



Research Article

An Analysis of Trade Union Membership in Malta

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Abstract. Despite their crucial social role, trade unions in Europe are suffering from challenges relating to a widespread trend of declining membership levels. Public information on trade union membership levels in Malta is mainly obtained from reports compiled annually by the Department of Industrial and Employment Relations through administrative records provided by the trade unions. This study, the first of its kind in Malta, offers an alternative and more detailed examination of membership levels through a survey carried out among a representative national sample of 781 employees. This study reveals a lower trade union membership level than what is officially reported. In line with foreign research, this study also indicates that the likelihood of being a trade union member increases among older employees, those who are in full-time or indefinite contracts, and those employed in the public sector. On the other hand, contrary to European trends, employees holding tertiary qualifications and higher level occupations are more likely to be unionised in Malta. Besides, male and female employees are equally likely to be unionised. This study concludes that, in order to prevent further decline in trade union density and membership, Maltese trade unions need to reorganise themselves, refocus their strategies and become more effective in attracting and retaining non-traditional members.

Keywords: Trade unions, density, membership, socio-demographics, survey, Malta

1 Introduction

Free trade unions play a crucial role in a democratic society. Trade unionism is widely credited for having improved the working conditions of employees around the world through collective bargaining and by influencing public policy. However, “trade union influence extends beyond the confines of the workplace and impacts upon

society as a whole, making a key contribution to creating, maintaining, and rebuilding democratic societies” (Fick, 2009, p. 249). “Trade unions are often the only institutions that give a voice to workers, whose circumstances are often neglected by those in power. More important still, sometimes they are the only mass-based organisations that stand against authoritarian regimes” (Craner, 2002, July 18, para. 5). Fick (2009) argues that the strategic social importance of trade unions derives from the following five attributes. They are based on democratic principles, comprise heterogeneous membership (in terms of sex, age, social background and so on), are financially independent from governments and private interests, have a broad range of concerns extending beyond the workplace, and occupy a mid-level placement within the social pyramid, thus having access to both political and economic elites and their grass roots constituencies.

The European Union and governments across Europe hold trade unions as important social partners which are consulted in key decision making fora. Bryson, Ebbinghaus and Visser (2011, p. 104) note that “in large parts of Europe... unions are strongly embedded in social, political and economic structures which help sustain them and provide a strong foundation for their influence in society”. Yet, the same policies and forces that are pushing towards economic growth in Europe might be undermining trade unions. Economic, social, technological, legal and other contemporary changes affecting the labour market are offering increasing challenges to the trade union movement. Hyman (2007) mentions three major challenges facing trade unions, namely “economic internationalisation [which] makes it easier for employers to escape national structures of employment regulation, and appears to weaken the ability of governments to defend nationally-based social models; sectoral and occupational shifts in employment [which] erode traditional union strongholds, while social and ideolo-

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gical changes undermine workers' traditional orientation to collectivism" (p. 193). Many trade unions are losing their traditional membership base (Jensen, 2006) and struggle to maintain their *raison d'être*. It has been argued that trade unions might be gradually losing both their influence and relevance (e.g. Pech, 2005; MacShane, 2001).

Trade union membership is a major - though not the only - indicator of trade union strength, influence and relevance (Bryson et al., 2011). For instance, during its policy making process, the European Union consults trade unions that represent most employees in specific economic sectors. In Malta as in other European countries, the 'largest' unions (meaning those with most members) are represented on important Government fora and consultative bodies that may directly affect national policy and legislation. Thus, unions exert considerable effort to try to maintain and if possible improve their membership levels. But in order to do so effectively, it is important to understand the determinants of trade union membership. As will be discussed further down, international research examined a host of factors that may influence the likelihood of union membership. However, are such factors relevant in Malta, due to the country's distinct development of its industrial relations system and its particular socio-economic characteristics?

The aim of the study is to shed more light on trade unionism in Malta through a critical discussion of the results of a survey undertaken among a representative sample of employees, a methodology which has never been used in this country for such a target population. This study compares declared individual union membership figures with the official membership data sent by unions to the Registrar of Trade Unions (RTU). Besides, it examines the relationship between a set of socio-demographic variables highlighted in foreign research and the likelihood of union membership. The following section explores trade union density in Malta.

2 Trade Unionism and Membership Density in Malta

Over the years, trade unions have been a major social force in Europe. However, since 1975, there has been a steady decline in trade union density across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states, including European ones (OECD, 2018). The general trend of decreasing trade union density and also raw membership across the European Union is very clear, despite methodological difficulties in its calculation (Carley, 2009). Indeed, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions refers to this as a 'megatrend', with only a few countries registering stable

figures (Eurofound, 2015). It is clear that Northern European countries tend to be more heavily unionised than Southern ones. The countries' varying trade union densities are indicative of the absence of a single cohesive trade union system in Europe. Some researchers have found it useful to group countries according to their geographic location, in order to categorise the various trade union realities in Europe (e.g. Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2014; Jensen, 2006).

