



FIDEM FOUNDATION

WOMEN'S DAY
CONFERENCE
'ACCELERATE
ACTION'
7TH MARCH 2025

REPORT

CORYSE BORG

**PREAMBLE TO THE REPORT ON FIDEM FOUNDATION'S
WOMEN'S DAY CONFERENCE
*ACCELERATE ACTION***

The third annual Women's Day Conference organised by the FIDEM Foundation, *Accelerate Action* organised by FIDEM Foundation at The Xara Lodge in Mdina, Malta on 7th March 2025, highlighted the urgent need for real, measurable progress on gender equality across various sectors.

The event underscored that women's rights require year-round commitment rather than symbolic gestures, urging institutions to uphold their pledges for change.

Structured into four panels, the conference explored critical topics: economic empowerment through equal pay, education, and diversity in recruitment; the promotion of female participation in sports, arts, and culture; addressing systemic shortcomings for domestic violence victims and accelerating justice; and safeguarding the mental health of victims and their families, addressing trauma stigma and tailored support.

A robust lineup of speakers, including experts, advocates, domestic violence survivors, and industry professionals, facilitated engaging discussions and provided actionable insights to foster meaningful change.

The conference served as a call to action, emphasising accountability and the collective effort required to break systemic barriers and ensure gender equity.

CORYSE BORG
Rapporteur

OPENING REMARKS BY MARC CABOURDIN

FACILITATOR

During his opening remarks at the FIDEM Foundation's Women's Day Conference, *Accelerate Action*, facilitator Marc Cabourdin emphasised the urgency of advancing gender equality.

He highlighted that, while it has been 50 years since the United Nations adopted its vision for International Women's Day, progress has been made, but it remains insufficient.

Reflecting on the Fourth World Conference on Women held 30 years ago, Cabourdin underscored its groundbreaking commitment to equal rights and the safety of women and girls worldwide. He described the resulting framework as "the most comprehensive and visionary plan ever established for gender equality."

However, he cautioned that the world cannot afford to wait another 30 years for meaningful change.

Cabourdin stressed that the current pace of progress is too slow and called for real accountability to drive concrete action. It is It's time to demand real accountability, he said.

He also acknowledged the presence of distinguished diplomats, including Ambassadors from Australia, France, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands, as well as a representative from the British High Commission.

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY DR SABINE AGIUS CABOURDIN

FIDEM FOUNDATION FOUNDER

FIDEM Foundation founder Dr Sabine Agius Cabourdin began by expressing her gratitude to those who braved the inclement weather to participate in this important event.

Dr Agius Cabourdin emphasised the necessity of inclusivity in shaping the gender equality narrative, stating that progress requires the collaboration of both men and women. It is not a matter of women versus men but rather a collective effort to foster a more equitable society.

She extended a special welcome to the students and teachers present, expressing her hope that they would carry the conference's message beyond the event and into their communities.

This year's theme, *Accelerate Action*, highlights the urgency of breaking barriers such as the glass ceiling and striving for greater gender parity. Dr Agius Cabourdin outlined how the FIDEM Foundation actively contributes to this mission through a twofold approach.

Firstly, the Foundation educates and empowers vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals, guiding them towards education and employment opportunities. Secondly, FIDEM lobbies for systemic change, ensuring that the voices of women are heard and acknowledged.

Dr Agius Cabourdin stressed the importance of listening to the perspectives of all individuals, asserting that their voices are just as valuable as those of experts and panelists. FIDEM compiles reports based on these insights and submits them to various government ministries, advocating for policy changes and tangible improvements.

However, she acknowledged the frequent lack of response from many governmental departments, which she described as indicative of a broader disinterest in addressing gender equality issues.

Despite these challenges, Dr Agius Cabourdin reaffirmed FIDEM's commitment to persistently pushing for action. She assured attendees that the Foundation would continue to apply pressure and follow up on its initiatives until meaningful progress is achieved.

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY PROF. MARIE BRIGUGLIO

ECONOMIST

Prof. Marie Briguglio started off by expressing gratitude to FIDEM Foundation for organising the event and acknowledged Dr Sabine Agius Cabourdin for her continued commitment to this annual gathering.

She structured her address into three key segments: a review of last year's discussions, reflections on the present challenges, and recommendations for the future.

1. Reflections on Last Year's Conference: Economic Empowerment

Last year's conference centered on economic empowerment, with three main clusters of issues standing out:

A. Work and Employment

- The glass ceiling remains unbroken. As Dr Agius Cabourdin noted, society still celebrates when a company appoints a female CEO, highlighting the rarity of such occurrences.
- There is significant potential for businesses to embrace digitalisation and flexible work arrangements.
- Employment stereotypes persist, particularly in fields such as early childhood education and ICT.
- The gender pay gap remains an ongoing issue.
- Political participation and gender quotas continue to be debated.

B. Education

- While girls generally outperform boys in school, the gender balance shifts at the postgraduate level, where male participation surpasses female engagement.

- Lifelong learning presents a challenge. An audit is needed to assess the inclusivity and quality of the education system for women, including migrant women.
- There is considerable room for educating boys and men on gender equality.

C. Beyond Work and Education

- Child-rearing responsibilities still predominantly fall on women. Short school hours, long summer holidays, and extracurricular activities add to these challenges.
- Violence against women remains a pressing issue and a harsh reality that must be addressed.

2. Observations on Wellbeing and Quality of Life

Prof. Briguglio emphasised the importance of looking beyond work and education to focus on overall quality of life. Drawing from the [Wellbeing Index Project](#), an initiative by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the University of Malta, she highlighted key insights based on five years of wellbeing data.

- Research in the field, including the work of Richard Layard, underscores that “happiness is what people most care about”.
- Over the past five years, data consistently indicates that women report experiencing more negative emotions and fewer positive ones.
- Women express higher satisfaction with their relationships but lower satisfaction with their financial situation.
- Certain groups of women face even greater difficulties. Data on separated, divorced, and widowed women reveal consistently lower wellbeing scores across all measured aspects compared to married or single women.

Prof. Briguglio stressed that the goal of wellbeing should focus on how individuals - particularly women - experience life firsthand.

3. The Path Forward: Accelerating Action

Looking to the future, Prof. Briguglio emphasised the need for strategic, effective interventions to accelerate action toward gender equality.

