



FAIRFORWARD:
SHAPING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES ACROSS EUROPE

National Focus Group Report

General Workers Union, Malta
July 2025

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Co-funded by
the European Union

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Abstract

This report on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups within the labor market is compiled in the context of the EU funded ‘*Fairforward: Shaping Inclusive Workplaces Across Europe*’ project being led by the General Workers Union, Malta in collaboration with other workers’ organisations across Europe. The project is aimed at contributing towards raised awareness of workers organizations of the EU’s anti-discrimination directives and the implementation status in participant countries; strengthening capabilities of workers organizations to assist workers from vulnerable groups through collective bargaining; enhancing cooperation of workers organizations for the development of measures to improve the status of vulnerable workers, and to increase awareness of the problems faced by these target populations. This report highlights the findings arising from the research component of the project based on a focus group discussion with a wide representation of workers at risk of discrimination, regarding their i) overall general employment experiences, ii) challenges and barriers, and iii) needs and requirements for accessing quality employment and career progression within the Maltese labour market. The focus group findings reveal a pervasive challenge for certain categories of workers in accessing and progressing within the labour market due to widespread prejudice, direct and indirect discrimination, poor working conditions, and lack of effective policy and legislative monitoring and enforcement. These experiences inform recommendations and suggestions for the improved inclusion of disadvantaged workers within the Maltese labour market in terms of enhanced awareness and understanding, more optimally targeted and effective service provision, legislative and policy reform, and improved implementation, monitoring and enforcement of existing legislative and policy frameworks. A committed comprehensive and multifaceted approach addressing both personal and structural disadvantage is necessary to address prevalent forms of direct and indirect discrimination. Moreover, combating discrimination within the labour market needs to be addressed in collaboration with wider equality struggles on all grounds of discrimination as well as within the context of broader challenges for the protection of workers’ rights, where human rights and wellbeing supersede macro-economic interests.



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Introduction: Aim and Scope of Report

Malta has in these past years registered impressive economic growth accompanied by high employment rates. Employment levels in 2025 stood at 65.8% (National Statistics Office, 2025), resulting in the country being referred to as having reached ‘full employment’. Yet, GDP growth has not contributed to improved redistribution of wealth, reduction of poverty or improved opportunities for social mobility for all members of the population. Despite high employment, certain populations remain underrepresented within the labour market. In addition, high employment is not necessarily reflected in quality work, as precarity remains a glaring feature of the Maltese labour market. Moreover, despite the emergence of a more diverse and pluralistic community, prejudice and discrimination, including within the labour market abound.

Exclusionary and discriminatory treatment, often based on stereotypes and prejudices, impedes affected individuals from the full enjoyment of their right to decent work, negatively impacting their livelihood, wellbeing, and quality of life. This situation demands addressing those factors and mechanisms, including both inherent vulnerabilities and structural disadvantages, which are contributing to the perpetration and escalation of inequalities. Gaining better understanding of the mechanisms through which these exclusionary and discriminatory practices are perpetrated, as well as the needs and requirements of vulnerable and disadvantaged workers will help shed better light on necessary legislative and policy reform, as well as initiatives to improve human capital and wellbeing.

Within the context of this complex and contradictory scenario, this report aims to bridge the gap between the macro and micro situation, by exposing the micro-level realities and lived experiences which shape Malta's employment landscape within the context of its macro-level economic and employment indicators.

This research complements the overall objectives of the ‘Fairforward: Shaping Inclusive Workplaces Across Europe’ project being led by the General Workers Union, Malta in collaboration with various other workers’ unions across Europe. This initiative is directed at contributing to:

- raised awareness of workers organizations of the EU’s anti-discrimination directives and the implementation status in participant countries;
- strengthened capabilities to use the collective bargaining by workers organizations to assist workers from vulnerable groups;
- enhanced cooperation of workers organizations for the development of measures to improve the status of the target group; and
- increased awareness of the problems relating to the target groups.

The study is guided by questions examining the experiences, challenges and needs of disadvantaged workers within the labour market. The key research questions guiding this inquiry are:

- What are the main challenges and barriers, as well as needs and requirements of disadvantaged workers for accessing quality employment, occupational mobility and career progression?
- What measures need to be set in place in terms of policies and programmes for improving the inclusion and quality of work of disadvantaged groups in the Maltese labour market?

Following this brief explanation of the scope of the inquiry, the report offers a contextual background to the study by examining in more depth the ‘problem area’ within the national context. This desk-based examination of the employment situation is substantiated by an overview of existing equality and anti-discrimination legislative frameworks and measures in place to promote more inclusive labour markets. The report clarifies the methodological design which was adopted to examine the experiences, challenges and needs of disadvantaged groups, and based on the emerging findings, recommendations are proposed for improved policy change.

Employment Situation in Malta: A Dual Labour Market

In the last years, Malta's economy has experienced remarkable growth resulting in increased labor demand. Official statistics consistently highlight a robust and growing economy with high employment rates and exceptionally low unemployment. In the first quarter of 2025, the Labour Force Survey estimated the employment rate (ie; the proportion of a country's working-age population that is currently employed) at 65.8% with the total number of persons in employment amounting to 327,643 (National Statistics Office Malta, 2025). The unemployment rate for the same period stood at a remarkably low 2.7%. The activity rate was estimated at 82.7% (NSO, 2025b) with the average monthly basic salary of employees standing at €2,063. Salaries varied from €1,293 in elementary occupations to €3,217 among managers (NSO, 2025b).

