

THE NEEDS OF MALTESE FAMILIES WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY AMONG PROFESSIONALS[§]

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Abstract. This paper seeks to identify the needs of Maltese families with dependent children. The sociocultural context in which Maltese families are embedded will serve as a theoretical framework for this study. A series of six focus groups with experts in the area of family and children were moderated for the purpose of the study. These focus group sessions were audiotaped and transcribed and the results analysed using thematic analysis. This paper draws on the findings of these focus groups and compares them to extant literature on Maltese families before making a number of policy recommendations. Three key themes were elicited: the need for more community work and early intervention; the need for education for life; and the need to support families achieve work-life balance. The main recommendations are: the set-up of family centres for community work and early intervention; the implementation of relationship education programmes; and more family-friendly working practices.

[§] Dependent children are defined as children under 18 years of age.

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Introduction

This paper identifies the needs of Maltese families with dependent children taking into account the current sociocultural context. A review of local literature provides us with an interesting sociocultural fabric of Maltese society which at present is a complex weave of traditional values with increasingly modern lifestyles.

The overview of current trends affecting Maltese families serves as a theoretical framework for this paper highlighting the sociocultural context Maltese families live in. This theoretical framework helps us appreciate how the needs of today's Maltese children and families are shaped by their affiliation to modern day culture and how the sociocultural context permeates the philosophy of important institutions and organizations serving the family including the school, welfare and health services, and the leisure industry among others (Barrett, Mesquita and Smith, 2010).

Literature Review

This review focuses on current social change affecting Maltese families especially those with dependent children. These include changing employment and working practices, new demographic trends and changing family structures. The various challenges these changes present will be discussed.

Current trends in employment and working practices in Malta

Employment and working practices have an enormous impact on family life. Maltese families are moving away from the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker model. Part-time work is also on the increase. Moreover over half of the Maltese work more than the standard eight hours a day of work (Borg, 2011).

The shift from traditional to dual-earner families

Although the percentage of Maltese women who work outside the home is still low (Eurostat Labour Force Survey, 2011) compared to other countries

such as Sweden (with a 70.3% female employment rate) and Cyprus (with a 63% female employment rate), the figure is higher for the younger generations of Maltese women. The percentage of women in the 25-29 age bracket who hold jobs increased from 56.1% in 2001 to 70.3% in 2010, a far greater increase than that registered by the EU27 which increased from 64.8% in 2001 to 67.3% in 2010.

Employment rates during the child bearing years are also changing. Employment figures for Maltese women in the 30-34 and 35-39 age brackets rose from 40.9 % in 2001 to 60.3 % in 2010 and from 27.2% in 2001 to 50.5% in 2010 respectively (Eurostat Labour Force Survey, 2011). The rise in the percentage of women with a tertiary level of education means that women are less likely to give up their career/job when they have children (The Economist, 2009). This was also corroborated in the Borg Xuereb (2008) study. She also reports that 31% of women in her sample planned to resume work 6 months after childbirth and 23% were gainfully employed 6 months after their first baby was born, citing financial pressure as the main reason.

Part-time employment

Financial pressure could also explain the fact that Maltese men hold more second jobs than the EU27 average (Eurostat Labour Force Survey, 2011). Male second job holders in Malta have increased whereas those in EU27 countries have decreased. Eurostat data does not indicate the age bracket of these men or their marital status (C. Caruana, personal communication, March 7, 2012). The number of women holding a part-time job over and above their main job is so small that it is not well-represented in the sample for the same survey (C. Caruana, personal communication, March 7, 2012).

Longer hours at work

A Regus private sector study on working practices found that 52% of Maltese work more than 9 hours a day and 13% work more than 11 hours a day (Borg, 2011). The study also found that 65% take work home at least once a week and 40% take work home on a regular basis. According to Anna Borg from the Centre for Labour Studies, these figures must be interpreted with caution as they could be due to employees having

increasing flexibility which helps their family life or to employees facing pressure to work longer (Borg, 2011).

These statistics point to a changing picture of Maltese family life, one which calls for a careful balance between work and family life.

New demographic trends and changing family structures

Other important trends affecting Maltese families include the low fertility rate and the dramatic rise in teenage pregnancy and single parent families. The current fertility rate stands at 1.4% with more than one in four children (27.37%) born outside marriage. In 22.9% of such births the mother was under 20; in 30.2% of such births the mother was between 20 and 24; and in 23.3% between 25 and 29 (NSO, 2010).

Single parenthood (including teenage parenthood) is still under-researched locally. Galea (2009) reported that around 35% of baptisms in Cospicua are registered with an 'unknown father' having important implications in terms of family policy. Doublesin (2011) found that issues involving the mothers' decision to declare the child's father unknown were complex and multifactorial. Relationships with the fathers may break down for a variety of reasons. Another issue needing exploration is the reticence of some fathers to acknowledge offspring. Even if the father is known, one may not assume that these children have an ongoing relationship with their father.

Single mothers and their families are at increased risk of poverty (NSO, 2012, January 5th). The majority of these mothers have limited employability to start with. Abela (2011) quotes statistics gathered by the Department of Information and Research on Health which shows that in 2010, 624 mothers who gave birth outside marriage had completed their secondary level of education whereas only 102 had a tertiary level of education. No data was available for 245 of these mothers.

Challenges for the Maltese family

Borg Xuereb (2008) studied the challenges faced by first-time parents. The transition was stressful for both spouses, pre-empting the need for more professional and social support. Only those mothers who enjoyed the

support of their family of origin considered returning to work soon after the birth.