A. Where are we going?

- A clearly stated vision and measurable, SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals are necessary.
- The focus must extend beyond narrow economic indicators to encompass broader aspects of wellbeing.

B. Who will get us there?

- We need a clarity of roles. A well-coordinated public sector is essential.
- Businesses must actively contribute to these efforts.
- Engagement should extend across society, including children, the elderly, migrants, and civil society.

C. And how?

- A combination of legal and fiscal reforms should be adopted, guided by evidence-based research.
- It is crucial to assess whether interventions yield intended results and to identify any unintended consequences.
- Continuous research should be conducted to evaluate the experiences of those affected by these policies and those who remain disengaged.

Prof. Briguglio concluded by stating that accelerating action requires more than just identifying challenges. It necessitates evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, learning from past efforts, and adapting strategies to ensure meaningful progress.

PANEL 1

ACCELERATING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN ECONOMIC, EDUCATION, AND EMPLOYMENT SECTORS

Moderator: Ariadne Massa (AM)

Panelists:

- Prof. Anna Borg, Expert in Gender Equality (AB)
- Julia Aquilina, Policy Executive, The Malta Chamber (JA)
- Joe Farrugia, Economist (JF)
- Dr Maria Brown, Senior Lecturer in Adult Education (MB)

Ariadne Massa (AM) opened the discussion by highlighting the importance of including both men and women in conversations about gender empowerment. She emphasised that the question of whether women are truly empowered depends on whom one asks. Real empowerment is about having genuine choices, yet restrictions persist.

She noted that Malta has the lowest fertility rate in the EU, with many mothers expressing reluctance to have a second child. Mothers are feeling torn between working and childbearing.

She called for a discussion on how Malta can create an environment where both women and families can thrive, particularly by making shared parenting a reality.

Prof. Anna Borg, (AB) stressed that Malta does not provide adequate support for mothers. A [recent study](#)¹ co-conducted by herself and commissioned by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE), indicates that while parents ideally want two children, financial constraints and other barriers prevent them from achieving this.

Higher-income individuals are more likely to have multiple children, highlighting economic disparities. However, financial concerns alone do not account for the issue.

She pointed out that maternity leave in Malta is too short, with mothers receiving only 14 to 18 weeks. There is an urgent need for improved maternity and paternity leave, with greater support from partners.

Although both parents should ideally be involved in child-rearing, only 1% of fathers currently take on primary caregiving responsibilities. She questioned whether young people are being educated on the importance of shared caregiving responsibilities from an early age.

For years, mothers have been at a disadvantage, and they are no longer willing to accept the status quo. Tackling the issue requires closing the caregiving gap, increasing workplace flexibility, and shifting employer focus from hours worked to productivity. Additionally, the government must make this issue a priority by allocating significant resources.

AM referenced statements by Minister for Finance and Employment Clive Caruana, who called for urgent and substantial investment to address the declining birth rate. She asked how businesses should approach this issue.

Joe Farrugia (JF) acknowledged the complexity of the issue but argued that solutions do not necessarily have to be prohibitively expensive. He advocated for shared responsibility, including employer involvement.

He prefers the term 'family-friendly measures' over 'work-life balance'.

Unions, he noted, also play a crucial role in ensuring these measures are implemented without reducing working hours.

Government policies could help alleviate fiscal burdens, such as redistributing working hours and shifting public holidays that fall on weekends to weekdays - an adjustment that could free up approximately 900,000 workdays per year. He suggested that such a policy change could fund extended maternity leave.

Malta's labour market is highly competitive, and to attract top talent, companies must offer benefits like teleworking and flexible schedules. However, he acknowledged that not all jobs, such as nursing, allow for such flexibility, requiring alternative solutions. In the long term, career choices will be affected, as women may avoid professions that lack flexibility.

A generous government-provided lump sum for women who give birth could be one part of the solution, though it must be supplemented with additional measures.

While the burden of raising a family still falls largely on mothers, the situation is slowly changing, with more fathers taking paternity leave.

AM asked whether employers are recognising the urgency of these issues.

JF responded that change is happening, albeit at a slower pace than desired. He called for a social pact involving all stakeholders - government, opposition, employers, and unions - to ensure a coherent strategy with clear timelines and policy monitoring.

Julia Aquilina (JA) agreed with many of JF's points, adding that employers are acutely aware of Malta's aging workforce and skills shortages. The Malta Chamber has long advocated for government intervention to keep older individuals in employment.

She stressed the importance of embedding family-friendly measures into workplace culture rather than treating them as a temporary Women's Day initiative.

Education from an early age is key to shifting mindsets. Some employers have proactively implemented changes without government mandates, while others still discriminate against women due to potential maternity leave.

Additionally, she highlighted the pressures on the social security system and called for a focus on productivity rather than working hours.

While policy advancements have been made in the past two years, she criticised the patchwork approach, emphasising the need for a holistic gender mainstreaming policy. She also pointed out significant implementation gaps and the lack of comprehensive data collection.

Dr Maria Brown (MB) identified two fundamental problems:

1. There is an overemphasis on long-term goals without sufficient accountability for policymakers, who may not be in office when results materialise.
2. Education is often tied to employment rather than personal development, leading to a focus on obtaining certificates rather than lifelong learning.

She challenged the perception that free childcare is genuinely free, as it is taxpayer-funded. Initially, access to childcare was tied to parental employment, an approach she argued should be reconsidered.

She called for a paradigm shift beyond outdated concepts like the 'glass ceiling', advocating instead for equal access and opportunity. She said, "Frankly in 2025, I don't want to break anything. I want to come through the door. I will not be offended in the least if it is a man who does that for me. I'll reciprocate the favour in the future."

AB reiterated the need to place families at the center of policymaking. While childcare helped some women, a majority did not want to send their children to childcare before six months of age. Instead, increased parental leave would have been a more effective solution.

She also highlighted the lack of adequate leave policies for those caring for elderly parents or siblings. She said: "Let's find a solution for the 21st century. Till not long ago, fathers got one day paternity leave. What message does this give? Fathers want to be involved with their children but are we allowing them to do so? No."

JF said that everyone should share the responsibility. The focus on family should extend beyond the workplace and be embedded throughout society. When

considering additional leave, priority should be given to parents, as they are most in need of more time away from work.