Yet, Malta's labour market presents a complex and often contradictory scenario. While macro-economic indicators paint a positive picture of a high-employment, low-unemployment economy, the lived experiences and reality on the ground of many workers, reveal a persistent struggle against systemic discrimination, exploitation, and inadequate support. Indeed, the strong aggregate performance, conceals significant difficulties faced by specific groups within the labor market as “good employment statistical data may mask underlying challenges” (Kósa and Tschank, 2023, p.39). It also masks challenges regarding the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of certain disadvantaged groups within certain sectors of the economy, as well as multiple direct and indirect forms of discrimination.

Employment Trends for Disadvantaged Groups

The Maltese situation is akin to the European context in terms of the main groups who are at higher risk of poverty, social exclusion (Deguara, 2008) and discrimination, including within the labour market. Such groups amongst others, include those having low levels of education and skills, persons with physical, mental health and addictive behaviour difficulties, young people and older persons, lone parents, and migrants (Deguara, 2008). These challenges often stem from systemic barriers, cultural attitudes, and policy gaps, leading to pronounced disparities in economic participation and a heightened risk of poverty.

Malta continues to struggle with a notable gender employment gap, with only 64% of women aged 15-64 in employment, positioning it among the widest gaps in the EU (Borg & Camilleri, 2024). Persons with disabilities encounter profound systemic challenges in labor market inclusion, evidenced by a 31% gap (compared to EU27 average of 19.8%) in economic activity rates compared to individuals without disabilities (Gauci et al., 2021). This disparity is even more pronounced for women with disabilities, who face lower employment rates (49% vs. 53.9% for men) and a higher risk of poverty (Gauci et al., 2021). Despite the 'Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act' and a 2% quota system for businesses, cultural attitudes and discriminatory practices continue to hinder effective implementation and inclusion.

Malta's older workers (55-64) face significant hurdles, with their employment rate sharply declining to 63.7% from 81.1% (AGE Platform Europe, 2023). This demographic, projected to be 33.6% of the population by 2027, faces a high poverty risk (29% for those 65+) (Malta Employers' Association, 2024). Ageism, skill mismatches, and discriminatory employer practices, such as forced retirements and age-based limitations, contribute to labor market inequality (Brown & Briguglio, 2007) demanding active aging policies and schemes to combat age discrimination (Formosa, 2014).

The nation's ageing population and low fertility rates necessitate substantial labor migration. While economically vital to address skills gaps and shortages (Kósa and Tschank, 2023), this reliance on foreign labour, particularly from third-country nationals who now comprise over one-third of Malta's employed population (Kósa & Tschank, 2023), has exacerbated challenges related to fair wages and precarity of working conditions. Many foreign workers in Malta are employed in precarious work, characterized by low pay, poor conditions, and job insecurity, particularly prevalent in sectors like construction, hospitality, administrative and support services, cleaning, and care work. Foreign workers, in particular, asylum seekers and third-country nationals experience racial discrimination at recruitment and within the workplace, with many being forced into irregular and exploitative employment (Farrugia, 2019) leading to in-work poverty (Kósa & Tschank, 2023). This also impacts the broader economy by suppressing wages for all the workforce (Kósa & Tschank, 2023).

Single parents represent a highly vulnerable group, with Malta exhibiting the highest rate of jobless single parents in Europe (54% out of the labour market) (Massa, 2014). They face a high incidence of poverty and are often trapped in insecure employment due to significant work-family interface issues, lack of family-friendly measures and caregiving burdens (Borg, 2015). Despite government incentives like in-work benefits and benefit tapering schemes, many do not engage in available support, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and accessible assistance (Borg, 2015).

Individuals with low educational attainment consistently face lower employment rates and higher vulnerability to economic shocks, as almost 40% of persons aged 15 and over in Malta have attained secondary education or less (National Statistics Office Malta, Q1/2025). Despite improvements, the rate of early school leavers remains above the EU benchmark, perpetuating a skill mismatch in a labor market that increasingly demands medium to highly-skilled workers (Guznajeve et al., 2023). This educational divide contributes significantly to in-work and

intergenerational poverty and social benefit dependency (Ministry for Social Policy and Children Rights, 2025).

Beyond these recognized groups, ‘hidden’ populations such as individuals with mental health and addictive behaviour difficulties, undeclared workers, and trans- and non-binary individuals also face significant social exclusion and discrimination, often proving difficult for policies to reach (Kósa & Tschank, 2023).

Overall, while various policies and schemes exist to promote inclusive employment, tangible barriers, including prejudice and discrimination, cultural attitudes, and skill mismatches, persist. Across these groups, labor market discrimination remains a prevalent issue despite a robust legal framework prohibiting it on grounds such as race, age, sex, disability, and sexual orientation. The effectiveness of anti-discrimination laws is hampered by pervasive underreporting, often due to a lack of trust in redress mechanisms, fear of reprisal, or insufficient awareness of rights, allowing discriminatory practices to persist unchecked.

National anti-discrimination and inclusion measures

Malta’s employment agency, ‘Jobsplus’ manages various national and EU Funded initiatives, particularly under the European Social Fund with the objective of enhancing employability, including for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. In addition, Malta’s LEAP centers serve as community hubs, providing accessible social and employment services to a diverse range of people, particularly focusing on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to foster their inclusion and well-being.

Malta’s commitment to anti-discrimination is underpinned by a robust legislative framework. The ‘Equality Act’ of 2003 (Cap. 577) serves as the primary instrument, prohibiting discrimination on grounds such as sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion or belief, race or ethnic origin, and disability. This is further reinforced by the ‘Employment and Industrial Relations Act’ of 2002 (Cap. 452), which defines discriminatory treatment across various grounds, and the ‘Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act’ of 2000 (Cap. 413) which specifically strengthens protections for persons with disabilities. Notably, the ‘Promotion of Equality (Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics) Act’ of 2015 (Cap. 555) offers progressive protections, extending beyond the explicit grounds of earlier EU directives. The transposition of the ‘EU Pay Transparency Directive’ (EU 2023/970), through the ‘Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Regulations’ of 2025 should lead to more robust monitoring of pay equity by mandating salary range and pay gap disclosures in line with the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

Some of the main measures addressed at vulnerable groups and groups at risk of discrimination within the labour market include initiatives aimed at encouraging activation, enhancing competences, and making work pay.