Due to its geographic location in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, one may be tempted to classify Malta's trade union movement within the group of Southern European countries. Indeed, the country's trade unions have some similar characteristics to this group, such as being divided according to political ideologies and being very active at policy level. Malta's culture has been especially affected by the close proximity to Italy. However, in contrast to several Southern European countries, the legal foundation of industrial relations has traditionally been rather weak, and Malta's industrial relations are regulated in large part through collective bargaining; collective agreements are estimated to cover between 50% and 61% of all workers (Debono, in press; Grech, 2013). The trade union movement in Malta is dominated by two general trade unions, and all collective agreements in the private sector are concluded at enterprise level. These latter characteristics place Malta within the Anglophone group of countries. Having been a British colony for some 160 years, most of Malta's institutions, including trade unionism, were originally developed on the British model. The unions' traditional confrontational approach towards employers appears to derive from such influence. However, with Malta's independence from Britain in 1964 and its accession to the EU forty years later, a gradual shift away from some British elements towards continental Europe has emerged. For example, governments have increasingly facilitated social partners' participation in policy formulation. Over the last decade, industrial relations were also affected by the European economic crisis. Unions became perceptibly less confrontational and industrial action has decreased substantially, making space for more dialogue with employers (Debono & Baldacchino, in press).

Traditionally, trade unionism in Malta flourished among blue-collar workers, starting in the Malta Dry-docks and continuing in the manufacturing sector. Indeed, the General Workers' Union (GWU), which is by far Malta's largest union (representing about half of all unionised workers in the country), has over the years primarily supported blue-collar workers and their families. The union has since its foundation adhered to a leftist ideology, publicly backing the Labour Party in its early years and having been statutorily fused

to that party during 1978–1992. The Union Haddiema Magħqudin, Malta’s second largest union (representing about a quarter of all unionised workers in the country) grew in part as a Christian democratic counterbalance to the GWU: it tends to lean to the right of the political spectrum and attracts mostly white-collar workers as its members. It is important to note here that, despite the ideological stances of these two general unions, Maltese workers appear to be motivated to join unions mostly for instrumental rather than ideological reasons (Zammit & Rizzo, 2002; Debono, 2017).

The only source of trade union membership data in Malta is that compiled by the Director of the Department of Industrial and Employment Relations (DIER) in his/her capacity as Registrar of Trade Unions. The Employment and Industrial Relations Act (EIRA) (Government of Malta, 2002) specifies that trade unions are required to send their annual membership figures to the Registrar in June. Such data is then compiled and published in the Government Gazette. Failure to comply with such procedures may result in the cancellation of the union from the register. In order to derive density, trade union membership figures are compared to employment data. Different studies have used different procedures to carry out such comparison. Thus, while Malta’s trade union membership figures are similar across all studies (since they derive consistently from one and the same source), density figures tend to vary. A main source of divergence derives from which of two types of employment data is used. Official employment data is often based on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) that has been compiled for nearly 20 years. However, there exists another type of data based on administrative records held by the Malta’s public employment service, which relies on the formal registration of workers, and which goes back at least to 1950. The latter does not tally with LFS figures since they are based on different data-gathering methodologies. In fact, the use of the LFS results in considerably lower density levels. Another source of discrepancy in density figures derives from whether one compares ‘gross’ or ‘net’ membership densities (Baldacchino & Debono, 2009). The reported density figures are often based on ‘gross’ calculations, deriving from simple ratios between overall membership and employment figures. However, net densities are sometimes used. These are based on more precise calculations and exclude from the equation such factors as union members who are pensioners, students, self-employed, unemployed persons, and workers who are legally prevented from joining trade unions (Baldacchino & Debono, 2009). This more realistic measure reveals higher trade union densities in Malta between 1953 and 2008 (Baldacchino & Debono, 2009). With a net density of 59.3% in 2008 (Baldacchino & De-

bono, 2009), Malta ranked among the European Union countries with the highest membership densities, close to the Nordic cluster. More recent comparative data from the ICTWSS Database (Visser, 2016) indicates a lower union density of 52.9% in 2012 (the methodology used is unknown) but this still gives Malta the fifth highest density in the EU. The latest density recorded in Malta is about 58% in 2017 (using administrative employment data and excluding pensioners who are trade union members) (Debono, in press).

While the above figures indicate Malta’s trade union density to be between 53% and 58%, this might be overstated. Doubts remain as to the accuracy of RTU figures (Baldacchino, 2007, May 20) which rely on trade unions’ own membership declarations; as mentioned in the introduction, unions have an interest in brandishing strong membership figures. Besides, RTU figures do not consider the phenomenon of workers who are paid-up members of more than one trade union, and who may thus artificially inflate the overall trade union density in Malta. Considering the importance of density figures, often used as the main indicator of unions’ performance, this study aims to investigate the veracity of official statistics. It is hypothesised that the trade union density computed through a survey method will be considerably lower than what is normally reported.

The following section examines research linking socio-demographic variables with trade union membership, while taking into consideration the situation in Malta.

3 The Relationship Between Socio-Demographic Variables and Trade Union Membership

International literature links trade union membership with socio-economic, political and work-related aspects, personal characteristics and attitudes (Schnabel & Wagner, 2007). This section explores how gender, age, education, occupation, employment sector and economic activity may relate to unionisation by examining the changing socio-demographic characteristics of trade union membership in Europe and the likelihood of unionisation.

