

Research Article

Mapping the ecosystem: Relational dynamics of Malta's women's organisations

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Correspondence: maria.c.borg.05@um.edu.mt**Abstract**

This paper presents the landscape of women's organisations (WOs) in Malta and Gozo exploring their relationships as part of civil society and their role in the public sphere. It focuses on WOs active in 2021, when civil society was recognised for its influence on national leadership in Malta. WOs play an integral role in this landscape, contributing to feminist and gender-related advocacy as well as wider societal issues.

Sociological literature increasingly views civil society as a networked ecosystem that links organisations with varied interests, strategies, and networks. This study investigates the relational dynamics among WOs and their relations with institutions, addressing three key questions: (i) what are the relations of WOs with institutions?; (ii) how, if at all, does the structure of relations among WOs contribute to the making of an 'ecosystem'?; and (iii) what are the main factors which facilitate or hinder collaborations among WOs?

This research builds on Diani's (2015) modes of collective action, applying both aggregative and relational approaches, along with social capital theory, to understand the significance of the bonds formed by these WOs. Based on surveys and qualitative interviews with 52 WOs in Malta and Gozo in early 2021, the study maps the complex web of relations within this ecosystem. The findings suggest that women's organisations coordinate through different coalitions across different issues. The ecosystem of WOs remains vulnerable to fragmentation, particularly around contentious topics like abortion, despite the overall strength of bridging social capital in promoting trust and collaboration.

Keywords: civil society; Malta; non-governmental organisations; relations; social networks; women's organisations

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Introduction

This paper examines the landscape of women's organisations (WOs) in Malta, exploring their relationships as part of civil society and their role in the public sphere. The contextual backdrop to the study, conducted in 2021, reflects a period of heightened civic activism, during which civil society was credited with 'rocking the establishment' (Malta Today, 2020) and identified as a major force in bringing about significant changes in the country's leadership (Parliamentary Ombudsman Malta, 2020). WOs play an integral role in this landscape, contributing to feminist and gender-related advocacy as well as wider societal issues. This

paper examines the relations of civil society as WOs vie against prevailing institutions, such as the Church, the Government and private corporations, situating WOs within this broader context of civil resistance and collective action.

Sociological representations of civil society as a relation have emerged in recent years (Diani, 2015; Edwards, 2020; Fine, 2014; Jessop, 2020). Relations have been conceptualised as essential connectors, described as the ‘hinge’ by Fine (2014), hailed as the ‘*connective tissue*’ by Edwards (2020, p. 29) and presented as the ‘cement’ of civil society by Diani (2015). This research considers civil society as a ‘complex and fragile ecosystem’ (Edwards, 2020, p. 28), linking organisations with diverse operations, interests, people and networks.

This research sets out to portray the relations constituting the collective action of WOs. Together, these WOs activate a field which ‘in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148): womanhood. The study draws on sociological theory to analyse findings emerging from the research questions guiding the investigation, asking: (i) what are the relations of WOs with institutions?; (ii) how, if at all, does the structure of relations among WOs contribute to the making of an ‘ecosystem’?; and (iii) what are the main factors which facilitate or hinder collaborations among WOs?

Using the basic tenets of relational sociology, the study delves into the ‘relational dynamics which make and remake societies continually’, uncovering the ‘state of play within a vast web of ongoing interactions’ (Crossley, 2011, p. 13)⁴. Drawing on a survey tool and qualitative interviews involving 52 WOs in Malta and Gozo in early 2021, this study maps this vast web and analyses the state of play through a relational approach. This research strategy makes it possible to portray a systems view of the civil society ecosystem steering collective action by WOs. This study seeks to address the research gap in the study of WOs in Malta by taking this approach.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the dynamics of the ‘*ecosystem*’ (Edwards, 2020) of WOs in Malta through the lens of collective action theory and social capital theory. Drawing on Diani’s (2015) work, this review considers how WOs operate within networks that connect them with other voluntary organisations, the Church, local councils, and government bodies, emphasising the importance of understanding civil society through its intricate web of relationships. This literature review also explores Edwards’ (2020) tripartite model of civil society, discussing the role of voluntary organisations within it. Finally, the review contextualises this study within the unique sociopolitical landscape of Malta, focusing on the space navigated by WOs in this landscape.

The ecosystem approach resonates with Jessop’s (2020) interpretation of governance, wherein dialogue, relations and solidarity emerge as strategies for social coordination. Tilly (2007, p. 94) further argues that ‘relations between trust networks and public politics matter

⁴ The study of relational dynamics involving voluntary organisations has been used by Crossley (2006) to analyse psychiatric movements between 1600-2000; Diani (2015) in a comparative study of the civil society organisations in Glasgow and Bristol; and Phillips (1991) in her research on national WOs in Canada.

deeply'. Social capital theory foregrounds the value of trust networks in society, supporting 'coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1993, p. 35). Social capital manifests in different forms: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, all relevant to the study of VO ecosystems as together they balance relations across networks. Bonding social capital is studied in terms of its capacity to bond the relations among members of a group. It is inward-looking and seeks to promote exclusively the interests and identity of a specific group (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital looks at relations between social groups, encouraging people to look beyond their immediate identities and connect outside the in-group. Through bridging social capital, we understand the value of inter-organisation relations (Putnam, 2000). Linking social capital is concerned with the relations of organisations with government and markets, negotiating resources and forging influence (Edwards, 2020).

Melucci (1996) presents organisations as 'quasiautonomous cells' which connect through a 'communication and exchange network' (p. 113-114), fuelling solidarity through the exchange of knowledge, personnel (e.g. activist members and leaders) and displays of performance. Networks thus serve as the 'connective tissue' (Edwards, 2020, p. 29) or the 'cement' (Diani, 2015) holding civil society together, shaping the structure of the organisational ecosystem, showing who is in, or out of, a relationship with other actors.

Collective action

Collective action refers to the powerful ways in which organisations connect individuals in solidarity for a shared cause (Olsen, 1974). One development of Olsen's argument on collective action is Diani's (2015) theorem of 'Modes of coordination of collective action', which integrates network analysis and social movement theory, revealing civil society as a scheme of relationships among different stakeholders. Diani explains that these relations are based on the binary mechanisms of resource allocation and boundary definition.

The resource allocation mechanism deals with how resources (such as money, time, personnel, space, information, and social capital) are distributed and managed among different stakeholders. It explores who has access to resources, how resources are shared or withheld, and the power dynamics involved in this distribution. The boundary definition mechanism involves negotiating the limits and distinctions among different groups, organisations, or individuals within civil society, manipulating relations through ideas, social constructs, and narrative frameworks. The negotiation inherently involves the revision and reconfiguration of previously set boundaries, which is key to the development and initiation of organised social structures. In particular, Diani's (2015) model is concerned with the way relations contribute to the 'creation and reproduction of boundaries' (p. 16) within a network of civil society organisations, determining the modes of coordination of collective action.

