



**Voices of The Young
and Vulnerable in Malta:**
A Qualitative Study

By
Andrew Azzopardi

Commissioned By
Aġenzija Żgħażaġh

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Foreword

Under the National Youth Policy, *Towards 2020 - A shared vision for the future of young people*, which is being implemented over the period 2015-2020, the Government is committed to ensuring that youth policy is evidence-based and outcome-focused. Accordingly, priority is being given to research as it provides all those working with and for young people with an invaluable tool and source of relevant and up-to-date information. The research programme for the period 2015-20 targets the main areas that concern young people today such as education (including the digital divide and skills gaps), employment, environment, rights and responsibilities, health and well-being, and justice.

It is in this context that the qualitative study conducted by Prof. Andrew Azzopardi, Dean of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing and Head, Department of Youth and Community Studies of the University of Malta is being published. Qualitative studies have an invaluable role to play as they both complement and inform other research methods and provide young people with the opportunity of expressing and sharing their lived experiences with others.

Miriam Teuma
Chief Executive
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Introduction

Young people remain a highly contested group within our society (Dimitrova, 2017). The positioning of this population within the community is complex and multifarious (Zizek, 2009). Considering that youth has emanated from a social construction (Roche, Tucker, Thomson and Flynn, 2006) there has always been the risk of instrumentalising young people merely as consumers. This exemplifies commodification best illustrated in the notions around Cohen's 'moral panic' (1972). In this study, I argue around the ambivalent positioning of a segment of the youth population considered as vulnerable because of the social productions that relegate them, best illustrated in the narratives of young people. What features strongly in this work is that young people are not a homogenous group and youth should be contemplated as 'a time of opportunity, or flux and transformation' (Furlong, 2013: 25). I maintain in this research that it is the current social context enmeshed with their experiences that impacts their identity and not their distinctiveness. This work also demonstrates that youth exclusion happens on multiple levels, in that age, race, gender, class and lifestyle all affect youth life experiences within a given culture. This intersectionality affects how young persons' experience exclusion from their community whereby context plays a big role in this discourse on segregation.

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THE STUDY

Vulnerable young people want solutions to their problems (Azzopardi, 2013). They recognise the need for personal effort and commitment, but also know that their problems cannot be overcome without the support of others. Professional and support services and the voluntary sector need to be more proactive and engaged with vulnerable young people, who often need to be “sought out” and more actively supported and encouraged (Maynard and Stuart, 2017). Cross-sectoral community supports, services and referrals for vulnerable young people and their families are also of fundamental importance. We need to recall that welfare emerged from the need to negotiate and reinvigorate the social responsibility for collective needs. Benevolence, goodwill and compassion towards all those who are at the fringe of society is not good enough. Social and community operators have developed myriad initiatives to meet the imperative to help the casualties of the economic system but is surely missing the wood for the trees. There are other elements, for example, the need to create a dialectic and a conversation with young people to bring about the conceptual changes. Social inclusion expands our moral currency. It is another path that leads towards full citizenship and societal engagement (Hardgrove, A., Pells, K., Boyden, J. and Dornan, P., 2014).

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to highlight the main challenges that vulnerable young people, between 17 and 28 years of age, have to face in the course of family and community life as well as in accessing welfare and other state and voluntary support systems.

The study aims to inform the youth work profession and those implementing the National Youth Policy on how we can best support vulnerable young people by addressing their particular needs and concerns. Young people can be vulnerable in different ways, not only economically, socially and culturally but also in terms of gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation and health and personal wellbeing.

Awareness raising, listening to and supporting the voice of young people is one of the main strategic aims of *Towards 2020*, the National Youth Policy, which provides for a wide range of initiatives and opportunities to enhance young people’s social and political awareness and enables their voice to be heard on issues that impact on their lives. It is only through listening to young people’s actual experiences that we can provide responses that are humane, informed and effective.

Young people have a crucial role to play in informing, developing and implementing youth policy at both national and European level. In particular, young people’s actual experiences in accessing and using relevant welfare and support services provided by the State and the voluntary sector need to be considered and acted upon if these services are to be both relevant and effective.

The study attempts to highlight and articulate the often varied and complex vulnerabilities of young people and analyse the challenges that they face on either a temporary or more long-term basis.