A number of initiatives are addressed at upskilling the workforce through lifelong learning and training initiatives. Such measures include, the ‘Investing in Skills’ programme which promotes training to enhance adaptability, the ‘Work Exposure’ scheme which assists jobseekers with low

levels of education and skills to gain relevant employability competences whilst benefiting from a training allowance, and the 'Traineeship Scheme' which offers jobseekers pre-employment training through vocational training encompassing both on-the-job skills training and theoretical off-the-job training.

Other initiatives are addressed at promoting activation through initiatives which aim to make work pay. Such measures for example include the 'Tapering of Benefits', the 'In-Work Benefit' schemes, and the 'Average Wage Earner Scheme'.

These initiatives and schemes complement other taxation (such as tax rebates and credits) and social security in-work benefits (such as rent subsidy schemes) which aim to promote active inclusion and combat in-work poverty (Borg, 2019). For example, measures, encompassing income-tax arrangements and free childcare services are specifically addressed at the activation of long-term, unemployed women (Camilleri and Camilleri, 2023).

A number of initiatives are specifically aimed at disadvantaged groups. For example, the 'Youth Guarantee' scheme, (referred as the NEET Activation Scheme II) is specifically designed to assist young people in enhancing their employability prospects through individual profiling, personalised assistance from youth workers and motivational and behavioural interventions. They are also assisted in furthering their education and training or work exposure and traineeship whilst in receipt of an allowance comparable to the minimum wage. The National Youth Employment Strategy (2014) prioritises amongst other initiatives, measures which facilitate young people's integration into education, training and employment for those at-risk of disengagement, the uptake of learning tools and employability skills, as well as initiatives that address precarious conditions (Azzopardi and Bezzina, 2015).

The National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing and the Jobsplus Mature Workers Scheme aim to combat ageism and encourage continued employment. Schemes like the Employment Aid Programme (2009) subsidize employment for those aged 40 and over. Industrial relations practices, such as "last-in first-out," and the Temporary Agency Workers Regulations (2011) also assist older workers in remaining employed, even if on temporary contracts, while pension reforms allow elder workers to remain in employment without losing entitlements.

Malta's New Labour Migration Policy (2021-2030), effective August 2025, aims to improve workforce retention and protect foreign employee rights. It introduces stricter criteria, including high turnover rate thresholds, for companies recruiting third-country nationals, potentially barring repeat offenders. The policy also mandates local advertising of vacancies before seeking foreign labor and requires electronic salary payments to combat exploitation. These measures seek to foster a fairer, more sustainable labor market.

In spite of these various initiatives to promote more inclusive labour markets, many disadvantaged groups experience in-work poverty (Borg, 2019) through precarity and inadequate income (Vella, 2025). In line with the EU economic and social policy agenda, domestic strategic action is primarily addressed at incentivising labour market activation and counteracting disincentives created by social benefit systems. Such dogma is however resultantly contributing to "a vicious cycle of social dumping of various categories of people, including those who for

some reason or other lie outside the labour market, those engaged in precarious employment and those in dire need of social benefit and welfare services” (Vella, 2025, p. 56).

Notwithstanding these various legislative and policy frameworks governing equality and anti-discrimination, as well as the various services and programme implementation initiatives to promote the representation of vulnerable workers or workers at risk of discrimination within the labour market, more needs to be done to ensure that such groups have equitable access to quality work and opportunities for career progression. Moreover, more needs to be done to ensure that forms of discrimination, abuse and exploitative practice, as well as lack of transparency which lead to precarious work and poverty is “not tolerated and does not go unpunished” (Borg, 2019, p.10).

Methodological Design

A multi-layered approach was adopted to examine the employability of disadvantaged workers within the Maltese labour market. Desk-based research on the topic was initially carried out to provide a contextual background to the study, exploring official national employment data, the dimensions and manifestations of vulnerability and disadvantage, and existing legislative frameworks and measures addressed at promoting more inclusive labour markets.

Primary research was conducted through a focus group with a wide cross-sectional representation of disadvantaged workers and entities advocating on their behalf. The focus group, held in June 2025 included the participation of 20 individuals who are representative of various vulnerabilities and/or grounds of discrimination: age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental health difficulties, religious belief; and racial and ethnic origin.

For this purpose, an interview guide (Annex 1) was utilised covering various issues of concern regarding vulnerable groups’ access to the labour market, conditions of work and quality of employment, and occupational mobility and career progression. The questions aimed to guide and focus the scope of the discussion by examining disadvantaged workers’ i) current/overall general experiences (both positive and negative), ii) challenges and barriers faced in accessing quality employment and career progression, and iii) the needs and requirements for accessing quality employment and career progression.

This approach enabled the collation of in-depth rich data from the direct experiences of disadvantaged workers and representatives advocating on their behalf. The findings of the study, as presented in the section below, elicited a number of common themes that lead to relevant recommendations in terms of policies and programmes for the amelioration of disadvantaged groups’ i) Access to the Labour Market, ii) Conditions of Work and Quality of Employment and iii) Occupational Mobility and Career Progression in Malta.