3.1 Gender

Gender has probably been studied more than any other socio-demographic variable in relation to unionisation in Europe (e.g. European Trade Union Confederation, 2002; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007; Ledwith, 2012; Eurofound, 2014). Women are less likely to be unionised than men (Checchi, Visser & Van De Werfhorst, 2010) and, despite lacunae in data, trade union membership in Europe is clearly male-dominated Carley (2009). Only in around 30% of the main trade union organisations (for which data was available) do women outnumber men;

while, in aggregate terms, about 43% of trade union members in the studied organisations are women (Carley, 2009). However, when one compares the last figure with the fact that around 46% of those in the labour force are women (Eurostat, 2018), then the gender imbalance in union membership appears to be small. It is also worth noting that in some Nordic countries, women have a significantly higher probability of being unionised than men (Schnabel & Wagner, 2007). Indeed, women comprise the majority of trade union members in Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as Poland (Carley, 2009). In most of these countries, women are especially dominant in white-collar unions. This reflects the fact that the majority of white collar workers in these countries tend to be women (Eurostat, 2018). Women are also particularly present in some countries in public sector unions, which again tends to reflect the fact that women might be more likely to work in the public sector than men. The gender difference in unionisation “has traditionally been interpreted as a reflection of men’s greater degree of attachment to the labour force which would increase the benefits of unionisation both from the point of view of employees and of unions” (Schnabel & Wagner, 2007, p. 12). There appears to be a set of social conditions that restrict women from joining trade unions, such as the social position associated with women’s work, the restrictions deriving from family responsibilities, and even the workings of trade union structures (European Trade Union Confederation, 2002). Despite this, between 2003 and 2008 there was an increasing proportion of female trade union members in most European countries. This “suggests that their membership is tending to hold up better than men’s in union organisations that are decreasing in size, and that they are making up a greater proportion of growth in organisations that are expanding” (Carley, 2009, p. 19). In 2014, 65% of all union members in Malta were men and only 35% were women (Government of Malta, 2015, November 6), reflecting the fact that around 63% of all workers are men (National Statistics Office of Malta, 2015). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Malta’s General Workers’ Union is among the most male-dominated main trade unions in Europe (Carley, 2009). However, in line with the trend in other EU countries (Carley, 2009), the ratio of female trade union membership in Malta is on the increase. Besides, in line with several other EU countries, women in Malta tend to be particularly numerous in unions that represent professionals and other white-collar workers. It is thus hypothesised that, despite the difference between raw male and female membership figures in Malta, working women are as likely to be unionised as much as working men.

3.2 Age

Issues relating to the unionisation of young persons have also been well documented (e.g. Blanchflower, 2007; Checchi et al., 2010; Eurofound, 2010; Bernaciak et al., 2014). Eurofound (2010) lists young age as one of the four main contributors to low trade union density, stating that young workers “seem to be almost invariably the most problematic group of workers to unionise” (p. 13). Indeed, in most European countries, trade union density of younger persons is well below average, whereas in a number of countries, half the current trade union members are set to retire within a decade (Bernaciak et al., 2014). Trade unions across Europe appear to be aware of this time-bomb and established specific structures for young workers. Eurofound (2010) and Bernaciak et al. (2014) describe various strategies being adopted by trade unions to recruit and organise young persons, with varying levels of success. In a study carried out on data across 38 countries, Blanchflower (2007) found an inverted U-shaped pattern of unionisation in relation to age – peaking in the mid to late 40s across most of the examined countries. He attributes this phenomenon in part to cohort effects. Similarly, analysing data from seven European countries, Checchi et al. (2010) found that union membership peaks between the ages of 47 and 61. However, Schnabel and Wagner’s 2007 findings do not support the U-shaped pattern of unionisation. The authors argue that this might have occurred due to the large number of control variables they used. While there exists no documentation on the topic of age and unionisation in Malta, there is a shared perception that young persons are less interested in unions than older ones. However, is such a lower interest related to the type of job or economic sector that young persons are joining, or does it exist irrespective of such circumstances? Many of the jobs occupied by youths in Malta are in sectors which are difficult for the unions to organise such as wholesale and retail, and the emerging ICT and finance fields. In line with most foreign research, it is hypothesised that young employees are less likely to join trade unions when compared to older ones.

3.3 Education and Occupation

According to Checchi et al. (2010), in general, lower qualified workers have a higher probability of union membership than tertiary qualified ones. However, as argued by Schnabel (2013), empirical evidence for this relationship is flimsy. Indeed, other variables appear to intervene in such relationship. For instance, Blanchflower (2007) found that, in the UK, while overall schooling and qualifications are positively related to membership in the public sector, they are negatively related to membership in the private sector. While within the public sector, a person with a first degree is more likely to be

unionised than someone without a first degree, the opposite is true in the private sector. Checchi et al. (2010, p. 95) themselves found that “among women, university graduates do not have a lower likelihood of membership than women with lower levels of schooling”. Indeed, in line with Blanchflower (2007), the authors tentatively link this to the “larger proportion of highly educated women employed in unionised public service professions like teaching and nursing” (Checchi et al., 2010, p. 95). When compared to highly qualified persons, lower qualified ones are more likely to be or become blue-collar workers. The latter are easier to organise in trade unions than white-collar workers, since they have more homogeneous preferences and experience more homogeneous working conditions (Schnabel & Wagner, 2007). Descriptive evidence in Schnabel and Wagner (2007) indicates that trade union density is higher for blue-collar than white-collar workers in half of 18 countries investigated and while it is lower in the other half.