In all, 23 young people, between 17 and 28 years of age, participated in the study and

all provided personal narratives. The stories of these young people reflect different aspects of human experiences. Access to these young participants was acquired through a gate-keeping agency that was contacted prior to communication with potential participants in the study. The relevant gate-keeping agencies and target groups were as follows:

- Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Drachma
- Caritas
- Youth Offenders Unit Rehabilitation Services
- Integra Foundation
- Dar Kenn għal Saħħtek
- Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ

Each participant was interviewed and their narrative recorded by the researcher. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Prior to the interview a Consent Form was completed by each participant after obtaining the approval of the relevant gate-keeping agency.

The following are the (fictitious) names of the young participants in the study.

- Michelle, 20-years old
- Oliver, 19 years old
- Louise, 22 years old
- Colin, 18 years old
- Cindy, 25 years old
- Julianne, 24 year -old
- William, 17 years old
- John, 19 years old
- Daisy, 23 years old
- Simone, 24 years old
- Michael, 22 years old
- Charlotte, 25 years old
- Fayette, 20 years old
- Simon, 20 years old
- Faud, 23 years old
- Vincienne, 24 years old
- Sandro, 18 years old
- Mark, 24 years old
- Hector, 23 years old
- Silvio, 20 years old
- Ferdinand, 28 years old
- Nelly, 24 years old
- Olga, 22 years old

Following on the interviews, the narratives were reviewed and analysed by the researcher and common themes and relevant issues identified.

EMERGING ISSUES

The main and most common themes/issues emerging from the study and analysis of the narratives were as follows:

Vulnerability

While the nature of vulnerabilities can vary; disability, sexual orientation, addictions, social and economic exclusion to name a few; the effects of vulnerabilities are the same; loneliness, anxiety, distress, pain, fear and, sometimes, despair. The negative effects of vulnerabilities are often compounded and made worse by the reactions and behaviours of others; indifference, antipathy, bullying, and not knowing how to respond or help. In spite of this, vulnerable young people often display a strong desire to deal with the consequences of their vulnerabilities and rebuild their lives.

- I don't have too many contacts in my life. One of the few persons who helps me on a day-to-day basis is my sister. I don't like to go out on my own and prefer going out with my mum. I think it is because I don't believe in myself. I am on Facebook all the time because it is the only place where I find some solace and friendship. I did get some help from adults. A youth worker is helping me to find a job, the parish priest encourages me to go to a youth center but the truth is that I am tired of trying and I still feel that no one is doing the right thing to help me, I feel alone and isolated. *Mark*
- My problems started surfacing when I was 11 years old. Nothing was more important than my weight at the time. This spilled over during my time at secondary school and I started binge eating and no one was realising what I was getting into. I used to feel bad with myself but still eat non-stop. At a certain point I would spend till 6am watching people eat on TV especially when I was at the worse time of my anorexia. I had got to 51 kilos, I was losing my hair and I was still unhappy with my size feeling I was fat and ugly. I had suicidal thoughts because of my condition. I wanted to die, I wanted to end it all then and there. In fact, I got so obsessed with my situation that I would look for weights everywhere I go. I would even weigh the milk I put in my tea. I just felt I couldn't control my weight. It all boiled down to lack of self-esteem. At times I would sleep for a whole day, almost two, to forget how hungry I was or I would chew gum continuously to remove my drive for food. *Simone*
- We used to take videos as we were having sex. When I felt that this relationship had to stop she sent the video images to the police and they arrested me because I was having a relationship with a minor as I was over 18 years old. I didn't know her age and the Courts did not believe me. I do know that this is a terrible moment for me and this follows another situation I found myself in when I had to defend my sister from her ex-husband some years before because she was going to get raped. I drew a knife and almost cut him up. In fact I stabbed him with a kitchen knife to defend her. At that time the police and the Courts did not find me guilty of any wrong doing because I was just defending my sister from domestic violence. With the issue of sexual relationship with a minor the decision was a different one – the courts decided to check my records and they considered me as dangerous and having a problem managing my anger. In prison I've learnt to appreciate and enjoy my own company. I try to make the best use of my time whilst I am here but I must say that there are no services. However, my biggest pain is that at times I feel so isolated and alone, forgotten by everyone. *Silvio*
- If I had to pin-point an experience that had a major effect on me was when my parents were getting separated. I saw too much fighting and I felt a great deal of instability. When my parents tried to sort things out the situation got even worse. My mother tried to be as present as possible but my father was completely disinterested in me. Even though I was young and had nothing to do with the