Due to ethical concerns regarding the vulnerability of participants, the focus group is underlined by the ethical principles of no harm to participants, informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity. The focus group was facilitated in such a way as to provide a safe and enabling environment for all participants to actively participate and voice themselves. It also circumvented discussion of issues which might be distressful to participants and/or which risk

eliciting secondary victimisation. For certain disadvantaged groups, advocacy by entities representing minority workers was deemed more feasible and effective. This approach allows for a broader understanding of diverse experiences from experts who directly support these groups

The University of Malta's Research Ethics Board granted ethical approval for conducting the focus group, guaranteeing adherence to ethical principles of safeguarding voluntary participation and informed consent, no harm to participants, and confidentiality.

Findings and Analysis

Following an aggregate overview of the profile of participants contributing to the focus group discussion, this section synthesizes participant feedback, providing a comprehensive overview of the challenges and barriers encountered across three critical dimensions: their initial access to the labour market, the conditions and quality of their employment experiences, and their opportunities for occupational mobility and career progression.

Profile of Participants:

The focus group, comprising a diverse cohort of 20 participants represented a broad spectrum of experiences within the Maltese labour market. This included individuals of varying ages, genders, and nationalities, ensuring representation of both Maltese and migrant workers. The group also reflected diversity in terms of religious beliefs and sexual orientation, alongside participants with health and work-life balance related challenges. Furthermore, the participants represented a cross-section of employment sectors, encompassing individuals from the public service, private enterprises, and civil society, each contributing unique insights shaped by their distinct backgrounds and diverse employment experiences. The varied profile of the participants allowed for an exploration of intersectionality, providing a better understanding of how multiple aspects of a person's identity converge to shape unique experiences of discrimination within the Maltese labour market.

Accessing quality employment and career progression: Experiences, Challenges and Barriers

Based on the feedback arising from the focus group, this section explores the lived experiences of disadvantaged groups within the labour market, highlighting the significant challenges and barriers they face in accessing quality employment and career progression. Even when employment is secured, the position in the labour market often remains precarious, with various intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to their fragile disadvantaged situation and limited prospects for professional advancement.

I. Access to the Labour Market

Participants highlighted significant barriers to access the labour market, often stemming from a combination of vulnerabilities and systemic prejudice and discrimination.



- **Discrimination Based on Personal Characteristics:** Workers frequently encountered discrimination during recruitment based on their appearance (e.g., tattoos, long hair for men), unrequired qualifications (e.g. not possessing a driving license, even when it's not essential for the job) or personal history (e.g., minor police records, even when unrelated to job requirements).
- **Barriers for Persons with Disabilities and Health Conditions:** Individuals with disabilities or chronic health conditions face significant hurdles. Many workplaces, even new facilities are characterised by lack of accessibility and structural barriers like insufficient ramps or elevators. Participants pointed out that few companies employ people with disabilities, and the existing fine for not meeting employment quotas is too low and poorly enforced, undermining otherwise useful regulation.
- **Systemic Discrimination Against Migrant Workers:** Third Country nationals, particularly from African, Pakistani and Indian backgrounds, are highly susceptible targets for discrimination due to cultural differences and their vulnerable position. This exploitation is a widespread, systemic issue, especially in the hospitality and construction sectors, where migrants are preyed upon through illicit recruitment fees (reportedly up to €10,000 paid to come to Malta) and forced into jobs with substandard pay and conditions. If they try to leave, they're often deemed illegal by the authorities, even with evidence of exploitation, leading to legal limbo, debt, and homelessness.
- **Gender and Parental Status Discrimination:** Women, particularly those with children or who are pregnant, often face exploitation and limited opportunities suggesting implicit biases that restrict career paths.

II. Conditions of Work and Quality of Employment

Participants highlighted a range of issues impacting the quality of their work environment and employment conditions, pointing to a pervasive culture of unaddressed discrimination and inadequate support.

- **Vulnerability to Exploitation:** Workers who are less vocal or unaware of their rights, are more susceptible to exploitation. This vulnerability is compounded by a lack of education and passivity, which prevents proactive measures against discrimination.
- **Insufficient Mental Health Support:** There is a notable lack of mental health services and awareness as well as general disinterest from employers in providing adequate support. Mental wellbeing provisions are also not effectively enforced despite some existing agreements with organizations like the Richmond Foundation.
- **Discriminatory Sick Leave and Telework Practices:** Management often shows intolerance towards employees utilizing sick leave, which has reportedly increased due to workplace stressors. A significant concern is the legal disparity in paid and unpaid sick leave entitlements, which varies among different employment sectors. Private sector employees particularly risk termination if they exhaust their allocated sick leave,

highlighting a 'legal discrimination' compared to the more robust public service measures (such as the 'The Leave and Time-in-Lieu Fund' and the 'Welfare Fund') that allow for leave donations. Telework policies lack standardization, leading to inconsistencies in eligibility and a risk of favoritism in their application.