A study exploring the relationship between Maltese adolescents and their parents, by Abela, Farrugia, Galea and Schembri (in press) found that time poverty challenges have become an issue.

The generational digital divide highlights further challenges faced by Maltese parents with regards to mentoring and supervising adolescents. Velislava Hillman reports that in Malta, 50% of children under the age of 12, 62% of children aged 13, and 63% of children aged 14 have unrestricted access to internet (Massa, 2011). This can potentially be attributed to either lack of IT knowledge on parents' part, lack of time to supervise adolescents, or a mix of both.

Maltese families with dependent children seek different forms of support to deal with the fast-paced changes that are taking place in Maltese society. Borg Xuereb (2008) found that participants in her study asked for more relationship education since parenthood classes were not sufficient to help them cope with the transition.

The move away from the traditional to the modern is also reflected in both existing structures of, and attitudes towards, care services provision for psychosocial problems. Abela and Sammut Scerri (2003; 2010) describe how help for such difficulties was provided by and sought from the Church in the past until the mid-eighties when the advent of psychosocial/psychological services heralded a change in culture. This is also reflected in the study carried out amongst Abela, Farrugia, Galea *et al.* (in press) where parents coming from different family structures clamoured for more psychological services for their children and family therapy for the family as a whole.

Nowadays such services are provided by a number of practitioners practicing privately as well as by the Government in a number of settings. Although the field of psychology in Malta is still in its infancy (Abela and Sammut Scerri 2003; 2010), the general public has cottoned on to the idea of seeking help from psychotherapists and psychologists. Indeed there are

waiting lists for psychological and family therapy services provided by FSWs and the Child Guidance Clinic.

The major challenges that families with dependent children face include their capacity to keep up their relationship as a couple, parent their children effectively and at the same time cope with their work outside the home. The situation is compounded for teenage and single parents.

It is in the context of the above sociocultural scenario that the study was carried out.

Methodology

Experts in policy or/and practice in the area of families with dependent children were invited to take part in focus groups on the needs of families with children from 0 to 11 (n=3) and those from 12 to 18 (n=3). Experts were invited to participate in this study by way of an e-mail which included brief details on the aim of the study as well as the date, time and location. The groups were held at the National Statistics Office (NSO).

The total number of focus group participants was 39, with 29 women and 10 men. The gender imbalance can be attributed to the gender skew of the professionals who opt to work in this area. Group participants included professionals working in the area of families and children including sociologists, economists, and professionals in social policy, social work, youth studies, nursing, midwifery, psychology, family therapy and law.

A potential limitation of this study was the familiarity between the participants which can inhibit self-disclosure and discourage nonconformity (Litosseliti, 2007). This might have been offset by the ease participants could have felt at using language and sharing information and opinions which are familiar to most people in their sphere of work.

All focus groups were moderated by members of the research team, with the assistant moderators taking notes. The moderators followed the guidelines for moderating focus groups outlined by Krueger (1994). The participants

were asked three key questions (refer to Appendix A). In line with Krueger's (1994) guidelines, the questions were carefully planned, clear, and open-ended in nature. This questioning route served as a guideline and moderators asked other probing questions as they saw fit. Also in line with Krueger's (1994) guidelines, moderators took great care to avoid giving nonverbal cues as to whether they agreed or otherwise with what participants were saying. They also refrained from expressing their own personal opinion on the matters being discussed, even when specifically asked by participants themselves. The focus group sessions were audio-taped and then transcribed. A report based on qualitative content analysis of the transcriptions, identified by Millward (2007), as one of the three types of content analysis of focus groups, was drawn up.

Findings and Discussion

Lack of public awareness on different forms of family in contemporary Maltese society and the need for provision of information and support services for different family structures were consistent emergent themes:

*"There have been rapid changes in what the Maltese family in our society is like, that there are new issues that one has to face, and perhaps that they are not equipped to face because there is lack of discussion about them, lack of information, etc., and it's about time that this information and service is provided."*¹

They also stressed that policies emanating from the findings should truly target all types of family structures:

*"Openness to diversity...so that the needs of these families can then be addressed...in today's society we have same-sex couples with children, reconstituted families, we have diverse types...one-parent families..."*²

¹ Quotes are given to support findings. In the case of quotes which were originally in the Maltese language, their English translations are given in the main text, with the corresponding original quotes being footnoted.

² *"Openness to diversity...imbaghad il-bżonnijiet ta' dawn il-familji jstghu jkunu indirizzati...jiġifieri ghandek same-sex couples bit-tfal illum il-ġurnata, ghandek reconstituted families, ghandek diversi...one-parent families..."*

Policymakers need to give priority to those families most in need namely the poor, those with a low level of education, parents with mental health problems, families with disability and families with adolescents who have difficulties. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of evidence-based family policies. In this regard focus group participants highlighted the work of the Centre for Family Studies and augured for the strengthening of the Centre's resources.

Key issues in the focus group data included: the need for community work and early childhood intervention, the need for relationship education, the need to support families achieve work-life balance, and the need for open spaces where families can enjoy their free time. These are further discussed below.

The need for community work and early intervention through the setting-up of family resource centres

Focus group participants felt that families did not always access services. One of the main reasons given relates to lack of availability of services due to waiting lists mainly for psychological therapies:

"But when it comes to services, if you want to see a psychologist, we have a year-long waiting list..."³

Families may opt to make use of private services but some families who require such services may think twice before seeking necessary help due to their lack of resources:

"So these families feel very much at a loss because they have little resources to seek assistance when they're having difficulties."