clashes at home, my father would offend me and call me names. My only link to sanity in the family was my grandfather whom I loved immensely - he died not too long ago. I used to blame myself for the problems between my parents but soon realised that this wasn't the case. This was the biggest loss for me which I couldn't manage to cope with. I felt that all had finished. This situation made me very anxious and made me worry all the time. At 7 years old I was already thinking and wishing I would die. I had so much fear building up in me. This situation eventually shifted into Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). I became obsessed with cleanliness but on the other hand this created so much stress that there were moments where I would not wash for weeks on end. The need to have rituals so that I feel secure was crucial. There were moments when I thought that I was so different from other people that I was sent from outer space. My experience of bullying was most often shown by being left alone with hardly any friends at all. OCD made me suffer a lot. Even though 179 was very supportive there wasn't too much continuation of support. *Nelly*

- This made it even more difficult for me to accept my homosexuality and I kept denying it and there were moments I even tried to force myself into a heterosexual relationship. I remember being called '*pufta*' all the time. To add to this, I had these big guilt feelings because of my inability to relate my sexuality with my beliefs and faith thinking it was sinful to be gay. There were moments I even considered becoming a priest to suppress my sexuality and create a safe comfort zone where I could hide my attraction to men. I was getting aroused when I see men and I felt so bad that people would realise what was happening. I felt lonely, depressed and ashamed in this transition phase. Bullying at a certain point in my adolescence was ripe and it was creating in me a sense of social anxiety. I would be called names and would be made to feel abnormal. The worse thing about all of my story was that I was never made to feel normal and I was obsessed with what people would think and say about me. My father could never understand that I was gay not out of choice but because it was who I was. I only told him I was gay a year or so ago. It was unfortunate that my parents were absent from this experience and choose to deny it completely. My mother was a bit more forthcoming. *Michael*
- I always felt that there was something not right with me. At a certain point I was 35 kilos and I just didn't like myself and feeling continually exhausted. There were moments I was so desperate I wanted to die but you just cannot stop fighting. I didn't believe them when they used to give me compliments, I would take laxatives to make sure nothing stays in me - at times I even took up to 60 laxatives a day. I believe that treatment requires a team approach. When I used to visit the mental health hospital prior to the setting up of Dar Kenn għal Saħħtek the situation was incomparable - every time I went to hospital I only felt worse. When I attended the mental health hospital the people in the hospital did not even know why I was there. I reiterate the importance of Dar Kenn għal Saħħtek, it is the best thing that has happened to me since I developed anorexia. I'm still not out of the woods. I have lived a lie, probably even I believed those lies but there is a silver lining as slowly I'm learning to love myself and allowing people to love me. *Daisy*
- The only support I found was from my parents. The school seemed to ignore my needs and acted as if everything was fine. It was only through Youth.Inc that I found a true friend whom I could speak with and share my dreams. I realised that the staff at Youth.Inc were completely different, they are nice and interested in me. They ask about my life and try to help. I want to learn computing and one day I would like to form a cooperative. This changed my life in a way. Finally I know

there is someone who respects me but also appreciates that I can be of support when called for. I am starting to dream new things for myself. Now I hope to go into the gaming industry. I am working hard so that all the school I lost and all the opportunities that I didn't take up I will make up for it. Before life seemed very dull and sad, now finally it is starting to look good. In fact, a highlight in my life was that I managed to save a horse that had a health problem and this gave me so much satisfaction and confidence in my abilities. *William*

Relationship with parents, siblings and friends

Parents, sibling and friends, and sometimes the lack of them, play an important role in the lives of vulnerable young people. While sometimes a source of strength and love, vulnerable young people often lack the understanding and support of their parents. Parents with problems of their own have a negative and debilitating effect on vulnerable young people.