He continued saying that we are failing to account for the real well-being of society. Work is meant to create wealth that improves our lives, but ultimately, the goal of employment and business should go beyond economic gain. Shifting from purely economic metrics to well-being is crucial, as it shapes demand for different services.

The employer-employee relationship is about more than just work. For example, a request for reduced hours can pose challenges for micro-enterprises, but the impact depends on who is making the request and why. These needs must be carefully considered when shaping policy.

A social pact is essential, but we also need to ensure workplaces are truly gender-neutral - irrespective of gender and nationality.

AM asked the panel: if they had the power to implement one radical reform, what would it be?

JA said it is all about access. There is a world of opportunities available, but women need the real right to choose and access them. Open the doors for women and provide a helping hand. The government needs to ensure that young people have access to these opportunities.

MB said that her vision is for Malta to become a lifelong education destination. Malta is a small country, and this is achievable. However, achieving this goal has significant implications. First and foremost, there is the need of the professionalisation of adult educators. Currently, in the state sector, adult educators earn just €20 per hour, with no required qualifications, no professional recognition, and often precarious working conditions. Additionally, there is the need of structured professional development for individuals handling maternity leave transitions, reintegration into the workforce, and other key life stages.

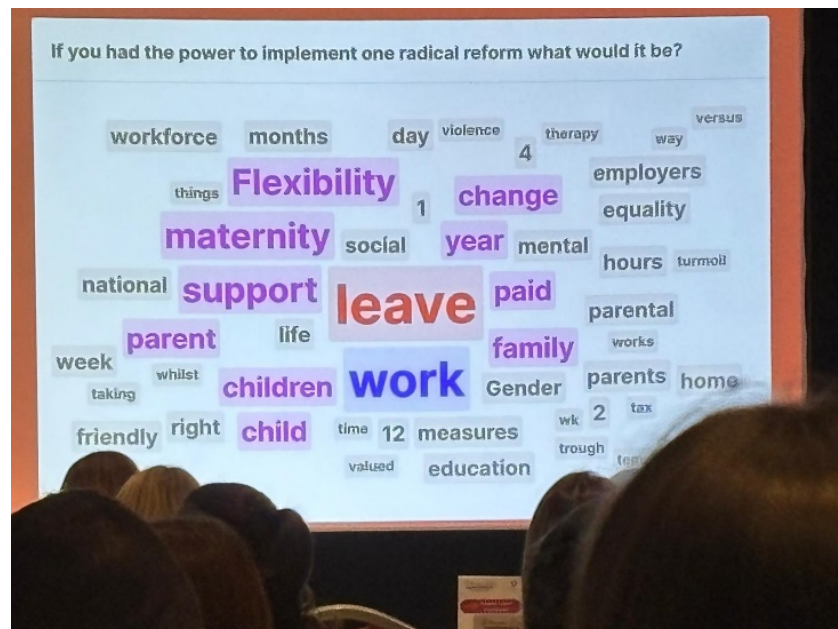
AB said that it is essential to place families at the centre of policymaking. There is a lot to be done, so there is the need to take a holistic and professional approach.

Rather than discussing work-life balance or individual family-friendly measures, we should be talking about work-life integration. This generation is the 'sandwich generation' balancing responsibilities for both children and aging parents. Flexible work arrangements should be accessible to everyone, not just parents.

JF said that the social pact is important but a 'gender neutral' workplace irrespective of gender and nationality, is also important.

A **Word Cloud** generated responses from audience when they were asked the same question highlighted key priorities:

- **Leave**
- **Work**
- **Flexibility**
- **Maternity**
- **Support**



AUDIENCE Q&A

Question from the floor: How is adult education recognised in Malta, and how is it valued within national education policies and workforce development strategies?

MB said that currently, education in Malta is primarily recognised as a means to fulfill the needs of the labour market - to provide learning that is required for employment. However, if we only learn to be employed, that learning becomes temporary and limited to a specific time and place. This narrow perspective implies that adult education is poorly valued. "There is a national education policy being rolled out, but it is still in its early stages. We need policies that balance both long-term and short-term goals," she said.

A speaker from the floor (**managerial position at Betsson**) noted that schools in Malta usually contact mothers, before the fathers, for anything regarding their children. She said that then it is the mothers who must leave work to sort things out.

By way of answer, **AM** said that there is the need of a 'cultural shift', as far as this goes.

AB pointed out that in Malta, there is little to no training on shared parenting, and 'motherhood gatekeeping' remains an issue, with many mothers believing they are the most qualified caregivers. She urged the need to educate mothers on the value of the fathers' involvement.

JA conducted a show of hands to gauge how many men pick up their children from school - initially, only one hand was raised, but eventually, three men in the audience acknowledged doing so.

AM said that she knew a woman who, when she mentioned possibly having a second child, her boss told her, 'Don't even think about it / *Tivvinitax*'.

Chairperson of Vassallo Group Malta Natalie Briffa Farrugia intervened from the floor, saying that families cannot be managed solely by employers. A national-

scale initiative is needed to address these challenges, particularly given Malta's increasingly international workforce. The country's labour force has seen rapid growth fueled by foreign workers, and future workforce planning must reflect this reality.

From the floor, **Panel 2 and 3 Moderator Trudy Kerr** highlighted the societal expectation, quoting: ““A working husband comes home to a cooked meal and a working wife comes home to cook the meal.”

She questioned how to engage men in these conversations and shift the perception that household responsibilities are "helping" rather than shared duties.

MB noted that younger generations of men may be more receptive to these changes.

AB said, “We need to let men know that it is ok to spend time with their children.” She added that, according to the study mentioned earlier, approximately 30% of men are already engaging in shared caregiving responsibilities, but more encouragement is needed.

JF stressed that discussions on parental roles should happen before marriage and that employers must realise that fathers, not just mothers, have family responsibilities.

[1 Perceptions and Attitudes of women and men in Malta towards work-life balance: with a specific focus on family size](#)

PANEL 2

Breaking Barriers in Sports, Arts, and Culture for Women and Girls

Moderator: Ariadne Massa (AM)

Panelists:

- Howard Keith Debono, Music Producer & Artist Manager **(HKD)**
- Mary Ann Cauchi, COO - Strategy & Funding, Arts Council Malta **(MAC)**
- Charlo Bonnici, CEO, Mediterranean College of Sports **(CB)**
- Dr Maria Azzopardi, MFA General Secretary **(MA)**

AM opened the discussion by posing a number of questions: Why, in 2025, are women and girls still fighting for a fair position in sports and the arts? Why do so many women face the dilemma of choosing between a career and the 'biological clock'? What is truly holding women back, and who benefits from maintaining the status quo? She then introduced a video clip by footballer Hayley Bugeja, who currently plays for Italian club Inter Milan of Serie A.