Human resources could be increased and strengthened in a number of ways. This could be done, for example, by improving the working conditions of those in the caring profession working for government such as psychologists and family therapists who are sought after privately and often resign from government agencies due to better conditions in the private sector including a better work-family balance for them. Improving the working conditions of those in the caring profession could help the

³ *"Imma services li naghtu, jekk inti trid tara psychologist, għandna waiting list ta' sena..."*

Government retain them for longer and could therefore be advantageous as the more experienced senior clinicians would support the junior staff in their work by sharing their knowledge and experiences. This would allow for clinical discussion of complex cases which would be an additional motivating factor for the junior staff to continue working in these services.

The heavy workload which professionals in the care services have emerged as an important consideration. This needs to be addressed so that they can find time to network with other professionals in order to ensure that work is not replicated and that professionals are in unison with regards to the care plan and the way forward. This is of utmost importance as is helping families build a support network that will help them all along the stages in the family life cycle.

Another reason cited for people falling through the support network was the “middle-class” set-up of a number of services including online services which assumes that all service users know how to access services.

In order to combat the difficulty of lack of accessibility of care and to help families build a support network, participants recommended an increase in both the quantity and the quality of services offered. They also argued that services should be community-based.

The benefits of community work

A dominant perception in the focus groups was that community services which are not only curative but also preventive, have many benefits as they are able to respond to the different needs of different communities:

*“...because you mentioned Isla, you mentioned Bormla, but they are **very** [emphasis added] different, they are neighbouring towns, we very often refer to them as parts of Cottonera, but the realities...are **completely** [emphasis added] different...so you not only have to be community-based, but also...neighbourhood-based.”⁴*

⁴ “...għax inti semmejt l-Isla, semmejt Bormla, imma they are **very** [emphasis added] different, jġigifieri qegħdin bieb ma’ bieb ma’ xulxin, ahna hafna drabi nagħlquhom wara s-swar tal-Cottonera, pero’ r-realtajiet...huma **kompletament** [emphasis added] differenti...jġigifieri... mhux talli trid tkun community-based, talli...neighbourhood-based.”

The transdisciplinary approach of community work was deemed important. Participants acknowledged that community work is already being implemented to a degree, citing some examples of existing good practice in this regard:

"...at De Soldanis school in Gozo...they had children with certain problems and they called parents for talks at school but realized that those parents who really needed [help] did not attend for them: so they went to look for these parents, even knocking on their doors...and they had this proactive approach and reached those parents of children who had most problems needing to be addressed."⁵

They recommended maximizing the potential of church services, NGOs, and community leaders in order to best respond to the needs of families within communities:

"If voluntary services, NGOs, in these localities were to be strengthened, if they were to be strengthened and given more help, I would say that it could happen, because...we are not a big country in which no one can be reached, everyone knows each other to a certain extent, all we need to do is intensify support..."⁶

Many participants argued that the best way to cater for community and neighbourhood needs is to set up Family Resource Centres (FRCs) in various localities in Malta. These FRCs, already functional in other countries such as Ireland and Australia, would cater for all the needs of families insofar as advice, support and therapy are concerned:

"By having a multi-disciplinary team, with a social worker, someone from the mental health field, community development, family therapy, counsellor, psychologist, who work together, creating community-based, talli...neighbourhood-based."

⁵ *"...għax inti semmejt l-Isla, semmejt Bormla, imma they are very [emphasis added] different, jiġifieri qegħdin bieb ma' bieb ma' xulxin, aħna ħafna drabi nagħlquhom wara s-swar tal-Cottonera, pero' r-realtajiet...huma kompletament [emphasis added] differenti...jiġifieri... mhux talli trid tkun community-based, talli...neighbourhood-based."*

⁶ *"...l-iskola De Soldanis, Għawdex...meta kellhom tfal b'certu problemi u għamli call għall-parents biex jiġu, biex jagħtu talks, imma ndunaw li l-parents ta' tfal li veru kellhom b'zonn ma gewx: marru, fittxewhom, anke habbtulhom fuq il-bieb...u kellhom dan il-proactive approach u laħqu lil dawg il-parents ta' tfal illi kellhom l-iktar b'zonn ta' problemi biex jindirizzawhom."*

*area...they would hold activities for parents, teenagers, children, and also staff child care centres or child-minding places if need be..."*⁷

Participants firmly believe that FRCs would serve to provide information, advice, or support besides therapeutic interventions. Some families may need support or help in the early stages of a difficulty; others may perhaps need help to "stay well"; others still simply need information, which is why some participants suggested that FRCs include, but not be limited to, a citizens' advice bureau. Several participants bemoaned the lack of such services:

*"...in order to be eligible for many of our services...you have to have some type of pathology, for example, in my experience of work at Appoġġ, people used to call and ask for services and you...sort of say to yourself,'I cannot offer [this person] any service'..."*⁸

Family Resource Centres best respond to the needs of diverse forms of families—not just those that are poor or in difficulty. For example, in the United Kingdom, The Centre for Social Justice (2009, July) recommended the set-up of such centres to act as a one-stop shop offering advice and support.