Diani (2015) identifies four modes of coordination of collective action:

- **Organisational Mode** – This mode involves autonomous decision-making within organisations, guided by leadership or grassroots efforts. Boundaries are defined by the organisation's agenda, fostering either weak or strong in-group ties, as seen in subscription-based groups (e.g., Consumer Reports, National Geographic Society) or in ideologically-driven organisations (e.g., *Brigate Rosse*).

- **Social Movement Mode** – This mode involves dense resource-sharing networks among organisations, with boundaries shaped by collective identities recognised by both members and key stakeholders. Examples include environmental, civil rights, and feminist movements.
- **Coalitional Mode** – This mode involves dense organisational networks engaging in resource exchange, defined by shared agendas but lacking broader collective identity. Examples include advocacy coalitions, political alliances, and temporary campaign partnerships.
- **Subcultural/Communitarian Mode** – This mode involves minimal links and resource exchange between organisations, driven instead by a broad collective identity rather than formal boundaries. Examples include subcultural groups like rockers, punks, or vegans, where common lifestyle or ethical preferences foster identification without formal membership.

Thus, Diani proposes a relational perspective to civil society, which acts as a scheme of relations in which a host of coordinated collectives interact by sharing resources and negotiating collective identities.

The role of voluntary organisations in civil society

The concept of civil society has evolved in sync with historical and technological progress since its birth in the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations, endowing it with ‘multiple meanings’ (Bob, 2011, p. 218). Edwards (2020) proposes a three-layered understanding of civil society: as associational life, ‘the good society’ and the public sphere.

Civil society as associational life draws on de Tocqueville’s view that associations and their activities are separate from market and state, thus signalling a difference between the private sector, the public sector and the voluntary sector (also known as the third sector) (Edwards, 2020). The civil society sector, made up of organisations, subsists through human rights laws, which grant citizens the rights to free speech and free association (Walzer, 1995, p. 183). Civil society as ‘the good society’ is tied with the concept of civic virtues, which represent a ‘desirable social order’ (Edwards, 2020, p. 38). Civic virtue is found in the ‘norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness’ that emerge from social exchanges, which in turn generate social capital (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). Calling these virtues ‘habits of the heart’, de Tocqueville insists these values and ethical practices are essential for functioning democracies (Brinton, 2010).

The public sphere represents a view of civil society grounded in civic dialogue and political participation. Habermas (2023) argues that a vibrant public sphere is central to a democratic society and plays a crucial role in the political integration of its citizens. The public sphere highlights the relational aspect of civil society, portraying it as a space for communication and for hegemonic struggles (Jessop, 2020). Here, different social groups develop and control agendas by attracting new followers and partners, convincing them to join their cause. Gramsci (1975, p. 75) captures this dynamic by defining state power as ‘political society + civil society’: a civil society capable of advancing its causes while remaining distinct from formal institutions. This separation supports the development of democratic societies,

ensuring a balance that allows for oversight of both political and social actors (Edwards, 2020; Jessop, 2020; Young, 2002).

The role of voluntary organisations in civil society is to mediate between individual autonomy and collective solidarity, and to foster civic virtues such as trust and reciprocity, which are crucial for democratic societies. By operating independently from the market and state, voluntary organisations provide spaces for civic engagement, enabling minority voices to be heard, shaping public agendas. Their role in balancing power ensures accountability and supports the development of a democratic society.

As a small archipelagic state in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta presents a particular context for this research.

Malta's context and dynamics

This research unfolds in the smallest EU member state with its dense population of just over 500,000 people living on a land area of 316 km² (National Statistics Office, 2022), marked by the power of personal interactions and emotional allegiances (Warrington, 1998). The inherent smallness which enables a connected society where people wear many hats (Baldacchino, 2012; Boissevain, 1974; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2019) impacts political life, as political actors emerge as very central figures (Corbett, 2015). Malta is considered an electoral democracy (V-Dem Institute, 2021), where every vote counts, and political power consistently alternates between two dominant parties, shaping both government and opposition. The importance of closeness with those holding political or administrative power is highlighted with the local proverb: *trid tkun taf in-nies biex tinqeda*⁵. Baldacchino (2014) argues that the activities of civil society organisations represent a shift away from an all-encompassing political focus, advocating for a model of multi-level governance in Malta. The Catholic Church in Malta wields considerable 'political, social, and cultural influence' (Briguglio, 2016), with a strong presence in the media, local parishes, the formal educational system, and an extensive network of charismatic religious and lay figures within the community (Sammut, 2017).

In the years leading up to 2021, the most recent public discussions around women's rights were the access to the morning-after pill (legally available in Malta since 2016); abortion and access to abortion (an independent MPs request to discuss an abortion decriminalisation bill in May 2021 was rejected by parliament's health committee (Times of Malta, 2021); the sex work reform (this was part of the Labour Party Manifesto in 2017), the domestic violence strategy (renewed in June 2021 (Vassallo, 2021)), femicide (The Malta Independent, 2020) and gender quotas in parliament (approved in 2021). These issues were often brought up by WOs during their interviews which formed an integral part of the study being presented.

Methodology

The research aims to explore the complex landscape of WOs in Malta, focusing on their relations with other women's organisations and in the public sphere. It forms part of a wider

⁵ This translates to 'You need to know people to get served'.

research (Borg M. C., 2021), which profiled WOs, their organising, strategies, motivations, values and their relations. The process of mapping the field of WOs active during the research involved analysing each organisation individually, like unique puzzle pieces that together form the complete picture.

This study integrates quantitative surveys with qualitative semi-structured interviews with elites, providing both breadth and depth to this research. The surveys provide extensive coverage, while the interviews offer deeper insights, jointly enriching the study's findings. Used together they enhance the validity and reliability of findings, enabling the researcher to consolidate analysis through assessment of similar or inconsistent results (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

In defining which organisations have been considered as WOs, this research is prompted by Ferree and Mueller's (2004) definition of women's movements. Thus, women's organising is considered as 'all organising of women as women', where women are the strategic constituency of the organisation, recognising women as 'women, mothers, sisters and daughters' (p. 577).