HAYLEY BUGEJA (VIDEO CLIP)

Hayley Bugeja shared her personal journey in football. Growing up, her father and brother played football, and at the age of five, she joined Birkirkara FC.

Initially, her mother was hesitant about her playing in a male-dominated sport, but eventually, she agreed. As the only girl among 30 boys, Bugeja faced negative comments and moments of self-doubt. However, with the unwavering support of her family, she persisted and ultimately gained the respect of her male counterparts.

She acknowledged that the landscape for female athletes has improved, but change is gradual. She said, “Nowadays there are so many opportunities for a woman to go and whatever she does. Yes, she will be criticised for doing it, as I have. But again, I wouldn’t change it. These things make you grow and get out of your comfort zone.”

Bugeja also stressed the importance of leveraging social and traditional media to promote women's sports.

While achieving success on a global stage is difficult, hard work makes it possible, she said. Playing alongside renowned athletes has been motivating, and returning to Malta to feel the appreciation of her fellow citizens gives her immense pride.

Looking ahead, she plans to support the next generation of female athletes in Malta.

Maria Azzopardi (MA) reflected on her journey as the first woman to hold the position of General Secretary at the Malta Football Association.

With 30 years of experience in football, she recalled how female players once had to wear men's kits - a seemingly small but significant issue at the time.

International matches were rare, occurring only a couple of times per year, whereas today, female players participate in 15 to 20 matches annually. Access to physiotherapists, once a luxury, is now a necessity.

Despite progress, disparities persist. Funding for men’s and women’s sports remains unequal, and the pay gap is stark. Internationally, female athletes still earn significantly less than their male counterparts.

The top-paid female tennis player ranks 107th globally, earning \$180 million less than the highest-paid male athlete. MA questioned whether redistributing funds more equitably - “like Robin Hood” - could be a solution.

Charlo Bonnici (CB) emphasised the continued male dominance in sports leadership, with only 20% of key positions occupied by women. This creates a cycle where fewer women are represented in decision-making, he said.

Women need to push themselves a bit more, but they should be given the space, he stressed.

He referenced the quote: "If you can see her, you can be her," stressing the importance of visible female role models, such as Hayley Bugeja.

He also highlighted efforts at the Mediterranean College of Sport to attract more female athletes through specific initiatives including schemes and campaigns to try to attract more female football players, as well as the introduction of sports such as gymnastics and tennis.

Howard Keith Debono (HKD) admitted that earlier in his career, he was largely unaware of the challenges women face in the arts. Over the years, he has come to recognize key barriers, including the biological clock and pay inequality. He recounted the struggle to secure equal pay for top female artists, a battle that has now seen some improvement.

Another issue – or ‘blocker’ as he called it – is the perception of female artists as they age, a challenge not as pronounced for their male counterparts. Education plays a crucial role, as the arts are often deprioritised within the educational system. While this affects both genders, female artists are particularly impacted due to societal and financial pressures.

Additionally, male artists tend to be more self-sufficient, while female artists often face additional obstacles when seeking financial independence or international opportunities.

On a positive note, he noted that female artists tend to be less driven by ego than their male counterparts, which can be an advantage. However, many women are discouraged from pursuing the arts, and perhaps not so driven, again due to societal expectations.

Mary Ann Cauchi (MAC) presented both positive and negative aspects of women's involvement in the arts. While more women work in the creative and cultural industries than men, many males drop out due to societal pressure to find so-called ‘real’ jobs.

The lack of arts education in schools exacerbates this issue, as children are conditioned to see the arts as insignificant. “We would have even more women involved if it were not for the ‘hazards’ that there are, she said. Education is the biggest one. There are schools which barely have any arts lessons – hardly a lesson a week. Sports yes. Arts are the last on the agenda.”

There exists a ‘career toolkit’. But career guidance must improve to highlight viable career paths in the arts. There is the need of cooperation from the education system.

“Things are moving but not fast enough. We sometimes find resistance from that end but we are not going to stop advocating careers in the arts,” she stressed.

MAC also emphasised the ‘right to culture’, stating that artists have the right to earn a living, and audiences have the right to access cultural experiences.

CB noted that more Maltese women than men are pursuing sports careers abroad. Female athletes are often more independent and willing to take risks, whereas many Maltese male athletes prefer to stay in Malta due to financial stability.

“We have a lot of ‘mummies’ boys’ in Malta. At our schools, we teach our boys a number of soft skills,” he noted.

MA added that currently, around 12 Maltese female athletes compete abroad in football and basketball. The financial gap is a key factor - while male footballers in Malta earn comfortable salaries, female players find better opportunities overseas.

She personally faced the dilemma of continuing her education versus pursuing an international football career, ultimately choosing to prioritise her studies.

AM asked the panelists what is most critical for change.

HKD said Education is key. Change must start there.

MAC said that special focus should be placed on migrant women, girls, and those with disabilities.

CB: Education, education, education.

MA said that while education is a long-term solution, quotas may be necessary in the short term; a stance she initially opposed but now sees as a necessity.

AUDIENCE Q&A

Head of Personal Development, Psychology and International Programmes of the Mediterranean College of Sport Dr Bernice Sant remarked that women often need to be more resilient than driven due to societal challenges. Once women achieve success, they tend to sustain it, she said, citing Hayley Bugeja as an example.

Anesthesiologist and harpist Annemarie Camilleri Podesta spoke about how she was discouraged from pursuing music in her youth. She highlighted the financial struggle of full-time musicians, noting that she earns only €130 for many hours of work. While music is her 'side-hustle', she acknowledged that for those relying solely on the arts, financial sustainability is a major issue.

AM wondered why it is not possible to learn an instrument at school.

An audience member who is a **photographer** pointed out that many people undervalue artistic professions, assuming that photography is as simple as "clicking a button." However, he noted that female photographers often have an advantage in niche markets, such as maternity shoots.