It should be noted however that one participant was wary of introducing FRCs, questioning whether copying a foreign model of care services would work better for us than tapping the potential of, strengthening/consolidating, and eliminating overlap amongst—existing services:

"...regarding the community centre...I do not know whether...one should reflect on Malta and what works for Malta...whether we

⁷ *"Kieku jissahhu anki iktar il-volontarjat, l-NGOs, f'dan il-lokalitajiet, tinghatalhom aktar saħħa, aktar għajjnuna, ngħidlek li jkun jista', għax...m'ahniex xi pajjiż kbir ta' barra minn hawn li hadd ma jista' jintlahaq, kulhadd jaf lil xulxin to a certain extent, kulma rridu naghmlu huwa li nintensifikaw is-support..."*

⁸ *"Billi jkun hemm a set of multi-disciplinary team, ikollok social worker, ikollok xi hadd mill-mental health, ikollok community development, ikollok family therapy, ikollok counsellor, psychologist, illi qegħdin jahdmu flimkien, johlqu sinerġija bejniethom. Iridu jkunu sensittivi għall-kuntest kulturali tal-post fejn qegħdin partikolari...johlqu attivitajiet għall-genituri, attivitajiet għat-teenagers, attivitajiet għat*

should [copy a foreign model] or else use [existing] structures that are accessible or perceived as friendly by people and expand on them?"⁹

Participants who were in favour of FRCs argued that besides catering for the complete spectrum of needs families may have, FRCs also serve as a base for early intervention work with children. Early intervention with children was mentioned by a number of participants, with some being of the opinion that primary health care be given more importance in the form of compulsory screening for all children, thereby avoiding stigmatizing certain client groups and ensuring early detection of difficulties and immediate treatment/drawing up of a care plan:

"...some of the European countries have compulsory screening...France is one of the biggest...periodically—for their education, for their mental health, for their emotional needs, ...there is no stigma..."

The importance of the education system

The Maltese education system was discussed widely in focus group sessions. Some participants welcomed the amalgamation of Education, Employment and the Family in one ministerial portfolio, saying that it enables better linkwork between the three sectors:

"...now that the ministerial portfolio covers education, employment and the family, I am pleased...all those services that are available—when it comes to social, community, educational [services]...the right hand will know what the left one is doing..."¹⁰

Some participants questioned whether schools should be mixed sex, saying that it is now high time for the issue to be revisited.

⁹ *"...hafna servizzi biex tutilizzahom...trid ikollok xi tip ta' patoloġija, per eżempju, mill-esperjenza tiegħi f'Appoġġ kien ikun hemm...nies iċemplu u jsaqsu għal servizzi u inti... speċi bejnek u bejn ruhek tghid,'Din ma nistax noffrilha l-ebda servizz'..."*

¹⁰ *"...fuq tal-community centre... ma nafx jekk...għandhiex issir riflessjoni fuq Malta u x'jahdem għal Malta...għandniex naqbd u mudell u nħawluh ġo villaġġ, jew inkella nużaw strutturi li huma aċċessibbli jew inkella n-nies jarawhom friendly, u nespandu fuqhom?"*

The introduction of college-based social workers was applauded, though some voiced the need for these workers to carry out community-based work and not just office-based work; and one participant stressed over and over again that schools and colleges also needed to have family therapists besides social workers to tackle students' family problems. This participant, in her reaction to another participant's suggestion that school absenteeism be tackled by imposing a fine on parents of absentees, stated that this could result in problems with enforcing payment and that it would be better to tackle root causes of absenteeism by employing family therapists in schools. The need for social workers and family workers in church schools was highlighted. This trend of thought is in tune with the recommendation for a greater link between home and school put forth by Abela and Tabone (2008).

An added source of stress for families, rooted within the educational system, is its emphasis on academic achievement resulting in the marginalization of those who are less academically inclined. Basic literacy remains an issue for many students:

*"And we are still seeing 10-year-old children who cannot write their names even though they have an average IQ, so somehow we also need to see to it...so that this is addressed, because that's pressure on parents."*¹¹

The need for the development of vocational education for adolescents was emphasized. Young people need to be empowered to make the important transition into the world of work (Coles, 1995). Citizenship education through informal learning and the need to widen the scope of the personal and social development curriculum was highlighted. A stronger collaborative link between home and school is needed:

*"Education should not only be a process of walking alongside our youth but it also has to be one of walking alongside our families."*¹²

¹¹ "...issa dan il-ministeru ġie 'Education, Employment and the Family', hadt pjaċir biha jiena...dawk is-servizzi kollha li jeżistu – fejn huma social, community, educational...wiehed ikun jaf id il-leminjia x'qed tagħmel ix-xellugija..."

¹² "U xorta qed naraw tfal ta' 10 snin li lanqas jafu jiktbu isimhom avolja they have an average IQ, jiġifieri somehow dik ukoll irridu naraw li...trid tkun addressed, għax that's pressure on parents."

The emphasis on education on such topics is concordant with the recent National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2011) which lists Citizenship Education as one of eight recommended learning areas. Citizenship Education comprises History, Geography, Social Studies and Environmental Studies together with aspects of Personal, Social and Health Education and Home Economics. Another learning area is Health Education. This comprises Physical Education and Sport together with aspects of Personal, Social and Health Education and Home Economics.

The need to strengthen collaboration between families and schools was emphasized:

“It is important to bring the parents on board with the teachers, so that they are abreast with their children’s studies. School shouldn’t only be for the children; it can become an encouraged behaviour for parents to come within certain times even outside school hours to be educated on certain subjects, like sexual education.”

Participants in the focus groups exploring the needs of families with adolescents talked at length about the need to create awareness amongst parents and adolescents alike regarding the diverse aspects of sexual health and sexuality:

“Parents are at a loss on how to speak with their children when, for example, they approach their teenagers to speak of sex-specific topics...”