Based on the previous considerations regarding the organisation's function as both a voluntary and women's organisation, the following definition outlines the civil society sector focused on in this research:

- Organisations that organise women explicitly as women to effect social change;
- Organisations dedicated to self-help, mutual support, and fellowship among women;
- Organisations that provide services specifically for women; and
- Organisations that bring together and coordinate the work of various WOs.

The inclusion of women's branches of political parties in Malta within civil society is complex due to the pervasive influence of political parties in small island states (Corbett, 2015; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2019). Edwards (2020) suggests that political parties might be considered part of civil society when in opposition but part of the establishment when in government. For example, during the sex work reform debate, the women's section of Partit Nazzjonalista actively opposed the government, joining forces with the Coalition on Human Trafficking and Prostitution; while Nisa Laburisti remained silent, possibly indicating support. Despite these complexities, both organisations are deemed valuable contributors for this research, given they represent an organised group of women that work for social change at the heart of the dominant political parties.

The study used non-probability sampling techniques, which are ideal for exploring niche and understudied communities. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods was employed to identify participants. Identifying WOs in Malta began with desk research through official sources such as the websites of the Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations and the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector, as well as broader online resources including social media and news outlets. These sources primarily revealed organisations active at the national level. To find those operating within localities, an email was sent to local councils and parishes. One organisation was discovered by chance: a group of

women bikers with matching jackets displaying their logo. Additional organisations were referred by participants already involved in the study.

Out of the 58 organisations contacted, 52 participated in the study⁶. The survey was conducted with 47 organisations while interviews were conducted with 14 organisations. Of the 52 participating organisations, 9 organisations took part in both the interview and survey, 5 took part only in the interviews, while 38 were involved only in the survey. Both survey and interview questionnaires were piloted, which allowed for minor changes indicated by the respondents.

Recruitment of participants and data collection were held between January and May 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The restriction on face-to-face gatherings imposed by the health authorities at the time limited the possibility of reaching out to organisations in-person at organised events. This also influenced the methods used for surveys and interviews, as data collection was conducted entirely online, by post, or by telephone.

Ethical practices aligned with the University of Malta Research Code of Conduct and Research Ethics Review Procedures were followed. This included obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants were informed of their autonomy, and making them aware of their right to skip any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was maintained, with the names of respondents and their respective VOs not being disclosed in the study.

WOs are being referred to through codes generated⁷ in relation to ideological positions based on their replies:

- Community: WOs unite women with a common hobby, cultural interest, or shared identity, organising niche groups or community-based groups in parishes.
- Equality: WOs prioritise advocating for women's rights and promoting gender equality.
- Empowerment: WOs provide services aimed at supporting and uplifting women, such as entrepreneurial mentoring and aid for victims of domestic violence.

⁶ The organisations are: Association for Equality; Agora Club; Attard Ladies Cultural Club; Attard Parents, Baby and Toddler club; Azzjoni Kattolika – Fergħa tan-Nisa; Grupp Nisa Żgħażaġh Birzebbuġa; Business & Professional Women (Valletta) Malta; Dar Hosea; The Good Shepherd Sisters - Dar Merhba Bik Foundation; emPOWer - Platform of Organisations for Women; Female Entrepreneurs Malta; Fondazzjoni Kenn u Tama – Dar Emmaus; Fondazzjoni Sebh – il-Milja; Foundation for Women Entrepreneurs (Malta); Grupp Santa Martha Gwardamangia; Gozo Crafty Ladies – Kerċem branch; Grupp Nisa – Parroċċa Ġużepp Haddiem, Birkirkara; Ladies Circle – Pieta Gwardamangia Parish; Ladies Circle – St Sebastian Parish Qormi; Ladies Circle – St George Parish Qormi; Ladies Crafts Circle - Mellieħa; Ladies Running Club; Legion of Mary – Women’s branch; Life Network Foundation - Life Line Malta; Malta Association of Women in Business; Malta Girl Guides; Malta Netball Association; Malta Sound Women Network; Malta Women’s Lobby; Mediating Women, Balancing the Media; Malta Football Association – Women’s Football; Miss inTech; Moviment Nisa Partit Nazzjonalista; Grupp nisa separati – Mosta; Oratorju Marija Immakulata – Mosta; Mother and Baby Club – St Sebastian Parish, Qormi; Mother’s Club; National Council of Women Malta; Nisa Laburisti; #occupyjustice; Positive Birth Movement; Soċjeta Duttrina Nisranija – Qasam tan-Nisa; Soroptimist Malta; St Jeanne Antide Foundation; Vixens Motorcycle Club; Women Directors Malta; Women for Women; Women Sound Network; Women’s Federation for World Peace Malta; Women’s Rights Foundation; Women’s Study Group; Young Progressive Beings; Young Women Christian Workers.

⁷ In the study, each organisation interviewed has a unique code and has been quoted as Empowerment 1, Empowerment 2 etc.

- Formation: WOs offer programmes and experiences that foster women's personal development, including spiritual formation and sports training.
- Radicalism: WOs engage in grassroots activism through direct actions, fuelled by strong emotions for social justice or feminist principles.

Although WOs may exhibit characteristics of multiple ideal types, the proposed typology focuses on the dominant features of what is, in reality, a complex structure. Rather than oversimplifying the social formation of each organisation, it acknowledges a hierarchy of influence, where 'structures of dominance' play a greater role in shaping some organisations than others (Althusser, 1969).

The landscape of 52 women's organisations, as mapped by this research, is made up of 22 Community WOs, 11 Equality WOs, 11 Empowerment WOs, 6 Formation WOs and 2 Radicalism WOs.

Data analysis

Data was analysed thematically in response to the research questions guiding the study. The relations and collaborations of the actors under study, using relational approaches, was the focus of the analysis. The research also sought to analyse which of the organisations under study has a feminist identity, and whether this has impact on their connections with other organisations. The research thus draws on Diani's modes of collective action, analysing WOs through a combination of aggregative and relational approaches. Aggregative approaches define actors by a set of specific characteristics - such as their association with feminism or their classification as a WO, while relational approaches prioritise the analysis of interactions and collaborations among actors in the field.

Data from the survey and interviews is being presented simultaneously, an approach which permits an analysis of the similarities and differences in replies. Furthermore, the joint exposition of research results shows 'new insights beyond the information gained from the separate quantitative and qualitative results' (Fetters et al., 2013, p. 2143).

Results and Discussion

What are the relations of WOs with institutions?

WOs taking part in both survey and interviews were asked about relations with institutional actors occurring at the locality and national levels, also enquiring about active representation in church and state structures. The figures below show results from the surveys.