- When still very young I wasn't happy and comfortable with myself. I always felt that I was in the wrong body. But I believe that at the end of the day it's up to 'you' if you want to live a lie. It is a fact that I still suffer at times because of what people say and do but my focus is to get on with life. For example, the parents of my girlfriend (with whom I have been going out with for these last two years) do not accept me at all. I've also had a turbulent relationship with my dad - he was never supportive of what I was going through. On the other hand my relationship with mum is perfect, it is very good. I feel lucky in that respect because my mum never judged me but provided me with all the necessary support and was close to me. She allowed me to take my own decisions. I feel that my mother not only understood me but provided me with all the support required. I wasn't bullied too much because my friends remained loyal to me both when I was still a girl and even during and after the transition. *Simon*
- I don't have many regrets except that until my father was still alive and being so religious I was afraid to tell him that I am a lesbian because I never had the courage to share who I really was and I thought he would be embarrassed of me. I did not want to risk losing his love. Most probably if my parents were more open to this reality it wouldn't have made all of this so difficult. *Michelle*
- I do not have any friends who understand me. *Oliver*
- I wear a hijab which I feel is not only a symbol of the religion I pertain to but also an icon of the struggle for religious inclusion. The scarf is part of the 'ideal' I believe in, a cultural symbol. Having said that I admit that wearing the scarf is not necessarily a choice I made completely freely. I would have preferred to have been left to make a choice myself whether to wear the hijab or not. Nevertheless, once you start wearing it you remain with it. I experience discrimination, bullying and oppression continually in my life and even though I have generally got used to it, I still can't understand how come people are so insensitive towards me. I feel exceptionally bad and sad when people discriminate against black people or any other minority. Even student colleagues at University tell me in my face that they hate Muslims! I've had people who spat at me and tell me to go back to my country, when my country is here! This hatred that is thrown at me happens all the time even on Facebook and as I walk down the street but I still believe that my life is a political statement and I need to pursue this struggle. People speak bad about me right in my face not realising that I am Maltese and I can understand every single word they say. My parents are very much aware of what I have to go through. *Louise*

- I am not very intelligent. I have been treated very badly by my mother. My father ignores me completely and he is not interested in me. My mother used to throw me out of the house when she had her boyfriend at home. There were times I would be made to sleep out in the public garden and left without any food and nowhere to wash. My mother used to take all my money, leave me hungry and she would give it all to her boyfriend. *Colin*
- When I went to Junior College I enjoyed it there. However, at a later stage I started developing depression and got suicidal. Something that happened that has marked my life was when I was going to be raped after I got to know someone on the internet and made a blind date. I get moments when I want to harm myself. I don't know if it has anything to do but my father was on medication as well. Since my father died my eldest brother has taken on the role of parent. One of the lowest moments in my life was when my father passed away. Luckily my brother is a doctor and he is able to guide me well. *Vincienne*
- I feel that in life what is important is to have people who try to understand me. *Sandro*

Relationship with teachers, professionals and social and voluntary services

While vulnerable young people recognise the need for professional support in their lives and the assistance of social and educational services, their actual experience, while sometimes positive, is in general more negative. A sense of frustration and a perceived lack of adequate response and support from professional and social/educational services is also apparent among vulnerable young people. The responsiveness of voluntary services tends to be seen in a more positive light. There is also a sense that professionals do not always recognise or appreciate the often complex nature and impact of their vulnerabilities as well as an apparent lack of confidence and trust in professionals.

- Whenever I needed the support of the police I never found it and now I do not trust them because they take our issues lightly. The solution is that people talk about their story but also focus more on political correct language. It is so difficult living in this situation where racism is all around us and happening to me all the time. Other minorities like disability and gay people are now much more accepted and given space in the community but with black people the road is still long and far. *Fayette*
- The only organisation that helped me in this situation was the Malta Gay Rights Movement. *Simon*
- There are times I just want to cry and kill myself, the pain is way too much and so unpredictable. The pills are expensive and the treatment to lessen the pain is expensive. I can hardly work or travel and I am left without any friends. Well really and truly I just have a couple of friends – hardly any. Apart from that we are not even recognized as a disability by the Government, which would give us some respite. The worse thing is that there are a lot of family doctors that are not aware of this condition and wouldn't know how to deal with it. I'm not really surprised my own family does not believe me when I explain the pain I get at times. What future do I have? *Cindy*
- I feel so ashamed being in prison but the truth is that I know I have an addictive personality and didn't get the necessary support at any stage of my life. The system has a lot to arrange because our system fails us repeatedly. I admit that I



was at fault for what I did and do not in any way try to excuse my behaviour and actions. However, since I was young the immense problems there were at home were for all to see and being so young if some of those issues were nipped in the bud I would have done well for myself. I knew that with the right type of support I wouldn't have ended up where I am now. Social welfare services left me on my own - I never got any support from them. When I needed them most they turned their eyes away from me. I also attribute my problems with what I had to face as consequence of my character. I have always been a follower and I don't know how to be a leader. I've allowed people to use me and to abuse me. Drugs took it all away from me. I had to sell myself for sex to support my habit. I feel that I was not taught how to love and respect myself. *Julianne*

