

Current Trends in Couple Relationships

National Centre for
Family Research



*The Malta Foundation
for the Wellbeing of Society*

Trends

Good quality couple relationships play a vital role in our wellbeing, and contribute to a higher level of life satisfaction among adults in Malta (PFSW, 2016). This factsheet presents emerging trends with respect to the frequency of different types of couples, as well as various challenges and factors which have been found to impact couple relationships.

MARRIAGES

On average, 2803 marriages per year took place in Malta and Gozo between 2010 and 2018. Although the crude marriage rate in Malta has declined over the past 50 years, Malta still had the third highest rate in the EU in 2017, of 6.3 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants (Eurostat, 2019). However, this must be treated with some caution as marriages between two foreigners are also included in this figure. Wedding tourism has grown over the past decade and reached 30% of all marriages in 2018.

Civil marriage has also become more popular. The number of Maltese couples who opted for civil marriage doubled between 2010 and 2018. This amounted to 14.7% of marriages in 2018, when excluding marriages between foreigners. As Table 1 illustrates, marriages of Maltese to foreigners are also on the increase and feature strongly among civil marriages.

TABLE 1: TOTAL NUMBER OF MARRIAGES BY CITIZENSHIP 2010 – 2018

Year	Total marriages	Civil marriages only						
		Total	FO to FO	MT to MT	MT to FO	MT to U	FO to U	U to U
2010	2596	847	436	176	235	0	0	0
2011	2562	965	535	166	264	0	0	0
2012	2823	1170	621	258	291	0	0	0
2013	2578	1199	653	224	322	0	0	0
2014	2871	1388	807	246	335	0	0	0
2015	3002	1481	755	328	236	133	8	21
2016	3034	1628	897	328	241	118	23	20
2017	2934	1564	889	309	226	106	24	11
2018	2831	1577	853	300	286	121	15	2

Source: National Statistics Office upon request

Legend: FO: Foreigner; MT: Maltese; U: Unspecified

Same sex couples was introduced in Malta in 2017. The number of same sex couples who married since 1st September 2017 amounted to 175 in Malta (excluding Gozo); 7 in 2017, 63 in 2018, 78 in 2019 and 27 in 2020 could not be retrieved from the Public Registry of Malta in view of GDPR requirements to protect the identity of the persons concerned.

CIVIL UNIONS

In Malta, civil unions between same sex and opposite sex couples were introduced in 2014. The Civil Unions Act grants the same rights and obligations as marriage.

Between 2014 and early 2018, 183 civil unions took place. According to Parliamentary Question 3582 of January 2018, 173 of these occurred between same-sex couples while 10 occurred between different sex couples. A year-by-year breakdown by sex of partner shows that for 2017 there were 7 couples, for 2018 there were 63 couples, for 2019 there were 79 couples and for 2020 there were 27 same sex couples who married.

COHABITATION

A Cohabitation Act has been in force in Malta since 2017, which provided legal recognition of the rights and duties of couples who cohabit. The Act recognised three types of cohabitation: de facto, formalised through a contract, and by unilateral declaration. In March 2020 a new cohabitation law was tabled in Parliament, providing for the recognition of only those cohabitations based on a contract. Cohabiting couples

must formalise their situation through a contract before a notary, which is then entered in the Public Registry and a certificate of cohabitation is issued.

Due to the small number of couples registered, statistics on cohabiting couples were not provided by Identity Malta in order to ensure privacy.

SEPARATIONS

An average of 826 separations a year took place between 2011 and 2019. As illustrated in Table 2 below, the annual number of separations has increased over this period. The table also illustrates that it has become increasingly likely for marital separations to occur on a consensual basis.

TABLE 2 TOTAL NUMBER OF MARITAL SEPARATIONS BY SEX 2011 – 2019

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total number of separations	704	713	790	833	911	886	859	844	893
Per cent of which:									
Court sentence	12	7	8	7	6	8	7	5	4
Consensual	88	93	92	93	94	92	93	95	96
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Court Services Agency upon request

Relationship satisfaction

According to a national representative survey carried out among couples and singles (PFWs 2016), relationship satisfaction correlated quite strongly with life satisfaction in general. Civil status was a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction. Married people were the most satisfied followed by those who were single, separated, widowed and divorced.

Other factors also correlated with relationship satisfaction, including income adequacy, employment status and age. The less adequate one's income, the lower the relationship satisfaction. In terms of employment, those couples with one partner working full time and one working part time were the most satisfied, followed by dual earner families. Those who were unemployed and on benefits reported being most dissatisfied. In terms of age, older couples

Statistics are not kept that show the duration of marriage prior to separation. This statistic is very important to help us understand whether marriages are breaking down at a particular stage of the family life cycle. We also do not know whether civil marriages are more likely to break down than religious marriages or vice versa, nor do we know the breakdown rate of cohabitation agreements.