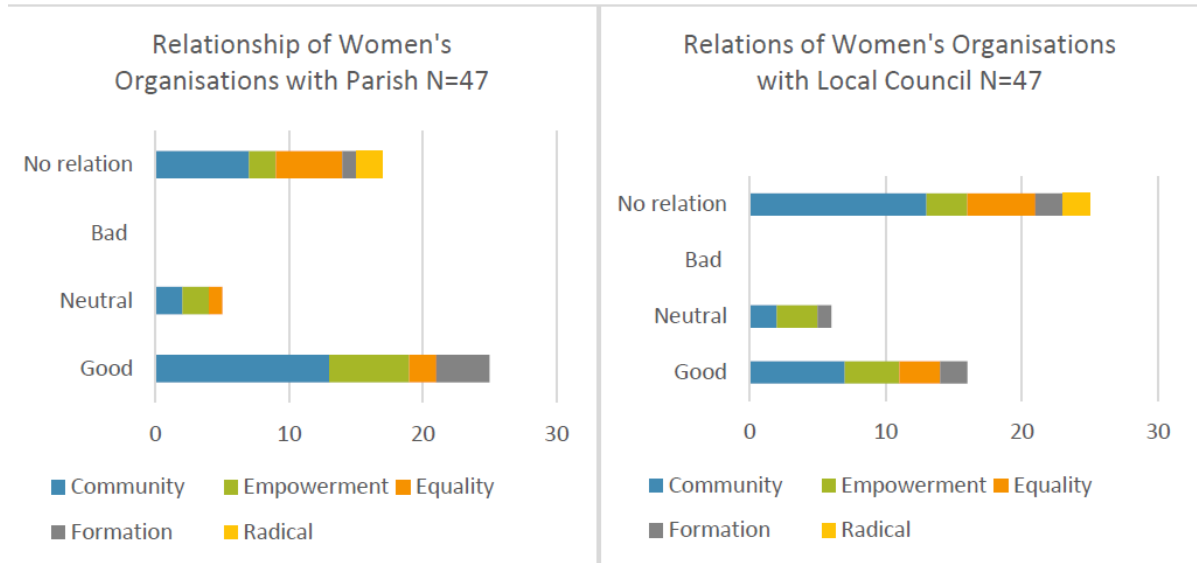
Relations with institutional actors in the locality

Relations of WOs in localities is primarily harboured by those organisations active within the locality. Twenty-five organisations have relations with parishes, and almost all of these are Community and Formation WOs who work in the parish (see [Figure 1](#)). Some Empowerment WOs also have contact with parishes, in particular those that are run by the diocese or other church entities. The parish priest and local councillors emerge as important stakeholders in the

locality, with one Formation WO explaining that these know ‘the needs of the district’. The survey shows that fewer organisations have relations with the local councils (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 1: Relations of WOs with Parish

Figure 2: Relations of WOs with Local Council

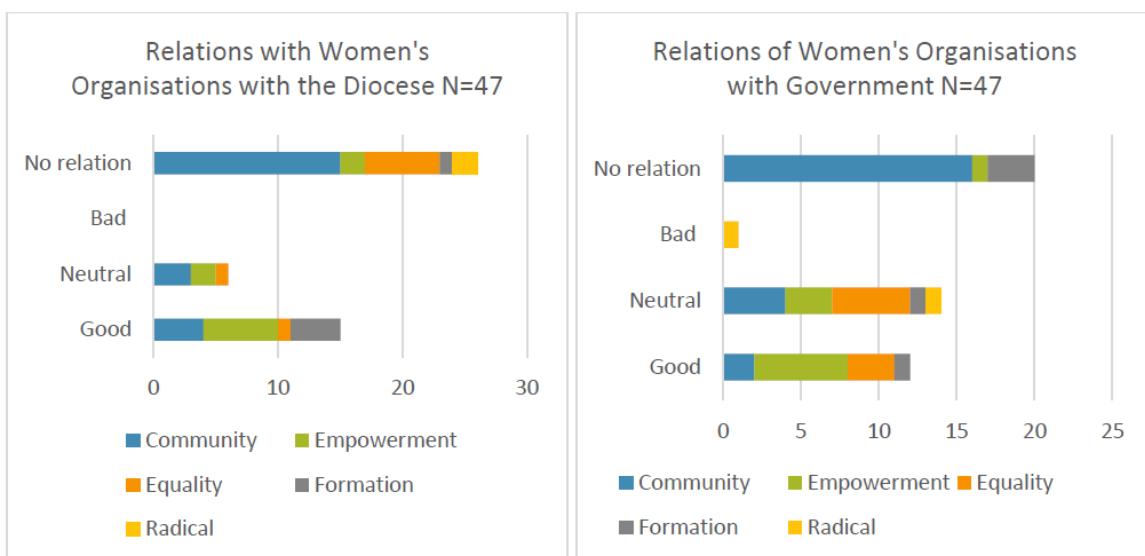


Relations with diocese

Data shows that more Empowerment WOs have relations with the diocese, but fewer Community WOs active in parishes have relations with the diocese (see [Figure 3](#)). Five out of 11 Empowerment WOs are founded by Catholic organisations. Empowerment and Equality WOs that are not attached to church structures often co-operate with church organisations, in spite of the differences arising from not having a Christian or Catholic ethos (Empowerment 3; Equality 3).

Figure 3: Relations of WOs with Diocese

Figure 4: Relations of WOs with Government



Relations with Government

The field features various examples of cross-sectoral collaboration between WOs and government, through Public Social Partnership agreements supporting services for vulnerable women, through which WOs collaborate with ministries which fund their work and other entities⁸.