HKD noted that within MEIA (Malta Entertainment Industry Association), female representation is significant. However, in male-dominated spaces, women often have to be louder to make their points heard.

AM added that when women assert themselves, they are often labeled as 'aggressive', underscoring the need for a shift in mentality. This was echoed by **HKD** who said that it is predominantly men's mentality that needs to change.

MAC spoke about the 'Cultural Backpack' initiative, which is currently in the works, and which aims to ensure that every student participates in at least two artistic activities per school year.

Question from the floor: Every single business / industry is going to be affected by AI. There seems to be a noted lack of discussion on the integration of AI – a field which is mainly male-driven -particularly in creative and artistic fields. More boys and men tend to engage in gaming and digital arts.

HKD noted that technology acts as a significant barrier for female musicians. From his experience managing various musical acts, only one female group - The New Victorians - has demonstrated the ability to independently produce their own work. This underscores the need for greater accessibility and support for women in technology-driven creative industries.

PANEL 3

Promises, Promises:

Accelerate Action for Victims of Domestic Violence

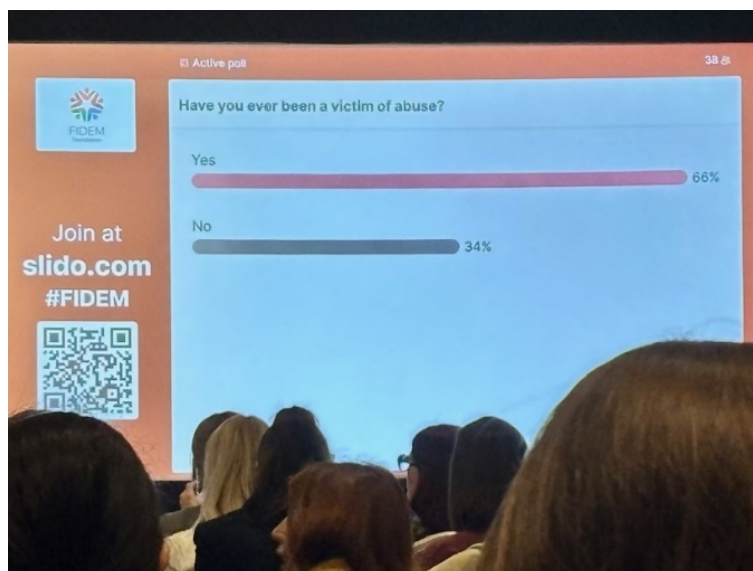
Moderator: Trudy Kerr (TK)

Panelists:

- Alessia Cilia Portelli, sister of femicide victim Bernice Cassar **(ACP)**
- Samantha Pace Gasan, Commissioner for Domestic Violence **(SPG)**
- Superintendent Sylvana Gafa', Head of Services, Victim Support Agency **(SG)**
- Professor Marceline Naudi, Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies **(MN)**

FIDEM Foundation Founder Dr Sabine Agius Cabourdin expressed her satisfaction at hearing the previous panelists emphasise education, noting that this remains a core focus for FIDEM. She voiced her dislike for the term 'glass ceiling' but acknowledged that until women's rights are fully integrated into society, it is necessary to continue addressing these issues.

Trudy Kerr (TK) opened the panel by asking women in the audience to raise their hands if they had experienced domestic abuse.



She pointed out that one in three women have experienced domestic violence, emphasising that everyone in the room likely knows and loves someone who has gone through it.

She noted that 11,056 cases of domestic violence were reported between 2020 and 2024, with 3,587 cases recorded in the last year alone.

Alessia Cilia Portelli (ACP) spoke about the difficulty of sharing her sister Bernice Cassar's story but stressed the importance of doing so. Bernice was murdered over two years ago, shot three times - two of which struck her - by her estranged husband after being physically assaulted for seven minutes. Her cause of death was a gunshot wound to the head.

Bernice had been experiencing various forms of abuse throughout her marriage. Initially, she did not recognise the red flags, staying in the marriage for the sake of her children. At one point, she left, initially without her children, but later moved them to her mother's house.

Over time, she reported her husband five times, though in reality, she could have done so much more, her sister said.

ACP noted that despite following all the prescribed steps for victims of domestic violence, Bernice did not receive the protection she expected. Her case exemplified the systemic failures within the justice system.

"Bernice did everything domestic violence victims were supposed to do. And yet she ended up being killed. There were massive systematic failures throughout it all." she said.

Her story serves as a tragic reminder of what can happen when the system fails victims, she stated. Notably, she added, Bernice had never suffered grievous physical injuries before her murder. As soon as that happened, she lost her life.

Samantha Pace Gasan (SPG) noted that even in Iceland, a country with a 94% gender equality rating, violence against women remains an issue. This, she said, was a sobering realisation that even in highly progressive societies, gender-based violence persists.

Professor Marceline Naudi (MN) emphasised the need for a shift in societal attitudes, behaviors, and stereotypes, which she identified as the root causes of these tragedies.

She stressed that while legal changes are important, education, both within families (parents - not mothers - she stressed) and in public discourse, is crucial. Harmful stereotypes are ingrained in society, affecting even institutions like the police, and unless these are challenged, progress will be slow.

TK said that we need men to call out men. Every woman in the room knows what domestic violence is, what it is like to have a gender pay gap. We need men to be our allies.

Superintendent Sylvana Gafa' (SG) explained that since 2020, Malta has had a specialised police unit dedicated to domestic violence cases. The majority of reports involve psychological violence.

While police officers are trained to investigate, they often face frustration when victims later drop charges. Many victims fear repercussions or struggle to navigate the court system.

One case that she was personally involved in, was a woman who lied under oath while her abuser smirked in court, although she risked prosecution for perjury. Months later, she returned to report him again. The case was investigated again, and this time, she did not return to her perpetrator.

ACP recounted that Bernice's final report was made just 24 hours before her death. She had a protection order and believed that reporting her abuser would result in immediate action. However, because she had no visible injuries, her case was not considered an automatic priority.

That day, ACP said, "her death sentence was signed".

Since her murder, procedural changes have been implemented, including an updated Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

ACP said that Bernice did feel believed but she also felt that people thought she was exaggerating or that there were more serious cases than hers.

SPG said that with 60 reports a day, there has to be a priority list.