As noted earlier, trade unionism in Malta was traditionally mainly fuelled by less qualified blue-collar workers; the GWU is mostly focused on such a section of the working population. While the unions representing white collar workers are increasing in size, they are still much smaller than the GWU (Debono, in press). Thus, despite the lack of clarity in European research, it is hypothesised that lower qualified employees and employees in blue-collar jobs in Malta are more likely to be unionised than higher qualified employees and employees in white-collar jobs.

Trade unions have also been traditionally associated with workers holding typical working contracts. However, in many countries including Malta, the share of full-time workers is decreasing while that of atypical workers such as part-timers and persons in definite contracts is increasing. “Atypically employed workers usually have weaker ties to their current workplace and are more difficult to recruit and keep as union members” (Schnabel, 2013, p. 260). While most research appears to support the claim that full-time workers have higher trade union density rates than those working on a part-time basis (e.g. Visser, 2006; Blanchflower, 2007), some studies do not (e.g. Schnabel & Wagner, 2007). Interestingly, Visser (2006, p. 47) found that “the gap in unionisation between part-time and full-time employees is narrowing in some countries in Northern Europe – most strongly in those wherein a part-time job is both widely diffused and ‘normalised’”. While in Malta atypical workers tend to enjoy the same legal protection as typical workers, atypical contracts are not yet as widely diffused and do not seem to be ‘normalised’. Thus, it is hypothesised that employees holding full-time and indefinite contracts are more likely to be unionised than those in part-time jobs and with definite contracts.

3.4 Employment Sector and Economic Activity

Strong evidence links unionisation and employment in the public sector across European countries (Checchi et al., 2010; Eurofound, 2010; Schnabel, 2013). In the public sector, it is easier to organise employees in unions due to “lower recruitment costs in large homogeneous organisations with low turnover rates and low employer hostility towards unionism” (Schnabel, 2013, p. 259). In line with such research, union representation in Malta’s public sector is much stronger than in the private sector. It is therefore hypothesised that Malta’s public employment sector has much higher levels of unionisation than the private sector.

Unionisation in Malta has also been traditionally strong in the secondary sector and weak in the primary and tertiary sectors. This phenomenon might be due to the small size and family-ownership of the traditional organisations in last two sectors (Debono, 2004), and to the unitarist strategic human resource management stance often adopted in the emerging tertiary subsectors (Debono, in press). However, Malta, like other European countries, is experiencing a decline in the manufacturing sector and an expansion of the services sector, some of which is difficult for the unions to organise. Nevertheless, this expansion has been reflected in the smaller occupational and in-house unions often catering for white-collar workers in the tertiary sector gaining ground in membership levels in relation to the two large general unions. Whereas in 2004, these small unions represented 16% of all union membership, in 2014 they represented 19.8% (Government of Malta, 2004, December 30, 2015, November 6). This trend appears to follow developments in Europe. Indeed, Visser (2012) discussed how the decline of industry, together with changes in organising and sectoral bargaining, have led to a decline in industrial unionism across different countries. He argued that “the expansion of the public sector and the unionisation of teachers, nurses, and many other service providers in the welfare state have led to even the mainstream and left-leaning trade union federations becoming, for the most part, white-collar organisations” (Visser, 2012, p. 135). On the other hand, Schnabel (2013) indicated that the empirical evidence for the impact of sectoral changes on union density is not clear and may vary from one country to another. It is hypothesised that, despite the decline in Malta’s manufacturing industry, employees in the secondary sector are still more likely to be unionised than those in the tertiary sector, as reflected by the fact that the GWU is still by far the largest union in Malta.

In support of the above often unclear international literature, in their research carried out on data from 18 different European countries, Schnabel and Wagner (2007, p. 24) found that “the same covariates have

a rather different explanatory power across countries”. Such findings reinforce the idea that it is important to investigate potential determinants of trade unionism in relation to specific countries due to the latter’s idiosyncratic characteristics. Malta’s distinct development of its industrial relations system, together with its particular socio-economic circumstances, may affect the nature of union membership in particular ways.

The next section outlines the methodology used for this study.

4 Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative methodology to investigate the relation between a set of socio-demographic variables and trade union membership levels in Malta. A brief survey was developed and pilot tested as part of a larger project aimed at shedding more light on trade unionism in Malta. The project was carried out by the author under the auspices of the Centre for Labour Studies of the University of Malta and the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society in 2014/2015.

Data gathering was carried out by Malta’s National Statistics Office (NSO) through Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). A representative sample of the adult population of Malta aged between 16 and 64 years and residing in discrete dwellings was chosen via stratified random sampling based on the variables of sex, age group and locality. This methodology ensured a good spread of the sample relative to the population.