- In terms of services I was left completely on my own and no services supported me in any effective way. *Simon*
- I didn't even have a proper lawyer. My family doesn't know where I am, they think I work in Malta. I am afraid to tell them because they don't have money to come to Malta and they will worry more. At times I want to die. I speak with the guards here, they are very nice people. They make us participate in what is happening in the prison. We clean, we wash our clothes, we cook and we play football - but there are not enough helpers and social workers. At times I want to kill myself, I feel very sad but some of my friends here help me. *Faud*
- I am infinitely grateful for the work done by the members of staff at Dar Kenn għal Saħħtek who were absolutely fantastic. *Daisy*
- I started getting depressed and if it wasn't for this Religious Order who gave me a roof I would be desperate, I would kill myself. *Hector*

Relationship with the wider Community

Vulnerable young people, like all young people, feel the need for a sense of belonging and connection with those around them. Being a member of a community is a source of identity, stability and support but one that needs to be reciprocal, inclusive and accepting. Vulnerable young people have a complex relationship with the communities in which they live. Their vulnerabilities can often determine how they react and behave at community level and they display a tendency to see communities only through the lens of their vulnerabilities.

- School made me self-conscious. At school the only person who supported me was the librarian who used to ask me to come and spend time at the library instead of staying in the yard. There was a time when I didn't have any friends at all. Maltese people started saying that I'm not Maltese, even though my mum is Maltese (my dad is Nigerian). I never felt African really and truly and I always spoke Maltese and felt Maltese. All these insults they threw at me made me grow even though till this day it has become increasingly difficult for me to understand and accept. To add to this when I got into an argument I was always referred to as a clandestine even though they knew I wasn't. *Fayette*
- I am sad! I am deeply disappointed with the politicians who did not do much to help me either. What I need is a simple job which is close to home and with not too many responsibilities. *Mark*
- It is all because I am a Libyan - it is always the same story, Maltese people hate us. *Faud*



- I was born and bred in Malta and I deserve to be respected. *Louise*
- It is unfair that because I am blonde and look different all people think is that I came to Malta to be a prostitute. *Olga*

OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

Vulnerable young people want solutions to their problems. They recognise the need for personal effort and commitment, but also know that their problems cannot be overcome without the support of others, in particular, their parents, family and friends; professionals; social and education services; the voluntary sector and the wider community. The following are some practical proposals for discussion and debate when considering how vulnerable young people might be supported.

While vulnerable young people need effective and tailored supports and services that address their specific needs; disability, sexual orientation, addiction, low educational achievement, ethnic/religious minority, the underlying effects of vulnerability, loneliness, anxiety, distress, pain, fear and, sometimes, despair, also need to be addressed.

Vulnerable young people need the support of their parents, families and friends. But, too often, parents and families also need support. Supporting vulnerable young people also means supporting their parents and families.

Vulnerable young people also need the support of professionals, social and education services as well as the voluntary sector. Having such professional and support services “available” however is not enough. Professional and support services and the voluntary sector need to be more proactive and engaged with vulnerable young people, who often need to be “sought out” and more actively supported and encouraged.

Cross-sectoral community supports, services and referrals for vulnerable young people and their families are also of fundamental importance.

CONCLUSION

Youth participation (Mizen, 2004) is a lynchpin in the whole debate on social cohesion and civil society (Roberts, 2009). This research highlights very clearly the fact that young people expect to be part of their community rather than wait submissively for an opportunity to come their way to be able to influence the matters that concern them. Being open to young people’s active participation is not enough – what is required, as it emerges in this research is that we have adequate social structures.