She explained that before these changes to the SOP, the handling of domestic violence reports was left to the discretion of the duty officer. Now, officers are obligated to arrest perpetrators in high-risk cases and in situations where a protection order has been breached.

This change has led to a decrease in repeat reports, as perpetrators are now being jailed, allowing victims to move forward with their lives.

SG cautioned that media narratives can impact reporting rates. While it is crucial to address systemic failures, emphasising that "the system is failing women" may deter victims from coming forward.

SG admitted that most police officers do not want to work with the Domestic Violence Unit.

ACP said that following Bernice's murder, there was an increase in reports as more women sought help out of fear.

SG noted that even in cases where victims refuse risk assessments, officers have a duty to intervene; also in cases involving minors.

MN added that social workers within the Domestic Violence Unit conduct separate risk assessments from the police.

While acknowledging that mistakes have been made, she emphasised the progress that has been achieved. She expressed frustration at having to repeat the same messages but remained committed to advocating for change.

"Until women believe that we are worthy, that we should not be treated like shit; until we truly believe this, we are going to continue having these issues. Men should be shoulder to shoulder with us. Stand with us," she said.

TK shared her personal experience of domestic violence, explaining that she did not initially recognise it as such. When she was: “dragged by my hair and beaten up”, she concealed her injuries and continued attending family functions.

TK asked the panelists what one action could make a difference for victims.

SPG highlighted the importance of technology, referencing the threats Bernice reported via Facebook just 24 hours before her death.

ACP urged frontline workers to truly listen to victims - not just to their words but also to the pain in their voices. “The fact that Bernice’s death brought positive changes is like a hug in my heart. If she is listening, I think she is happy to know that good things came out of her tragedy.

MN said: “I am an academic and an activist. She invited attendees to participate in the Women's March in Valletta on March 8, emphasising the need for both women and men to stand together for change.

SG encouraged individuals supporting victims to contact the freephone helpline 116006 for emotional and legal guidance.

MN said that one can also call *Appogg* and various women’s groups, as well as helpline 179.

From the floor, **FIDEM Foundation Founder Dr Sabine Agius Cabourdin** said one can also go to NGOs such as FIDEM and they will be guided step by step – mentally, financially, legally and so on.

SPG advised friends and family to offer non-judgmental support, reminding the audience that victims often believe they are in a loving relationship.

From the floor, a **social worker** emphasised that all cases of domestic violence have the potential to escalate dangerously. She warned about the influence of social media figures, such as Andrew Tate, who promote harmful narratives that perpetrators use to manipulate others.

AUDIENCE Q&A

An **audience member** pointed out that the risk assessment is now evidence-based and tailored to the local scene.

A **domestic abuse survivor** recounted her experience of seeking medical help, only to be attacked again after leaving the clinic.

SG acknowledged that while doctors can report suspected abuse, it rarely happens.

However, **SPG** noted that Mater Dei Hospital provides training for medical staff, and partners of pregnant women are now asked to leave the room to allow victims to speak freely.

MN noted that medical staff can also refer concerns to social workers.

After a question from the floor, a discussion on the leniency of court rulings ensued, with FIDEM Foundation Founder **Dr Sabine Agius Cabourdin** expressing concern that fear of inadequate legal consequences deters women from reporting abuse.

The panel confirmed that a bill is in parliament to introduce GPS ankle monitors for offenders.

A **Domestic Violence Unit representative** added that many doctors are willing to report cases but hesitate due to the time-consuming court process.

PANEL 4

Mental Health Matters for Domestic Violence Victims and Their Families

Moderator: Trudy Kerr (TK)

Panelists:

- Shakira Fenech, Head of SOAR Service, St Jeanne Antide Foundation **(SF)**
- Franica Cassar, Counselling Psychologist **(FC)**
- Antonella Mizzi, Director, Child Protection Directorate **(AM)**

Trudy Kerr (TK) started off by saying that we may ask: “Why don’t domestic violence victims just leave?” However, the deeper issue is the toll on their mental health.

Franica Cassar (FC) noted that children who grow up in households affected by domestic violence experience significant alterations in brain development. They are constantly on high alert, which can lead to long-term anxiety disorders in adulthood.

Antonella Mizzi (AM) said that one of the key challenges is determining how best to protect these children. Often, by the time they come to the attention of the Child Protection Directorate, the damage has already been done, she added.

She continued by saying that many women stay in abusive relationships for various reasons - financial dependence, fear of judgment, concern for their children. However, many eventually leave when they realise the extent of their children's suffering.

The Directorate receives approximately 200 reports per month regarding children exposed to domestic violence. These children are at high risk of developing trauma and, in some cases, may later enter relationships where they become either victims or perpetrators themselves.

For victims, emotional attunement to their children is often compromised due to their fight-or-flight survival response. Their primary focus is self-preservation.

Shakira Fenech (SF) said that as a domestic violence survivor herself, she knows that the problem was never her.

“I spent hundreds of hours interviewing children and women who have been in an abusive situation. We are not only survivors – I must admit that we are tired with the word ‘survivor’,” she said.

The idea of 'them and us' no longer applies, she continued. This is a collective issue, and men must also be part of the solution. Collaboration and professional support are essential. Education is key - we cannot predict whether our own children may become victims or perpetrators due to their environment.

Support networks are crucial. SOAR has initiatives such as IVY (Interrupting Violence Against Youths). She said she believes we have many of the answers to these challenges.

Systemic imbalances contribute to domestic violence. If the male has more salary than his partner, who can't his tax go in the bank account of his partner? Problems start with imbalances, she stated.

SF also spoke about the local court system saying, “The abuse itself harmed me, but the court experience broke me.”

FC added that women who seek justice through the courts often encounter insensitivity. They are forced to be in the same room as their perpetrator, endure harsh criticisms from opposing lawyers, and constantly feel they must prove their capability as mothers. Many women question why they must defend themselves when they are the victims. The process is extremely traumatic.

AM continued on this thread, saying that children suffer not only as direct victims of domestic violence but also by being dragged through the court system. Despite having a fully functional child-friendly facility, it is underutilised because it is not conveniently located near the courtroom.

Legal proceedings can take years - sometimes over a decade, she continued. The court process itself often becomes the most traumatic part of the experience. Children, caught between both parents, worry about the repercussions for both their mother and father.

FC said that a perpetrator might actually enjoy being in court. He will enjoy feeling empowered, in control. He may even try to lengthen this journey. He loves seeing their victim crying, fighting for her children, showing fear, not being able to talk.