- **Outdated Regulations and Lack of Standardization:** The current 'Work Regulations Ordinance' is considered outdated and in urgent need of revision. Participants called for greater standardization across the different sectors of employment, urging the government to lead by example in setting regulatory standards for the private sector.
- **Deficient Human Resources Practices:** Human Resources departments are perceived as lacking social conscience and sensitisation to psycho-social issues affecting employees. Human Resources professionals are perceived to be inadequately trained to be sensitive to employee vulnerabilities or to identify and address discriminatory treatment. Moreover, Human Resources departments often fail to strike a balance between management and worker interests.
- **Pervasive and Covert Discrimination:** Despite apparent progress, a strong undercurrent of discrimination persists, with participants feeling that though "Many things have changed, nothing has really changed." Discrimination, particularly on the basis of gender, is often hidden or subtly enacted.
- **Colleague-on-Colleague Discrimination:** A significant portion of discrimination occurs among colleagues rather than solely from management. This includes homophobic attitudes often attributed to "ignorance rather than a place of hate," highlighting intergenerational and cultural issues.
- **Discriminatory Workplace Policies:** Some company policies, especially concerning dress codes and physical appearance (e.g., requiring tattoos to be covered), are seen as going against anti-discrimination legislation and reflecting a conservative management mentality that frowns upon anything "against the norm."
- **Lack of Enforcement:** A recurring and fundamental problem across all areas is the "lack of enforcement" of existing laws and policies, rendering regulations ineffective.
- **Impact of Racial Discrimination and Cheap Labour:** The increasing importation of cheap labour, often linked to racial discrimination, is seen as directly undermining fair access, pay, and overall working conditions for all manual workers, particularly in the hospitality and construction sectors.
- **Interlinkage with Health and Safety:** Discrimination and poor working conditions are frequently intertwined with health and safety issues. Unfair treatment and substandard environments thus frequently create or worsen workplace hazards, directly impacting worker well-being.

III. Occupational Mobility and Career Progression

Participants identified several systemic issues hindering occupational mobility and career progression, largely stemming from a lack of meritocracy and fair recognition, persistent discrimination, and insufficient support for worker development.

- **Lack of Meritocracy and Resistance to Change:** A significant barrier to progression is the perception that merit is not justly recognized due to lack of transparency in internal processes for advancement. Progression is influenced by various other factors, including nepotism other than performance and capability.
- **Class and Education-Based Discrimination:** There's a pervasive discrimination based on class and education level, where the skills and extensive practical knowledge of manual workers are often underestimated by management. This can result in experienced workers being placed under the supervision of less experienced, academically qualified individuals, potentially leading to health and safety risks as their valuable insights are overlooked.
- **Limited Upskilling and Recognition of Prior Learning:** There's a recognized need for training, yet a disconnection persists in ensuring that such upskilling translates into tangible career advancement and that workers' prior learning and experience are formally recognized and credited valued.
- **Need for Proactive Union and Authority Action:** Participants stressed that unions must actively identify and combat hidden structural discrimination. Crucially, there's a strong call for authorities to demonstrate the "willpower" to enforce regulations and close loopholes in existing laws and policies, which are currently hindering fair progression and perpetuating discriminatory practices.

The comprehensive feedback from focus group participants illustrates that despite Malta's strong employment figures, significant and multifaceted barriers persist for vulnerable groups in accessing quality employment and advancing in one's career. These lived experiences underscore a pressing need for targeted interventions that directly address the identified challenges.

Recommendations for Improved Policy and Programme Implementation

As observed from the above discussion, disadvantaged groups face several constraints (both personal and structural) which make them more subject to face challenges and barriers in accessing quality employment and career progression. Drawing from the insights shared by participants on their needs and requirements, the following sections present a series of policy measures and initiatives for improving the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the labour market. These proposed measures span the legal, policy, cultural, logistical, and organizational

domains, aiming to improve access to quality employment, working conditions, and opportunities for career progression. Given the intersectionality of marginalisation and discrimination, addressing the challenges and barriers faced by disadvantaged groups within the labour market entails manifold action.

I. Access to the Labour Market

Access to the labor market is a critical entry point for individuals to achieve economic independence and social inclusion. The following recommendations aim to dismantle existing barriers to the Maltese labor market and ensure fair opportunities for all, by strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement, enhancing awareness of rights, addressing structural barriers for persons with disabilities, combating the exploitation of migrant workers, and promoting fair recruitment practices.

1. Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement:

- **Review and Update Legislation:** Conduction of a comprehensive review of the ‘Work Regulations Ordinance’ and other relevant labour laws to ensure they are up-to-date and effectively address all grounds of discrimination, including those based on appearance, health status, and marital/parental status.
- **Increase Penalties for Discrimination:** Increase in fines for non-compliance with anti-discrimination laws and quotas (such as the disability employment quota) to ensure that penalties offer a meaningful deterrent.
- **Proactive Enforcement and Inspections:** Increased capacity and mandate of labour inspectorates to conduct proactive, unannounced inspections, particularly in sectors known for precarity and exploitation (such as hospitality and construction).
- **Establish a Dedicated Anti-Discrimination Unit:** Creation of a interagency specialized unit focused solely on investigating and prosecuting discrimination cases, equipped with sufficient resources and legal powers. Complementing the remit of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality and the Department of Industrial and Employment Relations, this unit should be vested with the authority to mandate direct prosecution or binding investigative findings without the need for party consent.

2. Enhancing Awareness and Education on Rights:

- **Mandatory Rights Education:** Implementation of mandatory, accessible, and multilingual awareness campaigns and educational programs for all workers, especially new entrants to the labour market and third country nationals, on their employment rights, avenues for recourse, and anti-discrimination laws.

- **Employer Training:** Development of training programs for employers and Human Resources professionals on anti-discrimination legislation, cultural sensitivity, and practices for creating inclusive workplaces and fostering deeper understanding of vulnerabilities.
- **Accessible Information Hub:** Creation of a user-friendly, multilingual online portal and hotline for workers to access information about their rights, report grievances anonymously, and seek legal aid.

3. Addressing Structural Barriers for Persons with Disabilities:

- **Strengthen Accessibility Regulations:** Enforcement of stricter building codes and accessibility standards for all new and renovated commercial and public buildings, ensuring that accessibility design principles are integrated from the outset.
- **Incentivize Accessibility Upgrades:** Introduction of substantial tax incentives or grants for companies to adapt existing workplaces to be fully accessible for persons with disabilities (e.g., installation of elevators, accessible restrooms).
- **Enforce Employment Quota:** Enforcement of the disability employment quota for companies and implementation of a 'name and shame' system for non-compliant companies, alongside increased fines. Collected fines could be reinvested into initiatives supporting the employment of persons with disabilities.
- **Support Schemes:** Enhancement of existing schemes to support the employment of persons with disabilities, ensuring they address identified structural barriers and provide practical assistance (e.g., job coaching, assistive technology).