Out of 2,008 sampled persons who were eligible to participate in the study, 1,512 good responses were derived, resulting in an effective response rate of 75.3%. Out of these responses, the sub-sample of 781 employees was used for the current study.

Quality control during data collection was implemented via a series of measures consisting of quality checks and in-built validation rules in the data collection program to limit the occurrence of non-sampling errors. Missing values were imputed using a hot deck methodology, by considering donors according to district, age group and sex of respondents. The mode of the respective category was taken as the imputed value. Numerous measures were taken to ensure that non-sampling errors were kept to a minimum. Experienced interviewers

were used throughout the data collection process and appropriate supervision was conducted throughout. Interviewers were provided with precise definitions of the terms used in the survey to avoid varied interpretations.

The following section presents the results of this study, first by highlighting some important descriptive data and subsequently by analysing the relationships of interest in this study through inferential statistics.

5 Results

As can be seen from Table 1, just over a third of respondents (33.8%) are trade union members. Slightly less than half of the respondents (47.8%) have never joined a trade union, while another 18.4% used to be trade union members. There is no significant gender difference in the trade union membership status: $\chi^2(2, N = 781) = 0.393, p > 0.05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.022$.

As can be seen in Table 2 below, older employees are significantly more likely to be members of trade unions when compared to younger ones: $\chi^2(2, N = 781) = 7.864, p < 0.05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.100$. While only 23.5% of the youngest employees (aged 15–24) are members of trade unions, the figure increases to 38.6% among the oldest employees (aged 45–64). When examining these results by gender, it becomes apparent that age bracket is strongly related to trade union membership among male employees: $\chi^2(2, N = 469) = 15.760, p < 0.001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.183$, but not among female employees: $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 0.051, p > 0.05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.013$.

The membership of employees in trade unions increases significantly with their educational level $\chi^2(2, N = 781) = 21.767, p < 0.001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.167$. Thus, whereas only 26.1% of employees with no formal/primary/secondary level of education declare to be trade union members, the figure rises to 45.1% among employees with a tertiary level of education. An analysis of the results by gender indicates that the level of education is strongly related to members among female employees $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 26.410, p < 0.001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.291$, but not among male employees: $\chi^2(2, N = 469) = 2.766, p > 0.05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.077$.

The respondents’ occupation is significantly related to trade union membership: $\chi^2(4, N = 781) = 10.904, p < 0.05$, Cramer’s $V = 0.028$ (see Table 3). Senior officials, professionals and technicians are the most likely

Table 1: Trade union membership status of employees by gender.

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)	N	P	Cramer’s V
I was never a member	48.0	47.4	47.8	781	0.393	0.022
I was a member in the past	19.0	17.6	18.4			
I am a member	33.0	34.9	33.8			

$N =$ Number of participants; $P =$ Pearson Chi-Square

Table 2: Trade union membership by age, education and gender

			Yes (%)	No (%)	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
Age bracket of employees	Male	15-24	12.7	87.3	469	15.760***	0.183
		25-44	33.6	66.4			
		45-64	40.7	59.3			
	Female	15-24	35.7	64.3	312	0.051	0.013
		25-44	35.1	64.9			
		45-64	33.8	66.2			
	Total	15-24	23.5	76.5	781	7.864*	0.100
		25-44	34.2	65.8			
		45-64	38.6	61.4			
Level of education of employees	Male	None/Primary/Secondary	29.7	70.3	469	2.766	0.077
		Post-secondary	34.4	65.6			
		Tertiary	38.7	61.3			
	Female	None/Primary/Secondary	19.0	81.0	312	26.410***	0.291
		Post-secondary	36.9	63.1			
		Tertiary	51.4	48.6			
	Total	None/Primary/Secondary	26.1	73.9	781	21.767***	0.167
		Post-secondary	35.3	64.7			
		Tertiary	45.1	54.9			

N = Number of participants; *P* = Pearson Chi-Square; *** = < 0.001; * = < 0.05

occupational categories to be unionised, while clerical workers are the least likely. However, the difference is not particularly high, and becomes statistically insignificant when one examines trade union membership by occupation and gender.

Table 3 indicates that employees on indefinite contracts are significantly more likely to be trade union members than those on definite contracts (35.8% and 24.4% respectively): $\chi^2(1, N = 781) = 6.388, p < 0.05$, Cramer's *V* = 0.090. When examining type of contract and trade union membership by gender, it become apparent that, while there are no strong differences among males: $\chi^2(1, N = 469) = 0.812, p > 0.05$, Cramer's *V* = 0.042, females are significantly more likely to be trade union members if they work on indefinite rather than definite contracts: $\chi^2(1, N = 312) = 7.711, p < 0.01$, Cramer's *V* = 0.157.

Employees on full-time contracts are also significantly more likely to be trade union members than those on part-time contracts (38.0% and 9.5% respectively): $\chi^2(1, N = 781) = 36.010, p < 0.001$, Cramer's *V* = 0.215. This result holds among both male and female employees (see Table 3).