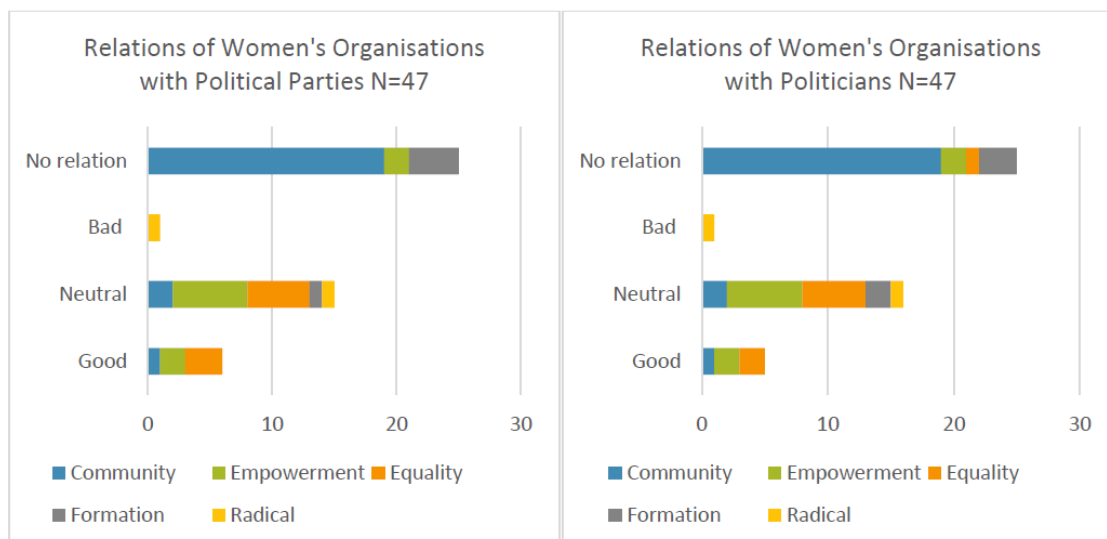
Additionally, WOs involved in lobbying may engage with government through invitations to take part in consultations processes and form part of boards by various ministries (Equality 1). While these invitations actively recognise the contribution of WOs, organisations also speak about frustrations arising from the lack of recognition by government, identifying two main scenarios: (a) lack of allocation of funds supporting the work of WOs, with 2 Equality WOs arguing that if ‘government really believes in equality’ (Equality 2), it would invest in their capacity to operate; and (b) lack of consultation with WOs, such as in the proposed sex work reform and the regulation of fundraising, referred to as ‘something which will put them out of business’ (Radical 2).

While Community WOs are the least likely to have relations with government, one radical WO has bad relations with government (see [Figure 4](#)).

Relations with political actors

The type of relation that an organisation harnesses with political actors is in direct link with its aim. Only those organisations forming part of political parties have a formal link with political parties. As shown in [Figure 5](#), 25 organisations claim they have no relations with political parties, while 6 claim a good relation. Other WOs value a neutral relation with political parties and their representatives, except for one Radical WO who has a bad relation.

Figure 5: Relations of WOs with Political Parties **Figure 6: Relations of WOs with Politicians**



⁸ Entities span various ministries and include the family courts, Appogg, the National Council for the Promotion of Equality, the Commission on Gender-Based and Domestic Violence, and a state school.

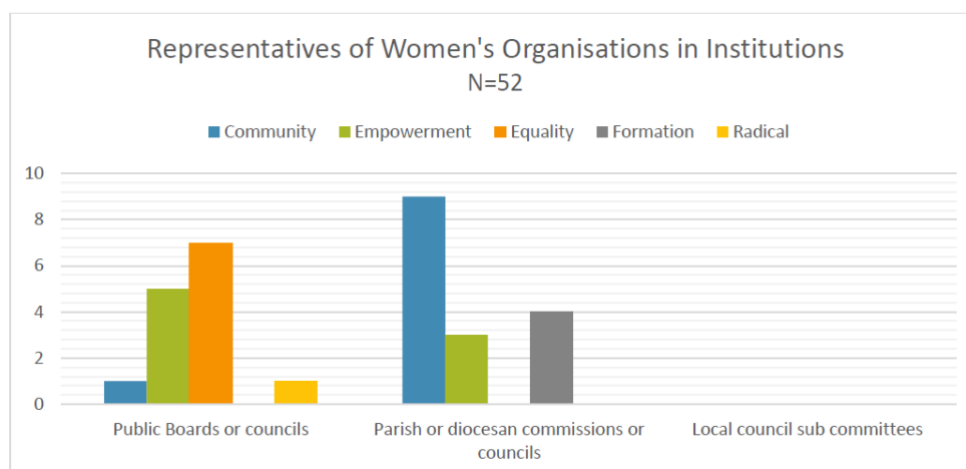
Empowerment and Equality WOs, who regularly lobby and negotiate agreements with political actors, emerge as those organisations with better relations. As *'the ones who can effect change'* (Empowerment 3), political actors (in government and in opposition) are lobbied. WOs appreciate their *'autonomy and neutrality'* which gives them the freedom to support and give credit to politicians or otherwise *'call them out when there needs to be action'* (Equality 3). Funding is also a tool which gives access to relations with ministry officials and elected representatives (Empowerment 1), which creates opportunities for closeness with political actors *'facilitat[ing] greater use of insider tactics'* (Mosley, 2011, p. 451).

Radical WOs seem sceptical about relations with political parties and politicians (see [Figure 6](#)), with one claiming a bad relation with these. Radical 1 only meets political parties or politicians as partners in a coalition, so the organisation does not seem *'to pander politicians, to make people feel comfortable'*. They emphasise non-relations as part of their strategy to show: *'we're here, we're young, we're angry'*. Radical 2, who speaks of bad relations with both government and political actors, says this conflict is related with their agenda to denounce corruption *'they don't like us...that's our job...we turn them to pieces when they do the wrong thing...to hold them to account...that is our relationship: we are there to hold them to account'*. Community WOs, who aim to nurture relations among a community of women, seek no relations with political actors, fearing the divisive impact this would bring in their community.

Representatives of WOs in Institutions

While 24 out of 52 WOs are rooted in religious beliefs, only 16 have representatives within church structures (parishes and diocese). In localities, community organisations active in parishes generally have representatives in the parish pastoral council. None of them is involved in parallel structures in local councils within their localities, or otherwise on public boards or within diocesan structures. Organisations with a Roman Catholic ethos active at national level may be involved in various diocesan commissions⁹. Radical and Equality WOs are not part of these structures (see [Figure 7](#)).

Figure 7: Representatives of WOs in institutions



⁹ These include the Secretariat for Diaconia, which brings together a forum of church-based organisations. Structures in the diocese are reserved for organisations with Roman Catholic beliefs.

WOs seem keen to participate in structures for dialogue, the setup of which is necessary to support a deliberative public sphere (Fraser, 1992). Empowerment 1 emphasises: *'What I would like is for us to be present and involved when consultative boards designing reforms are appointed – we represent the service user'*, showing the WOs' willingness to partner in state power by contributing to decision-making in the field, recalling Gramsci's (1975) political society + civil society vision.

None of the organisations in this research is involved in a structure set up by the local councils. 14 organisations are active in public boards or councils at national level¹⁰, most of these being Empowerment and Equality WOs. The organisations most active in these public fora are the officially registered umbrella organisations. The context of a small island, where inhabitants wear many hats (Baldacchino, 2012; Boissevain, 1974; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2019), is emphasised by the observation that even if their organisation is not formally represented on public boards or committees, they can still raise their issues through their individual participation or as representatives of other organisations.