They also discussed the importance of engaging parents in media literacy practices, especially with regards to social media such as *facebook*, in the light of the digital divide and also of the gap between parents’ and adolescents’ knowledge of such media. It would be best for parents to know about the positive and negative consequences of these media, how to control and monitor their children’s use of these media, and how to ensure that use of such media does not impede the quality of their children’s life or indeed of the relationship between them and their children:

“Today we do not understand how youth use the computer. The biggest [issue] I am encountering when they [parents] come with

adolescent children is if the parents are not empowered to deal with certain problems, so there is a huge denial of the problem.”¹³

This links to the findings of Velislava Hillman (Massa, 2011) which were discussed above and the need to educate both youngsters and parents on such issues.

A further suggestion made with regards to teachers’ training (though not specifically related to working with families) was that kindergarten assistants have a *Staff Development Day* in line with other teaching staff.

Relationship education

An emergent theme was the need for citizens to be educated about family relationships (e.g. about being in a couple/family, couple/family dynamics, parenting children):

“It’s surprising how we spend 16 years learning about the angles of the isosceles triangle, but the most important thing, that is how we are going to bring a child into this world and rear it, nobody teaches us that, except for those two weeks and that is if you choose to go...to ante-natal classes which are more about how to push and breathe than about how to bring up children.”¹⁴

“I think...there should be more...courses, education, be it for those who will cohabit or for those who will get married, even if they are single...they have to undergo at least a type of course, whatever, so that they become aware of their responsibilities and obligations.”¹⁵

This tallies with what Walker, Barrett, Wilson and Chang (2010) found in their study: “the strongest message to emerge from this study is that relationship education—learning about and preparing for relationships –

¹³ “Il-proċess ta’ l-edukazzjoni m’għandux biss ikun mixja maż-żagħżuġ imma trid tkun ukoll mixja mal-familja.”

¹⁴ “Illum ma nifhem liż-żgħażaġh kif qed jużaw il-kompjuter. L-iktar wahda li jiena qed insib li qed jiġri meta jiġu b’adoloxxenti hija if they have no empowerment whatsoever il-parents, how to deal with certain problems, allura jkun hemm denying kbir tal-problem.”

¹⁵ “Jiena niskanta kif nagħmlu sittax-il sena nitgħallmu l-isosceles triangle x’angles għandhom, imma l-aktar haġa importanti, cioè’ kif se ngibu tarbija fid-dinja u nrabbuha, dik hadd ma jgħallimna, hlief dik il-ġimgħatejn jekk trid...tmur titgħallim l-ante-natal classes li huwa aktar fuq kif għandek tippuxxa u tibbridja milli kif trabbi.”

should begin as early as possible” (p.99) and “...people believed that relationship education provided from an early stage in life would be helpful and would make people more aware of the essential ingredients of strong relationships and the need to have realistic expectations” (p.72).

Managing resources in a sustainable way

Participants voiced their concern that there is a great deal to be done when it comes to educating and guiding Maltese families on how to live a sustainable lifestyle. It is worth noting that Education for Sustainable Development is one of the cross-curricular themes mentioned in the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education, Employment and the Family, 2011). Several participants stressed the need for educating people to make use of free services, most notably in the health sphere, rather than spending money on private services, so that money can be better used elsewhere:

“...at the Health Department we offer vaccines for free...they [parents] tell you, ‘I am going to pay for the vaccines privately’...you can tell them that what you are going to spend on something which you can get for free, you can spend on something else for the children.”¹⁶

Investing in leisure

A similar difficulty exists in the sphere of leisure, according to the participants, who stressed that the Maltese also need to be taught how to enjoy leisure, especially leisure that is free:

“...we really prize working in Malta, our culture is not to waste time, so you have a job and a part-time job if possible and then you do household chores and whatever. Somewhere in our character formation we need to be taught to prize leisure...”¹⁷

¹⁶ “Jien nahseb li ...ghandu jkun hemm aktar...korsijiet, edukazzjoni, sew ghal dawk li jkunu to cohabit u sew jekk huma se jizzewgu,anke jekk huma single...they have to undergo at least a type of course, whatever, li wiehed igibhom aware of their responsibilities and obligations.”

¹⁷ “...ahna fid-dipartiment tas-sahha noffru l-vaccines free...mela jghidulek, ‘I am going to do them privately’...inti tista’ tghidilhom li dak li ha tonfoq biex taghmlu privat li tista’ taghmlu b’xejn, inti tista’ tonfoq fuq oggett iehor ghat-tfal.”

This is linked to another theme generated during the focus group discussions – that of the need for open spaces such as parks that provide the opportunity for free recreation for both adults and children. Some participants linked the lack of such spaces to existing problems such as asthma and obesity. The Gzira playing fields were mentioned as a positive example of such a public place in this regard as there are facilities for recreation for both children and adults. With regards to recreation, another recommendation was that museums should be transformed into family-friendly and interactive ones where children and parents alike could enjoy themselves in a stimulating environment.

The need for a better work-life balance through family: friendly measures

Participants discussed the issue of work-life balance faced by many Maltese families today. They addressed the difficulties of financial pressure faced by families which is one of the reasons for the increase in dual-earner families. This relates well to the comments made earlier about financial pressure and brings to bear on the challenge of work-life balance, with participants arguing that people also need free time besides time spent with their families.

Participants in the focus groups exploring the needs of adolescents said that flexible working hours, teleworking, and parental leave are important for parents with adolescents who require lots of support, including but not limited to, the support needed during the stressful period of examinations. They were concerned that parents are devoting less time to their children because of work and talked about the detrimental effect this is leaving on the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship and on the children themselves:

“Nowadays parents are replacing their presence with money and material things. Time to be together nowadays is limited and as we said before, makes all the difference.”