As can be seen in Table 4, respondents employed in the public sector are significantly more likely to be trade union members than those employed in the private sector (55% and 22% respectively): $\chi^2(1, N = 781) = 87.647, p < 0.001$, Cramer's *V* = 0.335. The difference is significant among both male and female employees.

As it may be expected, the larger the number of employees at the company/organisation that the respondents work in, the more likely it is that they are trade

union members: $\chi^2(1, N = 475) = 37.334, p < 0.001$, Cramer's *V* = 0.280. Indeed, while only 8.9% of employees in companies with less than 50 employees are members of trade unions, the figure grows to 32.6% among respondents who work in organisations employing 50 or more employees. The difference is similarly significant among both male and female employees.

Trade union membership is also significantly related to type of economic activity: $\chi^2(7, N = 779) = 91.217, p < 0.001$, Cramer's *V* = 0.357. The most densely unionised economic activities are education (57.7% of the respondents in this sector claim to be unionised), and human health and social work activities (54.3%) (see Table 5).

6 Discussion

This section first discusses the general trade union membership figures in Malta and subsequently focuses on the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and trade union membership.

6.1 General Membership Figures

While it was known that official trade union membership numbers in Malta might be inflated (e.g. Baldacchino, 2007, May 20), the result emerging from this survey is remarkable and thought provoking. Just over a third of employees in Malta stated to be trade union members, a figure which is drastically lower than the typically quoted range of trade union membership levels in Malta, which hovers around the 53-59% as mentioned in the literature review. The alternative methodology used in this study still indicates that Malta's trade union

Table 3: Trade union membership by occupation, type of contract and gender.

			Yes (%)	No (%)	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
Occupation	Male	Senior officials, professionals, technicians	38.5	61.5	469	7.805	0.099
		Clerical workers	27.9	72.1			
		Service workers	22.2	77.8			
		Skilled & craft workers	37.0	63.0			
		Operators, assemblers & elementary occupations	29.8	70.2			
	Female	Senior officials, professionals, technicians	42.3	57.7	312	7.652	0.105
		Clerical workers	27.3	72.7			
		Service workers	35.5	64.5			
		Skilled & craft workers ^a	16.7	83.3			
		Operators, assemblers & elementary occupations ^a	23.5	76.5			
Total	Senior officials, professionals, technicians	40.1	59.9	781	10.904*	0.028	
	Clerical workers	27.5	72.5				
	Service workers	29.1	70.9				
	Skilled & craft workers	35.4	64.6				
	Operators, assemblers & elementary occupations	28.1	71.9				
Definite/Indefinite contract	Male	Definite contract	28.1	71.9	469	0.812	0.042
		Indefinite contract	33.8	66.2			
	Female	Definite contract	21.1	78.9	312	7.711**	0.157
		Indefinite contract	39.0	61.0			
	Total	Definite contract	24.4	75.6	781	6.388*	0.090
Full-time/Part-time contract	Male	Full-time contract	34.9	65.1	469	9.723**	0.144
		Part-time contract	8.8	91.2			
	Female	Full-time contract	43.9	56.1	213	31.026***	0.315
		Part-time contract	9.8	90.2			
	Total	Full-time contract	38.0	62.0	781	36.010***	0.215
		Part-time contract	9.5	90.5			

N = Number of participants; *P* = Pearson Chi-Square; *** = < .001; ** = < .01; * = < .05

^a Treat with caution due to small sample size

density is higher than the EU average of about 23% (European Trade Union Institute, 2014), but is closer to the Anglophone and Southern European groups of countries rather than the Nordic one. One should note that the methodology used in this study is prone to bias deriving from the fact that it relies on respondents' declarations rather than real facts. Besides, unlike official statistics, this survey does not capture the situation in which employees might be members of more than one

union. However, considering the limitations relating to the traditional way of measuring Malta's trade union density (discussed earlier) and the country's historic-political and socio-cultural similarities to the British and Southern groups, the current figure offers a potentially more credible alternative representation of the local situation. The findings of this research are also in line with Baldacchino and Gatt (2009) who traced the proportional decline (in relation to the growth of the sector) of

Table 4: Trade union membership by sector, organisational size and gender.

			Yes (%)	No (%)	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>				
Sector	Male	Public sector	51.2	48.8	469	37.630***	0.283				
		Private sector	23.3	76.7							
	Female	Public sector	60.3	39.7	312			52.446***	0.410		
		Private sector	19.9	80.1							
	Total	Public sector	55.0	45.0	781					87.647***	0.335
		Private sector	22.0	78.0							
Organisation size (private sector only)	Male	Less than 50 emp.	8.3	91.7	297	31.293***	0.325				
		50 or more emp.	36.0	64.0							
	Female	Less than 50 emp.	10.1	89.9	178			7.750**	0.209		
		50 or more emp.	27.5	72.5							
	Total	Less than 50 emp.	8.9	91.1	475					37.334***	0.280
		50 or more emp.	32.6	67.4							

N = Number of participants; *P* = Pearson Chi-Square; *** = < 0.001; ** = < 0.01

Table 5: Trade union membership by economic activity.