How, if at all, does the structure of relations among WOs contribute to the making of an 'ecosystem'?

Structure of the Network: Relations

WOs were asked to identify other organisations with which they work, whom they support or otherwise have close ties with. Using a one-mode matrix¹¹, the information received through both surveys and interviews has been displayed in a network map, where different categories of organisations can be identified by colour.

[Figure 8](#) shows two clusters of relations and several isolated organisations. Both clusters are separate – one cluster is composed of 4 organisations, while the larger cluster shows the interrelations among 25 organisations.

Fourteen out of 21 Community WOs, 3 out of 6 Formation WOs, 1 of 2 Radical WOs and 3 of 12 Empowerment organisations are not attached to the main network and can be found outside the bigger structure, as isolates. Additionally, a small network of 4 actors represents Community and Formation WOs active in two different parishes within the same locality. This network has no ties with the bigger network, which is made up of 9 Empowerment WOs, 11 Equality WOs, 4 Community WOs, 2 Formation WOs, 1 Radical WO, mostly organisations which are active at the national level.

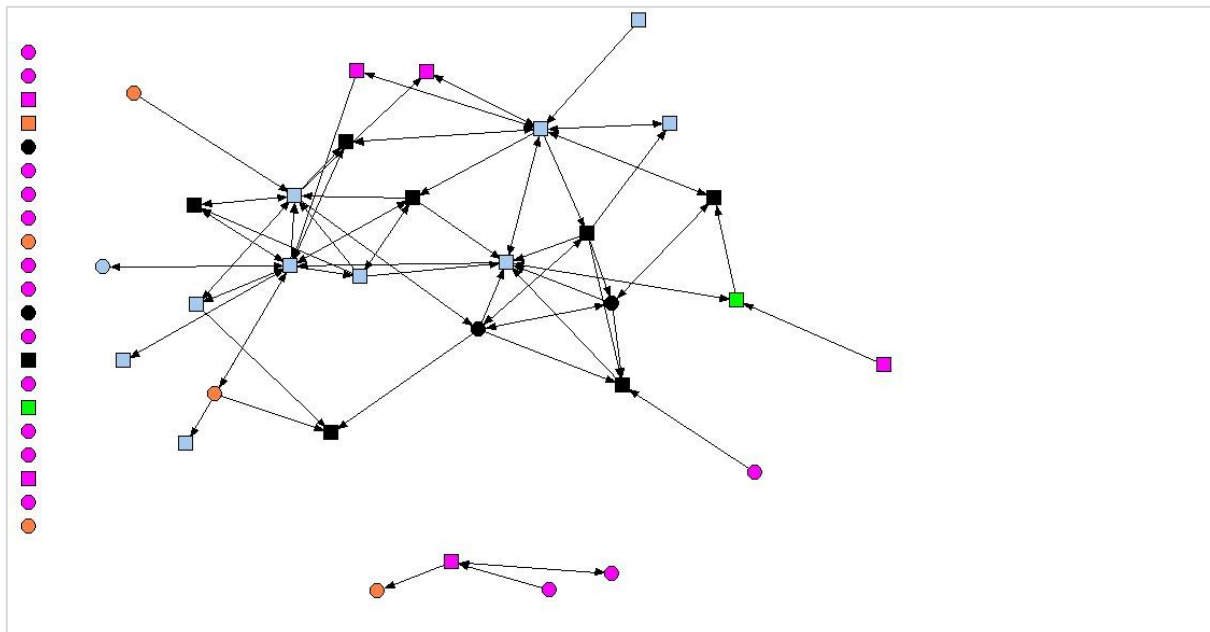
In [Figure 9](#), nodes were grouped by attribute. This shows more clearly the exchange among and between different categories of organisations. Direction of the connection is shown by use of arrowheads. Blue lines show reciprocal ties. Black lines show a connection moving in one direction, which signifies that only one of the two organisations mentioned this relation in

¹⁰ WOs are mainly active in the Consultative Council for Women's Rights, which at the moment of study was suspended due to the resignation of the Junior Minister. Other fora include the Oversight Committee driving the National Action Plan for the UN Women Peace and Security agenda, the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development – Civil Society Committee; the Monitoring Committee of the Operational Programme; The Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector; The National Enterprise Consultative Council.

¹¹ A matrix is 1-mode when rows and columns refer to the same set of entities – the 52 WOs participating in this research.

either survey or interview. There are dense connections between and among Empowerment and Equality WOs, although reciprocal ties also exist with other organisations in the network.

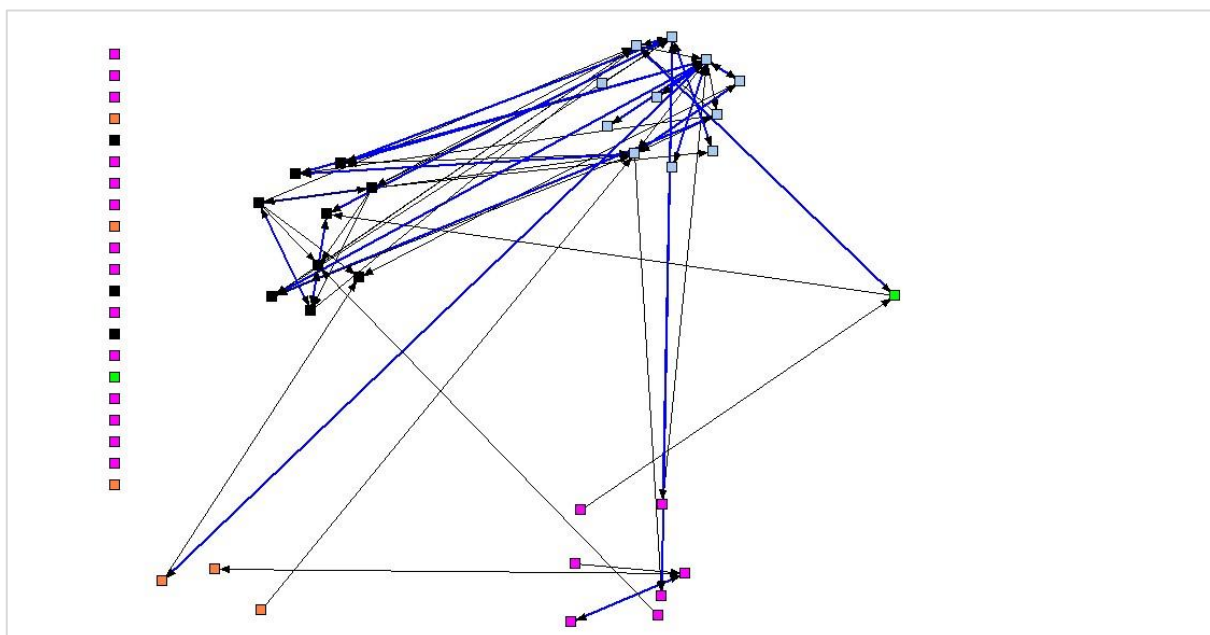
Figure 8: Networks among Women's Organisations, by ideology



Legend - Community: Pink; Equality: Blue; Empowerment: Black; Formation: Orange; Radical: Green; Squares represent organisations which identify as feminist; Circles represent organisations which do not identify as feminist.

