finding jobs.

Migrants' Solidarity Movement is working with these immigrants so as to try and improve their conditions.

The national winners were selected by a national jury which consisted of:

- William Martin, EC Representation
- Noel Calleja, Project Administrator for EY2010, Foundation for Social Welfare Services (representing the NIB)
- Grima Noel, Editor in Chief, Standard Publications (consisting of The Malta Independent, The Malta Independent on Sunday, The Malta Business Weekly)
- Mario Schiavone, PRO, Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family (representing Ambassadors)