SF noted that abusers extend their power by proxy – using people such as lawyers, media platforms, and even elements of the judicial system - to further victimise their partners. Women who have gone through domestic abuse are being revictimised by the courts, (some of) the police, and the judicial system.

TK asked: What can we do to support women and their children who are in this situation?

FC said it is crucial for friends or family members to provide support without judgment. Asking "Why don't you leave?" implies a lack of understanding. Many victims are not yet ready to leave and pressuring them only isolates them further - playing into the perpetrator's control tactics. They need to feel safe and supported before they can make the decision to leave.

TK noted that research shows that, on average, a woman will leave and return to an abusive partner seven times before leaving for good.

AM said that early intervention is critical. Children learn from what they see, and it is essential to educate them on healthy relationships. "So they know what is acceptable or not in relationships, we must have difficult conversations with children," she stressed.

SF said that children's rights must be prioritised over parental rights. "We still have children in their teenage years being forced to meet the perpetrator," she said. Before entering a new relationship, individuals should have open and honest discussions. Learning to read a partner's body language is vital, she added.

AUDIENCE Q&A

A representative from Sebh said that at their shelter, they often focus on what the women should do rather than addressing the failures of the system. Victims tell them repeatedly that the system does not provide enough protection. Severe judicial delays force women and children out of their own homes for their safety. Many struggle to survive while waiting for maintenance payments. Some children need to change schools while living in shelters. The system itself becomes a secondary abuser. “We have mothers begging for help for their children who are turning to aggression; who are turning into abusers,” she said.

From the floor, facilitator **Mark Cabourdin** said that addressing these issues requires collective action - from men, women, and organisations alike.

University of Malta student Milena Testa said that there is a severe issue of domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence on campus at the University of Malta. She noted that many students do not feel safe reporting incidents to the university.

“The first time I was sexually assaulted I didn’t have the vocabulary to speak about it and I didn’t know it wasn’t my fault.” She brought up the need to dismantle gender stereotypes, such as when males boast about the amount of people they have had sex with. She also stressed that youth representation on panels like the ones at the FIDEM conference is crucial.

FC said that it is essential to avoid judgment and create safe spaces where survivors feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Social media can be a powerful tool for raising awareness. Empowering young people to join initiatives like IVY can also create positive change.

TK intervened to say that consent remains a significant issue in Malta. “How do we effectively reach students on university campuses?” she asked.

AM answered by saying that we must reach young people earlier, starting in schools. Education on consent and personal boundaries should be introduced at a young age. “We have to give them permission to say: ‘No’,” she said.

FC added that conversations like this are essential. Older generations must create environments where young people feel safe to talk. "I don't accept certain language – like gender-based jokes, even if people judge me as being 'strange' for it," she said.

Engaging with women and showing genuine interest in their experiences fosters trust and awareness, she added.

A representative from TAMA stated that refugee women and children are facing extreme forms of suppression and violence, including rape. Many of these women arrive in Malta after they became pregnant from sexual violence, yet their children do not receive the same rights as Maltese children. These individuals often live in inhumane conditions, such as those in Hal Far. "How can we protect them?" she asked

In answer, **AM** said that collaboration is key. Unaccompanied children who arrive in Malta fall under our directorate's care. "We must all fight for all these vulnerable groups together," she said.

CLOSING REMARKS BY JUDITH VALLETTA

FIDEM FOUNDATION SECRETARY

Secretary for the FIDEM Charity Foundation Judith Valletta delivered the closing speech at the third Annual Women's Day Conference hosted by FIDEM Foundation, highlighting the foundation's ongoing commitment to education, empowerment, and mental wellbeing for women.

Valletta reiterated FIDEM's core belief that education is the cornerstone of a brighter, more independent future. She emphasised that access to learning not only transforms individual lives but also has a lasting impact on families and communities.

She noted that when women are empowered through education, they gain the confidence to pursue their ambitions, the independence to make their own choices, and the strength to shape their futures on their own terms.

Since its inception in 2018, FIDEM has remained dedicated to removing barriers to education for vulnerable women and adolescent girls across Malta and Gozo. Valletta highlighted the success of the Educate to Empower Programme, launched in 2020, which has provided countless women with access to educational courses, funding for books, laptops, and other essential learning materials.

Building on this mission, she spoke about the introduction of Skill Up in 2023 - a holistic programme designed to bridge the education gap and provide women with a structured path toward self-improvement.

Supported by the Atlas Insurance Community Involvement Fund, Skill Up offers a free English literacy course along with training in essential skills such as computer literacy, mindfulness, yoga, self-defence, dance, and drama. The initiative also ensures accessibility by providing free transport and on-site childcare, enabling more women to participate without obstacles.

Valletta announced that the second intake of Skill Up students commenced in October 2024 and will continue until May 2025, with lessons held every Tuesday

from 4.00 pm to 7.00 pm. She confirmed that around 25 women are currently enrolled in the programme.

Beyond education, Valletta emphasised FIDEM's recognition that true empowerment also encompasses mental and emotional wellbeing. She acknowledged that while emotional and psychological health has always been a priority for the foundation, there is a need to expand support services to reach more members of the community.

As part of this commitment, Valletta announced a significant milestone in FIDEM's journey: the appointment of Sue Falzon as the foundation's new Mental Health Lead.

Falzon is a Gestalt therapist with a background in management and education who will be introducing a range of new emotional and mental health services. This initiative represents a crucial step forward in FIDEM Foundation's efforts to offer holistic support and enhance well-being and resilience among women in need.

Following her speech, Valletta invited Falzon to share further details about the mental health services that FIDEM is set to offer.

PRESENTATION BY SUE FALZON

GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPIST & FIDEM FOUNDATION MENTAL HEALTH LEAD

The FIDEM Foundation has taken significant strides this year in reassessing its approach to mental health services, ensuring that its initiatives remain responsive and effective in addressing the evolving needs of the community.

As part of this commitment, mental health services have been strategically structured into two core areas: one focused on direct support for vulnerable women and another dedicated to fostering wellbeing in the workplace through corporate services.

Support Services

The Foundation continues to provide individual therapy for women, offering private and personalised sessions aimed at supporting individuals through various life challenges, including trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression. These sessions create a safe and confidential space for women to seek help and guidance.