DIVORCE

In 2011, divorce legislation was enacted by Parliament in Malta. At an annual average of 0.75 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants, Malta still has the lowest crude divorce rate in Europe. Following a high of 432 divorces in 2012 (the first year after its introduction), divorce rates have been constant at an average of 333 divorces per annum between 2013 and 2019.

over 61 years were more likely to describe their relationship as very positive.

Being a parent was not predictive of marital satisfaction. Parents reporting the highest levels of relationship satisfaction were those with children aged nine or younger, whereas parents reporting lower levels of relationship satisfaction had male or female adolescent children. The latter finding echoes previous research carried out in 2013 (Abela, Farrugia, Casha, Galea & Schembri, 2013). Dual earning couples with children were twice as likely to describe their relationship as negative or very negative than those without children.

In the PFWs (2016) study, what couples liked least about their relationship was having to work excessively (and thereby neglect the couple relationship), poor communication, and a lack of financial security. Those with low levels of relationship

satisfaction reported poor communication with partner, lack of fidelity, lack of financial security, violence and little or no demonstration of affection. Indeed, an earlier study carried out by Abela (2011) found that 21.6% of couples were distressed.

WHAT COUPLES VALUE IN A RELATIONSHIP

In the national survey (PFSW, 2016) respect, communication, trust and love were accorded the highest value in respondents' relationships. Generational differences were evident. Younger couples prioritise communication and trust whereas the older generation give importance to a sense of compassion towards one's partner by highlighting forgiveness and understanding. Those with high relationship satisfaction valued communication most of all. Other studies (Abela 2011) report that difficulty in demonstrating affection was ranked as the highest cause of conflict, throwing light on the importance of connection and intimacy in the couple relationship.

Figure 1 below depicts the seven interrelated themes that respondents deemed important for the couple relationship to thrive. These grow over time and demand an ongoing commitment from each of the partners, without which the couple relationship loses its equilibrium.

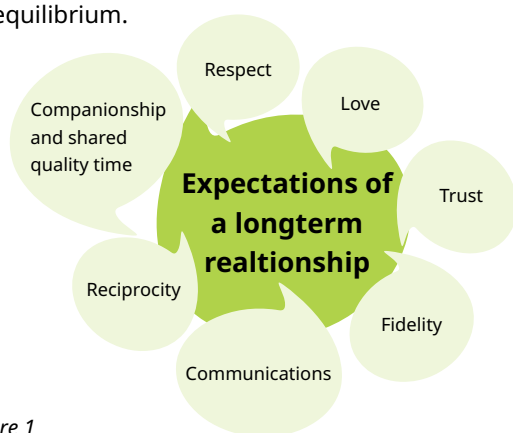


Figure 1

Challenges

In a qualitative study carried out by PFWS (2017), couples identified five dimensions of their context as particularly challenging. These included consumerism; work-family balance, mass media, technology, and perceptions of a growing ease of marital dissolution.

Almost all participants pointed out how consumerist norms have led to a reordering of people's priorities – adding to economic pressures and decreasing quality time together. They argued that maintaining a 'socially acceptable' lifestyle has become financially demanding and sometimes results in conflict between partners over consumption choices.

All participants valued quality time together as a couple. Nevertheless, they struggled to balance work and family life; a gender difference was evident, with women opting for telework and men working longer hours. Inadequate income experienced by some made it impossible to make ends meet without working overtime. Telework was perceived as a mixed blessing given that on one hand it provided the opportunity to be at home with the children when they returned from school, but on the other it meant having to work later in the evening with less time spent with one's partner. Many participants expressed anxiety about the risk of infidelity given the long hours their partners spent at work and the greater frequency of socialising with colleagues after work.

Participants had mixed opinions over the impact of mass media, particularly in respect of the way they shape individuals' expectations of couple relationships and marriage. The idealised nature of romance and married life was seen to leave couples ill-prepared for reality. Communication technologies were also seen to deeply affect the couple relationship. On a positive note, they were seen to facilitate communication during long working hours, allowing partners to 'touch base'. For many, though, social media was seen to intrude upon quality time, especially where people were more attentive to their devices than to their partners. ICTs were also perceived by some to increase the risk of infidelity, creating opportunities to form parallel relationships with relative ease.