4. Combating Exploitation of Migrant Workers:

- **Zero-Tolerance for Recruitment Fees:** Criminalization of the practice of charging exorbitant recruitment fees to third country nationals and adjudication of severe penalties for companies and individuals involved in such schemes.
- **Direct Visa and Permit Processing:** Streamlining the process for third country nationals to obtain visas and work permits directly from official government agencies to minimize reliance on intermediaries to mitigate exploitation.
- **Independent Grievance Mechanism:** Establishment of a fully independent and confidential complaints mechanism for foreign workers, ensuring that reports of exploitation do not lead to deportation or job loss. This body should have the power to investigate and take immediate action against exploitative employers.
- **Extend Grace Period for Job Search:** Amendment of the 10-day grace period for third country nationals to find new employment after losing a job to a more

realistic and humane period (e.g., 60-90 days), preventing homelessness and forced illegal status.

- **Due Diligence on Employers:** Implementation of rigorous due diligence on employers seeking to hire foreign labour, including checks on their compliance history and financial stability, to prevent the formation of "shell companies" for exploitation.
- **Multilingual Support Services:** Provision of comprehensive, multilingual support services for third country nationals, including legal aid, housing assistance, and mental health support, independent of their employers.

5. Promotion of Fair Recruitment Practices:

- **Guidance on Non-Discriminatory Recruitment:** Development and dissemination of guidelines for employers on non-discriminatory recruitment practices, emphasizing skill-based hiring over subjective criteria like appearance or unrequired qualifications (e.g., driving license for roles where it's not essential).
- **Review of Police Record Policies:** Review of policies regarding police records in employment, ensuring that minor past infractions or short jail periods do not disproportionately hinder access to employment, especially when unrelated to the job's duties.
- **Challenge Gender Stereotypes:** Incentivization of equal employment opportunities in gender stereotyped fields through awareness campaigns, mentorship programs, and targeted support.

II. Conditions of Work and Quality of Employment

Ensuring fair and decent conditions of work and a high quality of employment are fundamental for fostering a truly equitable and productive workforce. The following recommendations focus on enhancing workplace well-being by supporting mental health services, standardizing and improving sick leave provisions, reforming and enforcing labour regulations, professionalizing and regulating Human Resources practices, actively combating workplace discrimination, and addressing exploitation in specific sectors.

1. Supporting and Mandating Mental Health Services in Workplaces:

- **Employer Obligations:** Introduction of legislation requiring established firms to provide access to mental health support services for their employees (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs, subsidized counselling).
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Launch of national campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues and educate employers on their role in fostering a supportive work environment.

- **Training for Managers:** Mandatory enrolment in basic mental health first aid training for managers and Human Resources personnel to help them identify signs of distress and appropriately signpost employees to support.
- **Government Partnerships:** Expansion of existing agreements (e.g., with Richmond Foundation) to offer subsidized mental well-being support to small and medium sized enterprises and agencies.

2. Standardized and Improved Sick Leave Provisions:

- **Review and Harmonize Sick Leave Entitlements:** Review of sick leave provisions across all sectors (public and private) with the aim of standardizing a fair minimum amount of paid and unpaid sick leave for all employees.
- **Protection Against Dismissal for Sick Leave:** Introduction of legal protections preventing employers from terminating employment solely due to an employee's legitimate use of sick leave, especially where leave is within statutory entitlements.
- **Promote Best Practices:** Offering incentives to the private sector to adopt models similar to the public service's 'Leave and Time-in-Lieu Fund' or 'Welfare Fund' for compassionate leave or extended illness.
- **Address Stressors:** Investigation and resolution of workplace stressors identified as contributing to poor physical and psychological wellbeing through better work-life balance, reasonable workloads, and supportive management.

3. Reform and Enforce Labour Regulations:

- **Urgent Review of Work Regulations Ordinance:** Comprehensive overhaul of the 'Work Regulations Ordinance' to reflect contemporary employment realities, address new forms of work (e.g., telework exploitation), and strengthen worker protections.
- **Government as Exemplar:** The government should lead by example, ensuring all public sector entities and government contractors adhere to the highest standards of fair employment practices, including for subcontracted workers.
- **Strengthen Enforcement Mechanisms:** Reinforcement of the capacity and authority of the Department of Industrial and Employment Relations to ensure robust enforcement of labour laws, including adequate staffing, training, and resources for investigations.
- **Bolster Pay Transparency and Enforcement:** effective transposition of the EU Pay Transparency Directive (EU 2023/970) through the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Regulations (Legal Notice 112 of 2025) to ensure monitoring of pay equity by mandating salary range and pay gap disclosures and uphold the principle of 'work of equal value.' Increased penalties for employers'

violations beyond the general fines outlined in the Employment and Industrial Relations Act would ensure stronger deterrence against non-compliance.

4. Professionalize and Regulate Human Resources:

- **Mandatory Human Resources Training:** Implementation of mandatory professional development and certification for Human Resources professionals, focusing on anti-discrimination laws, biopsychosocial wellbeing, and sensitivity to vulnerabilities and disadvantage.
- **Ethical Guidelines for Human Resources:** Development and promotion of a clear code of ethics for Human Resources professionals, emphasizing their role as advocates for fair and equitable treatment of employees.
- **Independent Human Resources Audits:** Mandating regular, independent Human Resources audits for larger companies to assess compliance with labour laws and identify discriminatory practices.