The **Bejnietna** initiative remains a cornerstone of the Foundation's support network. This independent, non-denominational, and inclusive peer-led support group is designed for Maltese and Gozitan women, providing a safe and judgment-free space for individuals seeking solidarity and practical solutions.

Bejnietna is committed to inclusivity, diversity, and accessibility, ensuring that all women have a supportive community to turn to without affiliations to religious or political entities.

Recognising the need to extend mental health support to men, the **Isma' Habib** initiative was established to provide a stigma-free environment where men can share experiences and find support. While the group is not currently active, sessions will resume once there is sufficient interest from male service users.

Corporate Services

In recognition of the increasing need for mental health support in professional environments, the Foundation has introduced a corporate arm dedicated to assisting businesses in prioritising employee wellbeing. This service offers tailored corporate therapy, workshops, and well-being programmes designed to foster resilience and a supportive work culture.

A range of services has been developed to cater to different workplace needs:

- **One-to-one Employee Therapy:** Personalised and confidential therapy sessions to help individuals manage workplace stress, anxiety, and career-related challenges.
- **Wellbeing Workshops for Staff:** Interactive sessions focused on mental health literacy, stress management, mindfulness, resilience, and burnout prevention.
- **Group Support Therapy/Mentoring for Teams:** Group support and mentoring sessions aimed at enhancing emotional resilience, communication, and overall workplace well-being.

Therapy packages are tailored to company requirements, with flexible durations and frequencies to accommodate different organisational structures.

Proceeds from corporate services contribute directly to the Foundation's mental health fund, supporting vulnerable individuals in need of assistance.

The Path Forward

Mental health is not a final destination but a continuous journey that requires ongoing attention and support. As challenges arise, it is crucial to seek help, foster understanding, and build connections. No individual should navigate this journey alone.

Through shared experiences and mutual support, the community can create a culture of resilience and wellbeing.

Post-conference points from Howard Keith Debono

Music Producer & Artist Manager

Common Blockers Experienced by Female Artists

1. Overthinking, occasional lack of drive, and a self-centered tunnel vision can hinder progress.
2. The difficulty of separating the media-driven persona, which is often image-based, from societal expectations.
3. Artistic credibility can be harder to establish for female artists, particularly those who are considered conventionally attractive.
4. The impact of the biological clock, career choices, and an ageist, image-based mentality.
5. Societal stereotypes that make it more challenging to leave the island or one's family.
6. Inconsistent support and negative backlash regarding safe spaces for female artists, particularly concerning sexuality in the arts (music, film, theatre) and on social media.
7. Female artists rarely express political opinions due to fear of being labeled, whereas male artists' opinions are more widely accepted.
8. Financial challenges related to sustainability and self-sufficiency, although equal pay has improved.
9. Limited access to advanced technology skills necessary for career progression in the arts.
10. The perception of an oversaturated market of female singers, where unique voices and bold personalities are often suppressed rather than promoted.

Advantages of Working with Female Artists

1. Greater sensitivity and synchronisation with the needs of the art form, as well as a deeper awareness of international music trends. Male artists often struggle to stay current, leaning towards nostalgia.
2. Female artists tend to have lower egos, making them more open to experimentation and innovation.
3. Higher levels of preparation for stage performances.

4. Superior time management skills, ensuring tasks are completed efficiently. However, personal life, particularly relationships, tends to affect female artists more than their male counterparts.
5. In talent competitions like *X Factor Malta*, filling the male category proved challenging, reflecting a wider trend in many countries. While female artists are more willing to put themselves forward, maintaining momentum remains a struggle.
6. Within voluntary organisations such as MEIA, female representation is significantly higher at 65% across most sectors.

Immediate to Mid-Term Solutions

1. **Incentives for Technology Education:** Providing workshops and courses to empower female artists with technical skills needed for creation and publication, reducing dependency on male-dominated sectors.
2. **Advanced Training and Mentorship:** Supporting female artists in career management, overcoming financial barriers, structuring their work, international networking, and embracing entrepreneurial roles in the creative sector.
3. **Encouraging Female Musicians:** Developing programs that attract and reward female musicians, rather than just female singers, to create a more balanced and sustainable industry.
4. **Addressing Reproductive Challenges in the Arts:** Recognizing that career peaks often coincide with prime childbearing years (20-34). Proposals include financial incentives for those who pause their careers for family reasons or delay pregnancy until 34-40, when medical advancements have made later pregnancies safer.
5. **Support for International Career Development:** Introducing initiatives that help young female artists leave the island to pursue careers abroad. These should be merit-based and assessed by experienced international panels, rather than solely academic scholarships.
6. **Involving Men in the Narrative:** Encouraging male participation in discussions, programs, and media representation to foster understanding and support for gender equity in the arts.
7. **Family Life Balance Campaigns:** Promoting joint campaigns for both men and women, addressing career ambitions, multiple jobs, mental and physical wellbeing, and family time.

8. **Equal Pay and Fair Grading Systems:** MEIA is actively working on policies to ensure fair compensation, graded by merit and education. Collaboration between FIDEM, MEIA, and the Arts Council Malta could strengthen these efforts.

Long-Term Solutions

A common cause that seems to be responsible for a number of these blockers mentioned above seems to be Education. Several key issues, such as outdated gender mindsets (macho and stereotype-driven), body shaming, self-image insecurities, lack of female representation in leadership positions, and disparities in pay and job opportunities, stem from deficiencies in the education system.

1. **Early Education Initiatives:** Incorporating discussions on gender equity and the arts into primary school curricula to instill progressive values from a young age.
2. **Higher Education and Career Preparation:** Implementing advanced educational strategies at secondary and tertiary levels to better prepare young women for careers in the arts.
3. **Global Best Practices:** Learning from countries such as Scandinavia and Germany, which have successfully addressed many of these issues, to implement urgent reforms.
4. **Lifelong Learning for Gender Equity:** Recognising that change is not only necessary at the academic level but also among adults. Education for all generations, including older demographics, is essential in shifting national attitudes and behaviors.

While these measures may not yield immediate results, the long-term benefits could be seen within five to 20 years if implemented with commitment and urgency.

The discussions at the FIDEM 2025 conference also show that people who are past their scholastic years also require education. The way we think establishes the way we act and who we are as a nation.