Data collected from WOs about the relations they have within the field of WOs has been recorded using UCINET and visualised using NETdraw (Borgatti et al. 2002).

Figure 9: Relations of WOs where nodes are grouped by attribute (ideology)

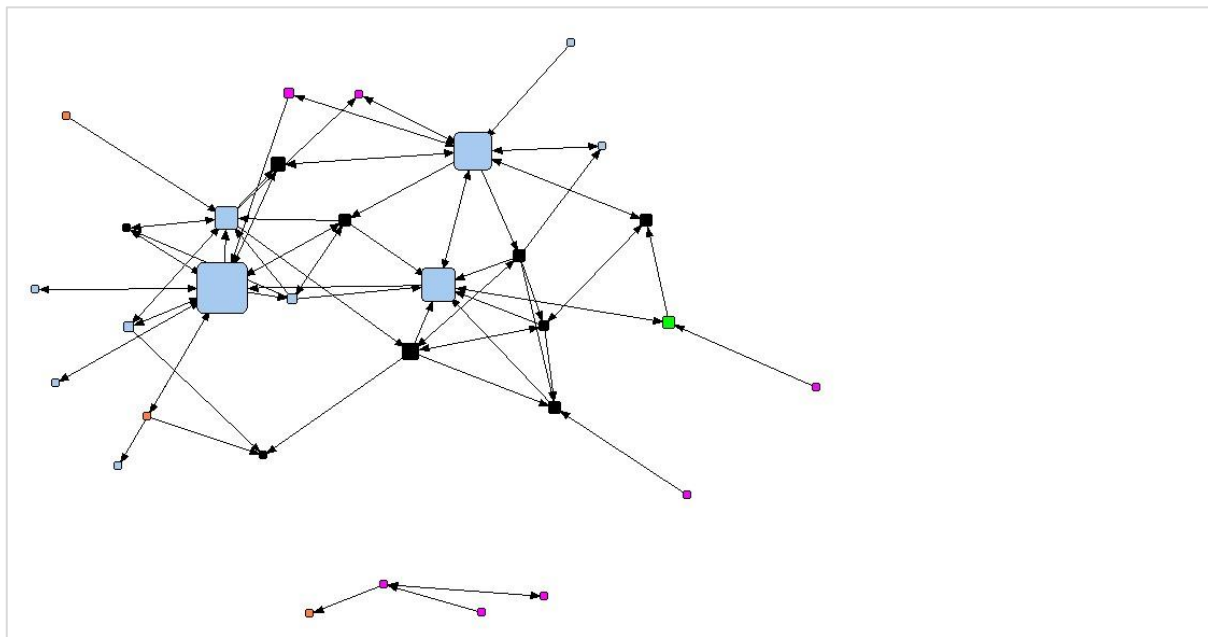


Legend: Community: Pink; Equality: Blue; Empowerment: Black; Formation: Orange; Radical: Green. Reciprocal ties are shown in blue.

Data collected from WOs about the relations they have within the field of WOs has been recorded using UCINET and visualised using NETdraw (Borgatti et al. 2002).

Isolates (organisations which do not form part of the network) make up 40.1% of actors in the network. 52% of organisations form part of the bigger network, with 4 Equality organisations, of which 3 are umbrella organisations in the field, show more connections and demonstrating their embeddedness in the field. This is demonstrated in [Figure 10](#), which shows the betweenness centrality of these 4 organisations. The overall density in the network is 0.034, meaning that 3.4% of possible ties are actually found in the network. The density of a binary network is the total number of ties divided by the total number of possible ties, and shows the level of cohesion within a network.

Figure 10: Relations between Women's Organisations, by ideology



Legend - Community: Pink; Equality: Blue; Empowerment: Black; Formation: Orange; Radical: Green.

Node size reflects the betweenness centrality of the actors in the network

Data about the relations of WOs was processed through UCINet and visualised with NETdraw (Borgatti et al. 2002).

Centrality measures the importance of an actor's position in a network (Freeman, 1979). [Figure 10](#) shows node size by betweenness centrality, which measures the information control of each organisation, identifying the best brokers in the network. The organisation represented by the biggest node is in fact an umbrella organisation which also includes women's branches of political parties as members, which may account for its potential to tie these organisations to the network. The bigger nodes in the network belong to Equality organisations, with three of these nodes being umbrella organisations. Umbrella, or intermediary organisations, focus on servicing and advocating for member organisations, co-ordinating and representing their interests (Edwards, 2020; Diani, 2015). Their value lies in the joint effort of different organisations coming together to enhance their capacity and representation (Edwards, 2020; Young, 2001).

Network centrality enhances an organisation's ability to generate, access, and leverage social capital (Diani, 1997). Central positions in a network allow for greater influence, trust, and access to resources, all of which contribute to stronger social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Granovetter's (1973) 'strength of weak ties' theory posits that a network's strong ties foster long-term alliances, shared ideologies, and trust, while weaker ties connecting or surrounding these alliances allow communication to extend much further. Equality organisations in this network have greater connections, indicating a likelihood to have more influence and power (Diani, 1997). This links with earlier findings showing these organisations to be more involved in the public sphere, engaged in boards and committees, at the discussion table with policy makers, but sometimes also involved in lobbying '*behind the scenes*' (Equality 2).

The structure of relations among WOs, therefore, reveals an ecosystem characterised by both connections and disconnections. The findings reported above show an ecosystem that is highly centralised, organised around a few powerful brokers who facilitate collaborations through knowledge and resource sharing and coordination of services and advocacy. The findings also show that 40% of the organisations remain disconnected from other WOs, highlighting the ecosystem's inherent fragmentation.