5. Combat Workplace Direct and Indirect Discrimination:

- **Develop Clear Anti-Discrimination Policies:** Requirement for all workplaces to develop and prominently display clear, comprehensive equality policies covering all protected grounds of discrimination, with clear reporting procedures.
- **Mandatory Diversity and Inclusion Training:** Implementation of mandatory diversity and inclusion training for all employees, especially managers and team leaders, to address implicit biases, prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination.
- **Review Discriminatory Policies:** Issuance of guidance on common workplace policies (e.g., dress codes, appearance policies) to ensure they are non-discriminatory, justified by legitimate organizational requirements, and do not violate anti-discrimination legislation.
- **Promote Inclusive Management Styles:** Provision of training and resources to promote inclusive leadership and management styles that value employee input and discourage dictatorial approaches.

6. Address Exploitation in Specific Sectors:

- **Targeted Sectoral Oversight:** Implementation of targeted oversight and enforcement in sectors characterised by high levels of exploitation (e.g., hospitality, construction), ensuring fair wages, safe conditions, and proper contracts for all workers, including third-country nationals.
- **Combat Cheap Labour Practices:** Development of policies to curb the importation of cheap labour that exploits foreign labour whilst undermining local wages and conditions, potentially through stringent enforcement of fair pay and

conditions for all, strengthening anti-discrimination and social protection measures and robustly integrating foreign workers into Maltese society to uphold human rights.

III. Occupational Mobility and Career Progression

Facilitating occupational mobility and ensuring equitable career progression are vital for fostering a dynamic and fair labour market. The following recommendations aim to remove barriers to advancement by promoting meritocracy and transparent progression, investing in upskilling, reskilling, and recognition of prior learning, empowering workers and unions, and ensuring strong regulatory cohesion and political will.

1. Promote Meritocracy and Transparent Progression:

- **Standardized Promotion Criteria:** Development and promotion of guidelines for companies to establish clear, objective, and transparent criteria for promotions and career progression, based on merit, skills, and performance.
- **Regular Performance Reviews:** Conduction of regular and fair performance review systems that include constructive feedback and opportunities for professional development, linking them directly to career advancement.
- **Address Nepotism and Favouritism:** Implementation of mechanisms to address and investigate complaints of unfair promotions or lack of meritocratic advancement.

2. Invest in Upskilling, Reskilling, and Recognition of Prior Learning:

- **Funded Training Programs:** Increased government funding and incentives for companies to invest in continuous professional development, upskilling, and reskilling programs for all employees, particularly unskilled workers.
- **Mandate Health and Safety Training:** Mandate and subsidization of specialized health and safety training for all workers in high-risk sectors, including certification to enhance their skills, safety, and potential for progression.
- **Strengthen Recognition of Academic Knowledge and Work Experience:** Formal validation of the valuable knowledge, skills and experience of workers, regardless of how they were acquired (formal education vs. on-the-job experience) ensuring a right balance and compensatory equitability between academic knowledge and work experience.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Consolidating the establishment of formal mentorship programs where experienced workers can guide younger professionals, fostering knowledge transfer and mutual respect across different skill levels.

3. Empower Workers and Unions:

- **Strengthen Collective Bargaining:** Consolidation of legal framework for collective bargaining and union representation, making it easier for workers to organize and negotiate for better conditions and career progression opportunities.
- **Support Union Capacity Building:** Provision of resources and training to trade unions to enhance their capacity to identify, investigate, and effectively challenge hidden and structural discrimination, particularly in areas affecting occupational mobility.
- **Worker Representation on Boards:** Setting up of mechanisms for worker representation on company boards or advisory committees to give employees a voice in strategic decisions, including those related to career development.

4. Ensure Regulatory Cohesion and Political Will:

- **Inter-Ministerial Task Force:** Establishment of a high-level inter-ministerial task force with a clear mandate to address labour market discrimination, involving relevant ministries (Labour, Social Affairs, Education, Justice) and agencies (DIER, Identita, Jobsplus, NCPE).
- **Regular Policy Review:** Implementation of a mechanism for regular, perhaps biennial, review and adjustment of labour market policies based on feedback from workers, employers, and social partners to ensure they remain effective and responsive to evolving challenges.
- **Political Commitment:** Demonstration of strong and consistent political will through commitments and timelines to enforce existing laws, implement new reforms, and close loopholes that enable discrimination and exploitation.

By implementing these comprehensive policy measures, Malta can move towards a more equitable, inclusive, and fair labour market that benefits all workers.

Conclusions

A number of difficulties are faced by disadvantaged workers within the Maltese labour market, including underemployment and overemployment in particular sectors of the economy, precarious working conditions, and reduced opportunities for job progression and mobility. Barriers and challenges arise from overt and covert forms of discrimination, stigma, harassment and exclusion, as well as exploitative practices and job insecurity.

The focus group findings paint a vivid picture of these persistent barriers and challenges, revealing a significant disconnect between reported economic prosperity and high employment, and the lived experiences of many workers on the ground. Participants underscored personal

circumstances leading to vulnerability but also various structural barriers that undermine access to quality employment and career progression. Exploitative practices are more prevalent within the informal economy where workers are more easily deprived of legal protections (Vella et al., 2024). An emerging central theme concerns the critical gap between existing anti-discrimination legislative frameworks, initiatives, and policy measures to promote inclusive and fair labour markets, and their implementation, monitoring and enforcement.