In the study by Abela, Farrugia, Casha, Galea and Schembri (in press) on the relationship between adolescents and their parents, the majority of the children who were interviewed wished to spend more time with their parents. Furthermore Coleman (2011) reports that various studies point towards the need for an authoritative parenting style for good outcomes

with adolescents. This calls for commitment, energy and the ability to have space in one's head for the children in a fast-paced life from parents who are expected to be warm but firm, able to set standards and hold on to boundaries, as well as provide explanations for their decisions.

Focus group participants were particularly concerned about the absence of the father from the home due to long hours at work and called for increasing awareness about gender roles and the importance of the father's role as parent:

"I think that one of the problems we have is that the father is less present at home."^{17,18}

"Challenge the stereotypes of the wife and husband's role in the household, even though the perception is changing in certain families but the rate is too slow."

Some participants argued that in order to help people achieve work-life balance, there should be real flexi-time both in the public and private sectors, though they were aware of the fact that we have many SMEs and therefore this might be difficult to enforce. Flexibility should not depend on the staff in management or on the situation:

*"...we talk about flexibility a lot but in reality there is none and we are encountering many, many problems..."*¹⁹

Others made the case for longer school days so that children could have more time to engage in meaningful activities at school including adequate recreation time during which children can play under proper supervision. They felt that a longer school day would help parents achieve a better work-life balance. One of the authors however alerted us to the fact that in the past school finished at four o'clock in the afternoon and she feels that keeping young children away from home for longer than that would take away more time from the connection that parents and children can have together.

¹⁸ "... we really prize working in Malta, our culture is not to waste time, so you have a job and a part-time job if possible and then taghmel il-facendi and whatever. Somewhere in our character formation we need to be taught to prize leisure..."

¹⁹ "Jien nahseb wahda mill-problemi li ghandna hu li l-missier ikun inqas id-dar."

Another theme that was discussed was that of child care, with suggestions being made that it should be free, or at least priced at a reasonable rate – as is in fact the case; and that hours of child care service be extended. The lacuna in child care for pre-kindergarten children with disability was also discussed.

With regards to the after-school service for children aged 3-16, some participants suggested that it should be means-tested as is that for children aged 0-3. Another suggestion was that such services be strengthened using financial help from National Funds. It would be of great help to families making use of these services if transport from schools to these centres were offered.

Participants were sensitive to the needs of women who work. Workplaces should be breastfeeding-friendly. Home help could be given to working mothers who need it, although one participant said that there had been such a project and it had failed. The particular difficulty faced by Gozitan women who find it difficult to commute from Gozo from Malta when they have children was also raised.

Because of the need to work, parents are increasingly leaving their children's care in the hands of grandparents for some time although this possibility does not apply to everybody given that a number of grandparents are now in the workforce. It was argued that grandparents need to learn parenting skills and need support too. Also, some grandparents may mistakenly think that their role is limited to ensuring their grandchildren's safety so they do not take an active role with children (such as by educating them, carrying out tasks with them, playing with them, *etc.*). Some participants cited examples of the need to provide education and support to grandparents:

*"And another thing...the grandparents who are looking after the children and the need these grandparents feel to update their knowledge, so many grandparents used to knock on our door, 'Tell me what to do because I cannot bring up my daughter's son like I brought up my son, I do not know what to do, show us how, hold meetings for parents and grandparents' ..."*²⁰

²⁰ "...ara kemm nitkellmu fuq flexibility imma in reality m'hemmx u qed insibu hafna problemi..."

The lecturing team in charge of *Parentcraft* courses held a lecture for grandparents some time ago with one of the aims being to reduce conflicting advice by parents and grandparents. This was met with very positive feedback and such lectures are now being held on a monthly basis (R. Borg Xuereb, personal communication, March 16, 2012).

Recommended fiscal measures

Reference has already been made to the financial difficulties being faced by families and the effect this has on work-life balance. Some participants argued that increasing salaries/wages will decrease parents' need to hold part-time jobs and hence improve work-life balance. Others argued the case for a more family-friendly taxation system:

*"...our taxation system is very much focused on the individual, it is not family-focused in any way.... your expenses have increased when you have a dependant or two or three so you consume more and pay more VAT because you are purchasing more, so the total amount of tax you are paying increases significantly with your family size...on the one hand we need to increase our birth rate but in this very specific way we are penalising families with children, and the more children you have the worse it is."*²¹

Family-friendly fiscal measures could be implemented in a number of ways, such as by increasing children's allowance or having two tiers of children's allowance.

Single parents have different needs and could benefit if the wage-benefit issue is revisited:

"Single parents who wish to be gainfully employed, who can only work part-time as they do not have support, but when they go to work, either they do not have childcare facilities, so...they have to pay, and even if they are then reimbursed...financially they have to

²¹ "U haġa oħra...il-grandparents li issa qed jiehdu ħsieb it-tfal, u l-bżonn li jhossu dawn il-grandparents biex japdejtjaw in-knowledge tagħhom, kemm kienu jigu nanniet ihabbtu l- bieb, 'Għidli x'ha nagħmel għax dat-tifel tat-tifla mhux bħat-tifel tiegħi kif rabbejtu, ma nafx x'ha naqbad nagħmel, urina kif, għamililna laqgħat għall-ġenituri u grandparents'..."

take the initial step, and is it worth it for them to give up their single benefits? As you would have to wait a couple of months.”²²

When it comes to large families, certain benefits are only given up to a maximum of a certain number of children. This discriminates against larger families. For example, families with more than four children can only claim energy vouchers up to a maximum amount for a total of four children. Families should be entitled to one voucher per child irrespective of the number of children if they qualify for the benefit in question.