	Yes (%)	No (%)	<i>N</i>	<i>P</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
Manufacturing	31.8	68.2	779	91.217***	0.357
Education	57.7	42.3			
Public administration	30.5	69.5			
Health & social work activities	54.3	45.7			
Wholesale, retail, repair of vehicles, accommodation, food service	10.1	89.9			
Information, communication, transportation, storage	34.7	65.3			
Professional, scientific, technical, administrative & support service	7.3	92.7			
Other economic activities	44.6	55.4			

N = Number of participants; *P* = Pearson Chi-Square; *** = < 0.001

trade unions in private sector companies between 1995 and 2008.

The retention of trade union members is another important aspect of unionisation which deserves greater scrutiny in Malta. Trade unions should not only aim to attract new members but also to retain them. This study indicates that nearly a fifth (18.4%) of all employees in Malta aged between 15 and 64 ceased to be trade union members at some point. While the reasons for this go beyond the scope of the current study, it appears that a substantial number of employees who were previously unionised, at some point in their careers felt that their membership was no longer worthwhile.

The above findings do not diminish the significant social contributions of trade unions in Malta, ranging from the macro policy-related ones to the micro ones at workplace level. A not-so-high trade union membership does not necessarily equate to low social impact. As demon-

strated by a case study in France, a trade union movement may exert a strong influence on government policy (da Conceição-Heldt, 2008) even with much lower union density than that of Malta.

6.2 Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Membership

While European and international literature demonstrates the hegemonic masculinity of the trade union movement (e.g. Ledwith, 2012; Rea, 2005), a phenomenon also reflected in the male dominance of Maltese unions, gender was not found to be a significant predictor of trade union membership in Malta. Using Schnabel and Wagner's 2007 reasoning, the similar likelihood of both genders joining trade unions might indicate the women's growing attachment to the labour force, which increases their benefit of unionisation. Women in Malta are investing more in their career, as demonstrated by their growing employment rate. Con-

sidering the many gender-related obstacles at work (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2012), it stands to reason that working women are seeking unionisation as much as men. This finding should not be confused with the fact that, in line with the general situation across the European Union (Carley, 2009), women represent a minority in the overall number of unionised employees in Malta; 41.3% of all trade union members are females according to the current survey, when compared to a slightly lower figure of 35% found in the official statistics. This finding reflects the gender ratio of employees in Malta. If through the continued support of government policy and the increasing qualifications of women, female employment continues to grow at a faster rate than that of males, the gap in absolute membership numbers is expected to close down significantly in the coming years.

The trade union movement in Malta, as in other European countries (Jensen, 2006), has traditionally developed and flourished among the skilled manual working-class population. However, this research has shown a diverging reality in which employees with post-secondary or tertiary qualifications are currently more likely to be unionised than those who hold lower qualifications. This finding appears to contradict the general trend witnessed in Europe in which the higher qualified workers care less about collective identities and interests and adopt more individualised employment relations (Eurofound, 2010). Indeed, the higher qualified workers in Malta might better appreciate the workplace role of trade unions than lower qualified ones. A deeper examination of this finding reveals that the positive relationship between qualifications and trade union membership is much stronger (and only statistically significant) among female workers. The lower qualified women are particularly detached from trade unions, while the highly qualified ones are more unionised than their male counterparts. This finding might be explained, at least in part, by the fact that a substantial percentage of highly qualified women work in education and healthcare, the two most highly unionised sectors in Malta. Previous research indicated that a union presence at the place of work significantly improves attitudes towards trade unions (Turner & D'Art, 2012). This finding linking higher educational qualifications to trade union membership is also reflected in a slightly increased unionisation rate of senior officials, professionals and technicians when compared to other occupations. However, the relation is not very strong and becomes statistically insignificant when one examines genders separately. Perhaps such a relation is weaker than expected given that a substantial number of workers are in occupations that do not reflect their qualifications. For instance, many tertiary educated persons in Malta hold clerical

occupations.

In line with foreign research (e.g. Eurofound, 2010), age positively predicts union membership, even in Malta. The finding might be explained through young workers' attitudes towards unionisation which, according to Turner and D'Art (2012), ranges from indifferent to hostile. When compared to their older peers, younger employees may be less willing, or aware of the possibility of defending their rights through unions. Research carried out among students in Australia showed that they tend not to understand the union's role in overcoming the power imbalance between employer and employee through solidarity or collective strength (Bulbeck, 2008). Young workers might retain such attitudes at least for the first years of their employment. Due to its cross-sectional nature, the current study does not indicate whether the younger cohorts will reach the same unionisation levels as the older cohorts over a number of years. However, considering the general lowering of trade union densities and the fact that many young persons are finding employment in the less unionised services sector, this appears to be unlikely, unless trade unions make a major effort to reverse the trend.

Foreign research indicates that workers in atypical work relationships are difficult to unionise (Schnabel, 2013; Eurofound, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that part-time employees in Malta are much less likely to be unionised than full-time employees. Different tentative explanations from the perspectives of unions and employees can shed light on the part-timers' distance from trade unions. On the one hand, in line with their traditional roots, trade unions appear to be still geared towards the protection of employees in typical full-time jobs. On the other hand, part-timers might view trade union membership less favourably as they might be more likely to perceive their job as a transient income-generating activity rather than a 'career' which requires long-term protection. They may be more prone to fear reprisals by employers if they join unions. Besides, the burden of membership costs might be higher for part-timers.