Regulatory reform must be addressed at making "declared work more beneficial" (Vella et al., 2024, p.5) as well as ensure equal pay for work of equal value through enhanced transparency. Specific measures, such as enabling the payment of social security contributions and reduction of income tax on part-time work, are crucial to formalize employment and extend social and labour protection to vulnerable workers. The strict regulation of employment agencies, especially for foreign workers, is also paramount, given the risks of exploitation. A 'joined-up approach' (Vella et al., 2024, p.6) is essential to address the specific risks faced by workers, simplify administrative requirements for formalization, improve enforcement, and establish a clear code of practice.

Beyond regulatory reform, education and awareness-raising initiatives are consistently identified as pivotal drivers for inclusion. The inverse relationship between education levels and employment rates (Lelkes & Ward, 2009) strongly underlines the need to consolidate education, skills, and human capital. Continuous improvements in compulsory, vocational, and higher education, founded on social inclusion and equity principles, are vital for enhancing employability, social mobility, and career progression (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2023). This empowerment, resulting in better income and quality of work, directly reduces the risk of poverty, social exclusion, and vulnerability.

However, while wage increases and better progression opportunities are crucial, they alone do not safeguard against victimization and discrimination. Addressing structural inequalities and implementing corrective measures to address systemic imbalances is indispensable.

Ultimately, policymakers must ensure that employment policies and strategies are inherently inclusive, proactively preventing victimization and discrimination on all possible grounds. This requires sensitivity to personal and structural barriers, offering accommodative measures to mitigate disadvantages and ensure equitable opportunities. This could involve positive discrimination measures, such as the establishment of quotas alongside robust support mechanisms.

Inclusivity calls for improved governance through the representation of disadvantaged workers and entities which advocate on their behalf. Networking and collaboration amongst national authorities (such as JobsPlus, DIER and the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality) operating within the employment sector, workers' unions, and NGOs that advocate on behalf of disadvantaged groups is pivotal to combat discrimination and ensure that policies and initiatives are addressing the needs and requirements of the targeted populations. The experiential knowledge of grassroots entities representing the interests of such groups needs to be appreciated and acknowledged as important stakeholders in the development, monitoring and evaluation of policies and services.

Combating discrimination within the labour market needs to be addressed in collaboration with wider equality struggles on all grounds of discrimination, as well as within the context of broader challenges for the protection of workers' rights. This is all the more relevant in the context where human labour has become subservient to the economy and the insatiable urge for profit overrides human, social and environmental interests. Such situation emphasises the significance of consolidating the diversity of workers' voices through collective unionisation. While demonstrating resilience amidst evolving challenges and actively expanding membership to non-traditional groups (including women, the highly educated, and foreign workers) (Debono and Fiorini, 2023), government intervention for full unionization (as is being called by the main unions) is crucial to safeguard all workers, irrespective of their background or sector.

Further analysis of the challenges, barriers and constraints faced by disadvantaged groups within the labour market helps to gain better awareness and understanding to inform policy development and programme implementation in the field. This study thus serves as a base line for further analysis in this area of study. Longitudinal and comparative research could help to identify labour market trends as well as highlight those factors which may be impacting different disadvantaged groups in different contexts. Disaggregated labour market data considering diverse categories of vulnerable workers would help to inform the development of more targeted measures. Evidence-based practice through impact evaluation studies of policies and interventions are pivotal for ensuring that initiatives reaching the desired goals and cost-effective compared to other measures. Such evidence-based practice would inform the identification and dissemination of good practices.

The study underscores a critical duality within Malta's labour market. While official statistics speak of high economic growth characterised by 'full employment', the qualitative insights from the focus group reveal persistent and deep-seated challenges for various sectors of workers. Such individuals consistently face discrimination, exploitation, and significant structural barriers that hinder their access to quality employment and meaningful career progression.

To bridge this gap between macro-economic success and the lived realities, a multi-faceted and committed approach is pivotal. Fostering inclusive workplaces, depends on active labour market policies complemented by targeted education, skills development, and social welfare and taxation provisions. To ensure truly inclusive and equitable growth, a concerted effort is additionally required to invest in meaningful workers representation and address the underlying cultural and structural biases that hinder fair access, quality employment, and occupational mobility. This report advocates for robust regulatory reform of outdated labour legislation and rigorous monitoring and enforcement of equality laws on all grounds of discrimination. Addressing the deep-seated, systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality and by actively implementing these measures, Malta can move towards a truly equitable and inclusive labour market, ensuring that economic prosperity translates into genuine opportunity and dignified work for all.

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Annex.1

Focus Group Guide

1. Please share your/ the group that you advocate on behalf of, current/overall general experiences (both positive and negative) regarding:

- Access to the Labour Market
- Conditions of Work and Quality of Employment
- Occupational Mobility and Career Progression

2. Please share some of your personal experiences regarding the challenges and barriers in accessing quality employment and career progression that you/the group that you advocate on behalf of, face with regards to:

- Access to the Labour Market
- Conditions of Work and Quality of Employment
- Occupational Mobility and Career Progression

(These challenges and barriers could be of a legal, policy, cultural, logistical and organisational nature).

3. Please share some of your personal experiences regarding the needs and requirements for accessing quality employment and career progression that you / the group that you advocate on behalf of, desire with regards to:

- Access to the Labour Market
- Conditions of Work and Quality of Employment
- Occupational Mobility and Career Progression

4. What measures in your opinion/ the opinion of the group that you advocate on behalf of, needs to be set in place in terms of policies and programmes for improving the inclusion of vulnerable/marginalised groups in the labour market (by for example: challenging discriminatory structures, processes and practices; improving retention and progression for marginalised workers; developing inclusive workplaces; promoting agency and voice for workers).

These measures could include the following initiatives:

- Education and awareness raising
- Legal Reform
- Policy Development
- Service-Provision