All study participants entered marriage with the hope that it would last forever, and emphasised the importance of working hard at one's marriage, especially where children are involved. Almost all, however, spoke of how fragile marriage seems to have become, and how people perceive marital dissolution to be something easy. Respondents attributed this to media influences, a weakened sense of commitment, weakening of social norms around fidelity and exclusivity, the demands of work and the relative ease of obtaining legal separation/divorce.

In respect of seeking help with relationships when necessary, the PFWS (2016) national survey found that 13.8% of respondents had sought help, and were most likely to be middle aged and/or parents of adolescents, divorced or separated and /or possessing a higher level of education (PFWS 2016). It is important to understand whether, and how, distressed couples with lower education levels are seeking support with their relationship.



WHAT CAN HELP?

As has already been highlighted, the lack of statistical data is a big challenge for policy makers and addressing information gaps would greatly contribute to evidence-based policy and practice.

Information gaps are most salient in respect of separations by years of marriage, the prevalence of cohabitation in Malta, the number of blended families, the number of intercultural marriages. In most cases, such basic information can be easily gathered and could help policy. At the same time, more extensive research is warranted regarding these and other family set-ups, such as inter-faith relationships, in order to help policymakers and practitioners in their work with families.

Evidence based relationship education is to be given priority in our family policies. Courses are to be offered to all couples, irrespective of their religious beliefs or whether they are married or not.

In the case of couples with children, co-parenting is to be given its due importance as suggested in the Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting 2016-2024, which addresses the couple relationship and recognises parents as partners.

Parenting programmes focusing on the realities following separation and divorce, with particular

emphasis on co-parenting in this context, are a step in the right direction and should be advertised more strongly.

Family-friendly policies are to be further developed and encouraged across the various segments of the labour market. Paternity leave needs to be extended and fathers are to be encouraged to take a good share of parental leave.

Given that income inadequacy was found to contribute to couple distress, adequate income support to meet basic needs should be guaranteed.

Personal finance education should be strengthened within formal and informal education systems and community initiatives. Such education often uses a values-based active learning approach to help couples to assess their consumption needs and to plan realistic budgets.

Various state and non-state or private agencies that offer in-person or online help to couples at different stages of their relationship are listed in below box.

Useful resources

LOCAL ORGANISATIONS

FSWS/SEDQA

FAMILY THERAPY SERVICE

Tel: 23885110

The Family Therapy Services forms part of the psychological services within Sedqa and offer family assessments, family therapy, couple therapy and support to services with psychological difficulties

CANA MOVEMENT

Catholic Institute

St Publius Street

Floriana FRN1441

Tel 2223 8000

www.canamovement.org

CANA Movement offers preparation for marriage courses and Couple or/and Family Therapy free of charge or at a reduced price.

Studies by the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (PFWS) National Centre for Family Research:

PFWS (2016) Sustaining relationships: Couples and Singles in a Changing Society

PFWS (2017) Sustaining Relationships: The expectations and lived experiences of couples and singles in Malta

HERE ARE SOME USEFUL WEBSITES THAT OFFER ADVICE

PSYCHCENTRAL

https://psychcentral.com/lib/category/relationships?_ga=2.225500186.1037465865.1573752323-2092078036.1573752323

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/relationships>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/resolution-not-conflict/201303/marriage-problems-heres-8-step-rescue-plan>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/gay-and-lesbian-well-being/201107/gay-couples-therapy-way-avoid-same-sex-divorce>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/sliding-vs-deciding/201807/the-risks-couples-moving-in-together>

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Here are some useful sites that offer advice and support on various relationship aspects:

RELATE

<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help>

RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA

<https://www.relationships.org.au/relationship-advice/relationship-advice-sheets>

TWO OF US

<http://www.twoofus.org/home/dating-advice/>

LOVE IS RESPECT

<https://www.loveisrespect.org/>

LOVE AND LIFE TOOLBOX

<https://loveandlifetoolbox.com/>

USEFUL BOOKS

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING MARRIAGE WORK

By J. Gottman, 2015

NEW RULES OF MARRIAGE

By T. Real, 2008

MARRIAGE MEETINGS FOR LASTING LOVE

By M. N. Berger, 2014

COHABITATION NATION

By S. Sassler, 2017

COUPLE SKILLS: MAKING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WORK

By M. McKay, P. Fanning and K. Paleg, 2006

MINDFUL RELATIONSHIP HABITS

By S. Scott and B. Davenport, 2018

ATTACHED: THE NEW SCIENCE OF ADULT ATTACHMENT AND HOW IT CAN HELP YOU FIND - AND KEEP - LOVE

By A. Levine and R. Heller, 2012

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