As expected, employees on definite contracts are less unionised than those on indefinite contracts. However, such difference is only statistically significant among women, and is not as strong as the difference in unionisation between full-time and part-time employees. Part-time work, which characterises about 15.1% of all employees in Malta, is more diffused and possibly more normalised, than fixed-term contracts that can be found among 7.5% of all employees (National Statistics Office of Malta, 2014). Thus, adopting Visser's 2006 logic, one would have expected a greater unionisation rate of part-timers than those on definite contract. However, this is not so. Such unexpected finding might be partially ex-

plained by the fact that part-timers spend less time at the place of work than persons on a fixed-term contract (most of whom are full-time employees) and so have less time to interact with union representatives. Besides, for many persons in Malta, a fixed-term contract might be the first step towards indefinite employment with the same employer – this expectation might motivate many employees on definite contracts to join a union. On the other hand, aspects such as fear of reprisals by employers might deter the unionisation of some individuals on definite contracts.

In line with other countries across the EU (Eurofound, 2010), employees in the private sector are significantly less likely to be unionised when compared to their peers in the public sector. Indeed, the education and health and social work activities sectors, which predominantly lie in the public sector, are the most unionised. The relatively lower membership levels in the private sector, especially in the services industry, may be attributed to unfavourable conditions such as low union presence (including lack of shop stewards), negative employers' attitudes against unions, and the dynamics prevailing in small family-owned organisations. To-date, trade unions in Malta have not established a strong presence in emerging services sectors such as financial services, the online gaming industry, and call centres.

7 Conclusion

The discrepancy in trade union density figures deriving from this survey and official administrative data (namely a third versus more than a half of employees being unionised), indicates that research based on official data might be offering a substantially inflated picture of unionisation in Malta. The difference is too large to be solely attributable to possible errors in the survey results, and it is more likely that the official density figures traditionally used in Malta are misleading. This is problematic on a number of levels. At a rather academic level, it might mean that the way Malta is classified for statistical purposes is not correct, and that local, European or international statistics that include Malta are inaccurate. From an administrative point of view, the government is expected to ensure that unions provide a true and fair view of not only their finances but also their membership. EIRA (Government of Malta, 2002) provides the government with the authority to inspect such records. Any lack of or insufficient action on this matter goes against the spirit of the law. On the other hand, if one takes the trade unions' perspective, one could be tempted to sympathise with those unions who might in one way or another inflate their membership figures for the greater good of their cause, since unions traditionally often get their strength in numbers. However, wouldn't it also be in their long term interest

to provide more realistic membership figures? After all, facing and accepting what might be a gloomier reality than what appears on paper, might provide the motivation and ingenuity required for unions to reorganise themselves and improve their operations in order to attract and retain more members.

The examination of membership according to socio-demographic variables provides some general directions that should be taken into consideration in any eventual trade union renewal. The picture emerging from the current findings is largely in line with EU trends, while also reflecting Malta's distinctive characteristics. As expected, several socio-demographic characteristics – such as older age, full-time and indefinite contracts, and employment in the public sector – are positively related to trade union membership. On the other hand, some results diverge from mainstream literature, in particular the similar membership levels of male and female workers, and the higher unionisation of the more qualified persons, especially women.

The latter findings reflect the specific policy and socio-economic developments taking place in Malta since the country joined the EU in 2004. When Malta's statistics started to be compared to those of the EU, it became apparent that the country had particularly low levels of women in employment and tertiary educated workers. Government policy was soon directed to improve the situation and massive EU funds were funnelled towards various measures which brought about substantial improvements on both fronts over a period of less than 15 years. Many more persons, especially women, started acquiring tertiary level qualifications and joining the labour market. The female participation rate grew by twenty percentage points in two decades. Unions focusing on graduates experienced strong increases in members, especially women. Considering the substantial union membership density of women, it does not make much sense that men still occupy nearly all the top positions in unions in Malta. A greater female representation at the higher union levels would bring about new perspectives and potentially better assist the growing number of female trade union members, and ensure that women members are retained.

This study portrays a rather traditionally-oriented trade union movement in Malta, which appears not to be particularly effective in attracting and retaining younger workers, part-time workers, workers on definite contracts and those in the private sector, especially in smaller organisations. The traditional cadre of union members is set to continue declining in the coming years due to economic, organisational and demographic trends. Thus, unless unions in Malta reorganise themselves and refocus their strategies, trade union density and membership are likely to drop.

This study, the first of its kind in Malta, provides a noteworthy alternative to existing official union density figures, and offers a more detailed picture of trade union membership than was previously available. However, the cross-sectional nature of the study, taking a snapshot at one point in time, carries the limitations of being unable to establish causality and shed light on long term trends. Thus, it is suggested that future research on this topic adopts a longitudinal design, which would not only clarify trends but also enhance causal inference.

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