Some participants were of the opinion that tax levied for environmental pollution be increased.

Better financial support for families with adolescents

Participants in the focus groups exploring the needs of adolescents stated that as children become adolescents and grow older, more financial pressure is put on the family’s resources. Participants pointed out that adolescents have a lot of expectations with regards to pocket money and material goods:

“Expectations are also from the adolescents towards their parents. For instance, a lot of youngsters I encounter expect loads of money over a short time.”

This was linked to the point made earlier on about teaching schoolchildren on how to lead sustainable lifestyles.

Parents may need to fork out additional money for private lessons, use of sports facilities, and memberships such as club memberships. It was argued that in Malta, the culture of sports is still very underdeveloped; and that families need substantial amounts of money to enrol their adolescents in sports clubs or to pay for use of sports facilities. This warrants more

²² “...our taxation system is very much focused on the individual, it is not family-focused in any way... your expenses have increased when you have a dependant or two or three allura inti ha tikkonsma aktar u ha thallas aktar VAT because you are purchasing more, so the total amount of tax you are paying increases significantly with your family size...on the one hand we need to increase our birth rate but in this very specific way we are penalising families with children, and the more children you have the worse it is.”

investment from the policymakers in terms of providing free use of sports facilities services to families or financial help in this regard.

The participants argued that families with fewer financial resources feel much more stress when trying to cope with the increase in the material needs and demands of their adolescents. They might very well take unsustainable options in order to avoid shame, thus increasing the strain on the family budget:

"...I worked with women on relief benefits, for example, and their children wear NIKE trainers, so I tell her, 'Why not buy them from the market?' and she replies, 'I am not having him in trainers from the market when he is with people who all have [NIKE trainers].'"²³

Again, this was linked to the recommendation made about educating the public on how to lead a sustainable lifestyle. The further development of youth work in Malta will contribute positively in this regard.

Conflict resolution and separation

The reality of family breakdown in Malta was discussed, with the crucial issue being the services couples need to help them resolve conflict which can have a detrimental effect on children's upbringing:

"There is a great study in Wales...showing that what affects children's outcomes for most is not parenting skills but the amount of conflict within the family, the negative impact mostly on children."

The Family Court is seen by some participants as costly and confusing. They recommend it be restructured so that it becomes a real, family-friendly one by helping both couples and children—at present there are no services for children of separating couples. Children's voice should be heard in the separation process.

²³ "Single parents jixtiequ jmorru jahdmu, li jistgħu jahdmu biss part-time għax m'għandhomx support, imma meta jmorru jahdmu, jew m'għandhomx post għat-tfal fiċ-childcare, allura...iridu jhallsu, u anke jekk imbagħad jigu reimbursed... the initial step bil-flus iridu jagħmluha, u jekk jaqbillhomx johorgu mis-social benefits, għax hekk għandek xi zahrejn jew tnejn."

Staff in the caring professions who are working with separating couples need support in dealing with issues such as those relating to data protection which they feel block them from exploring the issue of separation at greater depth with families:

"...you find that a lot of services fear getting involved in a court case, as it may look as though the social worker is influencing the mother to say this thing and therefore the mother can be badly affected by this...in Court...when she mentions the separation process – and that's why she brought the child to you because she's worried about the child... the social workers [or other workers]... immediately become defensive...because she [social worker] fears talking to the girl on her own, lest the [girl's] father say that she [social worker] influenced what she [girl] said in Court..."²⁴

All these arguments are consolidated by the research carried out by Abela, Farrugia, Galea *et al.* (in press) who identified a strong theme of loss and abandonment in families in which parents had separated contentiously. Some adolescents who came from families in which parents had separated consensually reported that they were spending less time with one of the parents. Amongst the various reasons for this is the time the parent spends with her/his new partner and stepchildren. Indeed, some adolescents specifically asked for time alone with their parent (*i.e.* not in other people's presence). They also found that some children were not given clear and coherent information about the separation and the way forward for the family. These all point to the need for the restructuring of the Family Court as well as to the need for Family Resource Centres which can provide support and help to such families over time and not just during the separation period.

Health

Some participants discussed the need for pre-conception care to be given its due importance, and suggested that the milk grant be removed to

²⁴ " ...Jien hdimt ma' nisa, per eżempju, li jgħixu bir-relief, u t-tfal bil-papoċ tan-NIKE, u ngħidilha, 'Għax mhux tal-monti?' u hi tgħidli, 'Jien mhux se nibagħtu b'tal-monti ma' nies li kulhadd għandu.'"

encourage breastfeeding. As has already been stated above, workplaces should be breastfeeding-friendly. These participants went on to express their wish for more funding for follow-up visits by midwives after women give birth—at present, midwives are only permitted to carry out three visits per case, with each visit being allotted a time slot of 20 minutes including travelling from one household to another, finding the place and parking.

Multiple births are on the increase owing to both women choosing to postpone having children to a later age and to IVF procedures. It was stressed that Government needs to provide assistance for parents who have multiple births.

Participants in the focus groups exploring the needs of adolescents recommended an effective, holistic sexual health policy, with the general public being educated through schools, health centres, and the community. Some participants asked for mental health to be given its due importance when it comes to priorities in the area of health, and for those with mental health difficulties to be given a voice.

The Media

The media has a very important and useful role in educating people about family life and, according to the focus group participants, its role is not being utilized to its full potential:

“Valuable air time, even if at the very least you film a family in action, a reality show...of how we can do this business of raising a family...”²⁵

The media can also help educate parents about the digital world and social media such as *facebook*. Quality children’s programmes are also needed.