Collaborations underline the collective action of organisations, their efforts to support each other through practical support, or the ideas which bring them together (Diani, 2015). Organisations share information, expertise, resources and social capital through collaborations, thereby enhancing their capacity. Interview respondents say that the network of relations is '*an invisible rope of support that women throw at each other*' (Equality 4), embodying a '*sisterhood*' (Empowerment 3). Collaborations not only enable successful projects and events, but they also leave positive effects on policy reforms (Equality 1). The disconnections in the structure of relations of WOs limits the full potential of collaborative efforts within the ecosystem, which in turn has significant implications for the effectiveness and coherence of collective action across the sector.

What are the main factors which facilitate or hinder collaborations among WOs?

Organisations were asked to reflect on elements that facilitate or hinder collaborations. Factors that encourage organisations to take up collaborations have been condensed to two main points: (a) their likeness and complementarity, and (b) their social capital, such as a mutual trust in the leadership of partner organisations and personal connections with their members. The former resonates well with the concept of homophily, which emphasises that '*similarity breeds connection*' (McPherson et al., 2001).

The main element impeding the consolidation of collaborations was indicated by WOs to be differences in fundamental principles. Of note is a finding from this research showing that only 52% of the organisations taking part in the research consider themselves to be feminist. Organisations also acknowledge that there are many different facets to feminism, and each organisation chooses a specific set of beliefs to define their form of feminism. [Figure 8](#) maps the links between feminist (square) and non-feminist organisations (circles), implying that while feminist organisations, particularly those active in lobbying and activism, tend to occupy central positions in the network, organisations which are not feminist may be located on the periphery of the main network. Non-feminist groups are also more likely to lie as isolated nodes on the side of the figure. Radical 1 reiterates that a common discourse among WOs is not possible given the current differences in ideologies in the field.

Another difference in the field is the position of organisations on abortion, an issue described as *'very divisive'*, where *'some organisations don't collaborate because of it'* (Empowerment 3). Organisations with either pro-choice or pro-life positions maintain working relationships on mutually beneficial projects while avoiding the topic in the public sphere and refraining from engaging in dialogue on the subject.

While shared values and social capital play key roles in shaping the structure of relationships within the WOs' ecosystem, concerns about relationships weakening when abortion is discussed suggest that identification with feminism alone is not the primary unifying factor within the ecosystem.

Conclusion

Drawing on sociological theory, this research presents findings on the civil society ecosystem of WOs from Malta, providing insights into the relations of WOs with institutions and with other WOs, and their operation as an ecosystem.

This research highlights relationships as a key strength of civil society organisations. While WOs are involved in parish and government committees, their participation in local council initiatives is lacking, and they have only minimal involvement within diocesan structures. Building relationships with parish priests and local councillors could be beneficial, as it provides access to the community.

Relationships with government and political actors are strengthened when appropriate deliberative arenas are established, allowing for the representation of diverse voices within the field, as suggested by Habermas' concept of the public sphere (Fraser, 1992). When these participatory spaces are not created, opportunities for relationships with government entities are diminished.

WOs emphasise the importance of their involvement in government consultations, viewing themselves as partners in state power. This aligns with Gramsci's concept of the interplay between political society and civil society (Buttigieg, 1995). Generally, relations with institutions and political actors are positive, allowing WOs to lobby and use insider tactics to achieve their objectives.

However, WOs also express their frustrations with these relationships and may distance themselves to avoid appearing overly-accommodating to politicians. They actively *'call them out'* (Equality 3) and emphasise their role in holding political society accountable, balancing power through oversight. The local two-party political system may also discourage organisations from forming close ties with political actors, as this could risk causing divisions among their members.

Diani's (2015) coalitional mode of coordination is highly relevant to understanding the network of WOs in Malta, where collaboration occurs within a decentralised structure characterised by multiple centres of power. In this model, coordination is achieved through alliances and coalitions, rather than being directed by a single authority.

The Maltese WO network reflects this approach, with different organisations exerting influence in their respective areas without a unified control point. This decentralisation highlights a key aspect of Diani's (2015) coalitional mode: coalitions form around specific issues or projects where participants' loyalties are rooted, with the agenda and rationale set by the organisation rather than the coalition.

A crucial factor in this ecosystem is bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000): the relationships between diverse organisations that enable them to share knowledge, information, and resources. This social capital is essential for fostering collaboration and building trust, which is key to establishing and maintaining relationships over time. In a civil society ecosystem like that of Malta, bridging social capital serves as the foundation for coalition-building. It allows WOs to support each other despite differences in focus or ideology, and to overcome fragmentation within the network.

The concept of the civil society ecosystem is vital here, as it encompasses the interconnected web of relationships among WOs. While some organisations may be on the periphery of this ecosystem, the network as a whole remains active through multiple exchanges facilitated by bridging social capital. Trust-based connections are especially important, as they help sustain collaborations and mitigate the effects of ideological divides.

The differences within the WO network—between those advocating for institutional change and those engaged in grassroots efforts—underscore the complexity of coalitional coordination. Even though alliances are formed, particularly through the support provided by bridging social capital, the network remains vulnerable to fragmentation, especially over contentious issues like abortion. This fragility points to the need for a more cohesive civil society ecosystem, where stronger connections between central and peripheral organisations could enhance overall unity.

Relations among WOs may be consolidated, or otherwise destroyed, depending on their agreement on fundamental principles. 52% of these organisations define themselves as feminist organisations. These organisations are likely to occupy central positions in the ecosystem driving lobbying and activism for women's issues. Other organisations are more likely to be out of the ecosystem of relations. Yet the network shows that feminist and non-feminist organisations may still relate and collaborate. Public dialogue and engagement of WOs on the issue of abortion has been described as the issue that could mark the further breakdown of fragile relations making up the ecosystem. The field presents itself with fundamental differences in ideologies, which hinder the development of a common discourse around the issues emerging from women's needs in Malta.

The Maltese WO network illustrates Diani's (2015) coalitional mode of coordination, where decentralisation and strategic alliances are central to its functioning. The civil society ecosystem, supported by bridging social capital, plays a critical role in enabling cooperation, trust, and resource-sharing. However, the network's inherent ideological differences and fragmented relationships present ongoing challenges that must be addressed to create a more interconnected and resilient ecosystem.

WOs may address these challenges through the creation of rhetorical and discursive spaces to accommodate diverse narratives of womanhood, some of which are excluded from mainstream discourses. Umbrella organisations play a pivotal role in this by facilitating dialogue and building bridges with isolated WOs. Actively investing in deliberative tools—especially those that support the inclusion of Community WOs and other WOs working at the local level—is crucial. Given that resource-sharing encourages collaboration, policy measures such as investment in the capacity of Umbrella WOs and the disbursement of grants for joint projects would help reinforce cooperation within the WO ecosystem, creating a stronger, more unified collective action framework.

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