²⁵ “...issib hafna mis-servizzi jibzghu jidhlu filha jekk il-każ qiegħed il-Qorti, ghax inkella jista’ jidher li s-social worker qed tinfluwenza lill-omm biex tghid dil-haġa u għalhekk jista’ ikun li l-omm tispicča minn taht...il-Qorti...when she mentions the separation process - and that’s why she brought the child to you because she’s worried about the child...mill-ewwel is-social workers jew [workers ohrajn]...ittella’ l-guard...ghax tghidlek ma mmurx inkellem lil dit-tifla wahedha, li ma jmurx missierha jghid li nfluwenzajt x’tghid il-Qorti ...”

The role which the media, the Broadcasting Authority, and professional bodies have to play in vetting speakers on programmes was also deemed highly important. These bodies have to correct what was said if necessary, as people sometimes believe what speakers say without questioning their credentials. Viewers following such programmes should be given contact details so that they can call for advice or help on the matter after the programme has finished if they so wish.

Housing

The need to inform the public of their rights with regards to housing was also discussed. For example, those who are subsidized by government after 6 months are sometimes not given a fiscal receipt and may not know that if they take an *affidavit* they will still get the subsidy.

Participants would like housing grants to be more in line with prices on the market together with reform of rental laws. Participants highlighted deleterious effects of overcrowded housing for certain families. The need for housing for victims of domestic violence was also brought up.

Children

With regards to children in care, some expressed their opinion that the State should take up a bigger responsibility for children in care and not rely so much on the benevolence of the Church; and that something needs to be done to help foster parents wanting to adopt children where family restoration proves to be impossible:

*"An open adoption needs to become a reality or else these children will end up living in purgatory."*²⁶

Some participants expressed their concern at the dearth of mental health services for young children and adolescents. One suggestion was that a dedicated children's helpline be set up: at present, the 179 helpline is being utilized for all purposes.

²⁶ *"Valuable air time, inqar if you film a family in action, a reality show...of how we can do this business of raising a family..."*

The report commissioned by the first Child Commissioner (2006) on dealing with challenging behaviour was discussed with some participants saying that the recommendations brought forward in that study ought to be reviewed. Participants expressed their wish for children's voice and participation in matters that affect them to be encouraged.

Disability

As has already been mentioned earlier on, participants lamented the lack of childcare for children with disability in the 0-3 age bracket.

Some people with disability can never work and therefore cannot supplement their allowance with another source of income. Participants stressed that this is unfair and these people should be given a higher amount of disability benefit. Another point raised related to transport for the disabled which is expensive. Moreover, one has to pay a month's fee in advance. An added problem is that if the driver is sick there is no replacement.

Some participants said that there is a lack of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) in schools and that the process of engaging a LSA is laborious.

Immigration

Rejected immigrants should receive help—at present, they have no financial help, with their babies even going hungry at times, and are not entitled to childcare. Nuns at children's homes are now refusing to take care of these immigrants' children as they no longer have the capacity for them.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

In the light of the above proposals brought forward by the experts and professionals themselves, we would like to conclude by highlighting the three recommendations that were considered to be a priority namely:

- Family resource centres, serving as a base for community work, and staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals, be set up in different localities to respond to, and cater for, the needs of different families including blended and single-parent families. We are conscious of the current economic climate and in this regard wish to point out that the operation of family resource centres represents value for money and long-term cost-cutting to the policymaker. This is because of the way these resource centres operate (e.g. group work, sharing resources with other local entities).
- In order to cope with the modern-day demands of family life, our younger generations need to be educated about these changes and the necessary adaptations. The authors, whilst agreeing with the implementation of life education topics in the National Curriculum Framework, strongly recommend the implementation of relationship education as a topic in its own right in schools. One may argue that the first and best place for education is always home, and this calls for parallel work to be carried out with and for parents by school staff and professional workers alike. This is all the more necessary today given that change has been relatively recent and our younger parents were unlikely to have been educated about these transitions by their own parents who have little or no experience of them.
- In view of the shift from the traditional to dual-earner families, more work places need to implement family-friendly measures such as reduced hours, telework, flexitime, and time off. These measures will help encourage women's participation in the workforce and hence ensure the sustainability of the economy whilst supporting family life and should hopefully help to increase the current fertility rate as well.

We are aware that the proposals brought forward in this study are those of experts and professionals working with Maltese families. It would be interesting to ask the parents themselves what they would consider helpful for their families to survive this challenging period for family life.

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APPENDIX A

Focus Group Questioning Route

Focus Group exploring needs of families with children

Introductory Statement:

This research attempts to identify the needs of **families with children**. This agenda necessitates a clearer conceptualization of needs. Therefore the first question attempts to identify the different types of needs families with children have.

Question 1

Drawing on your professional background, what general needs would you identify as being particularly salient for **families with children aged under 12**?

Question 2

How would you categorize these general needs in order of importance?

Question 3

Let's now focus on the specific needs coming out of the general needs and explore each in turn.

Question 4

How would you categorize these needs in order of importance?

Focus Group Questioning Route

Focus Group exploring needs of families with adolescents

Introductory Statement:

This research attempts to identify the needs of **families with adolescents**. This agenda necessitates a clearer conceptualization of needs. Therefore the first question attempts to identify the different types of needs families with adolescents have.

Question 1

Drawing on your professional background, what general needs would you identify as being particularly salient for **families with adolescents aged 12-18**?

Question 2

How would you categorize these general needs in order of importance?

Question 3

Let's now focus on the specific needs coming out of the general needs and explore each in turn.

Question 4

How would you categorize these needs in order of importance?