“It is true that ‘society’ was always an imagined entity, never given to experience in its totality; not so long ago, however, its image was one of a ‘caring-and-sharing’ community. Through welfare provisions seen as the birth-right of the citizen rather than a charitable hand-out for the less-capable, invalid or indolent, that image radiated a comforting trust in a collective insurance against individual misfortune. Society was imagined after the pattern of a powerful father, stern and sometimes unforgiving, but a father nevertheless, someone to whom one could confidently turn for helping case of trouble... No wonder either that the ‘good society’ is a notion most of us would not bother thinking about, and that many would think such thinking to be a waste of time.” (Bauman, 2001)



Michelle, 20 years old

It was quite late in my adolescence that I started realising I was in fact a lesbian, an issue I couldn't come to terms with at first. I still tried to wipe these thoughts out of my mind and in fact spent a lot of energy going out with boys initially and only then did I realise that I was feeling terribly uncomfortable trying to be someone I wasn't. Adding to all of this, my friends found it difficult to accept me at first especially when I was still at secondary school. At school teachers must have realised I was a lesbian but no support was forthcoming. I would be bullied physically and emotionally by my friends and many at times left alone and no one protected me. My situation was further compounded and made difficult, because I had to focus on many issues that were affecting my family at the time. Do you imagine how I felt, when all of this was happening in my life and in the meantime my mum was dying with cancer and my dad had his share of health problems? Eventually both of them passed away. At that point even though very young I had to assume the responsibility of being a mum and a dad in more ways than one. I had to take care of the home, the shopping, the house upkeep and also care for my siblings. In a way this situation did not allow any space for me to address my personal issues. I wanted to focus on my family first and it is only now that I am starting to take care of myself. The only NGO that helped me in this situation was the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM). They were the only NGO that really helped me especially at the phase of 'coming out'. No other NGO or social service were interested in giving me a helping hand. If it wasn't for MGRM I wouldn't have managed to cope with all of this. I admit that keeping my sexuality under wraps placed immense pain and pressure on me and made it difficult for me to address the issues I needed to look into. It is so difficult to 'come out' and be accepted, especially in certain regions of Malta. For example, in our neighbourhood, people are just interested in gossiping. Everyone is curious about each other's business and is ready to judge. Now-a-days I don't have many regrets except that until my father was still alive and being so religious I was afraid to tell him because I never had the courage to share who I really was and I thought he would be embarrassed of me if the rest of the neighbourhood knew about this. I did not want to risk losing his love. Most probably if my parents were more open to this reality it wouldn't have made all of this so difficult.

Oliver, 19 years old

I am 18 years old and considered as underachiever academically. I believe that my main problem was that I had problems accessing more than one language. Schools were not understanding, in the sense that they were unable to accept that I can only function with one language at a time. The teachers did not understand me and attributing my weird behaviour mostly to hyperactivity. I do not have any friends who understand me. At one point my father just threw it at me that I have a disorder – than he told me, it's ok 'no one is perfect'.

Louise, 22 years old

I am a Maltese Muslim girl. My father is Lebanese but my mother is Maltese. I have lived in Malta all my life and identify completely with the Maltese culture. I was born and bred in Malta and I deserve to be respected. I wear a *hijab* which I feel is not only a symbol of the religion I pertain to but also an icon of the struggle for religious inclusion. The scarf is part of the 'ideal I believe in', a cultural symbol. Having said that I admit that wearing the scarf is not necessarily a choice I made completely freely. I would have preferred to have been left to make a choice myself whether to wear the *hijab* or not. Nevertheless, once you start wearing it you remain with it. I experience discrimination, bullying and oppression continually in my life and even though I have generally got used to it, I still can't understand how come people are so insensitive towards me. I feel exceptionally bad and sad when people discriminate against black people or any other minority. Even student colleagues at University tell me in my face that they hate Muslims! I've had people who spat at me and tell me to go back to my country, when my country is here! This hatred that is thrown at me happens all the time even on Facebook and as I walk down the street but I still believe that my life is a political statement and I need to pursue this struggle. People speak bad about me right in my face not realising that I am Maltese and I can understand every single word they say. My parents are very much aware of what I have to go through. My mother, who was converted to Islam after marriage, worries a lot and my father tells me to keep a low profile, a suggestion I refuse to accept because I feel that there is nothing I should be shy of. Apart from that I'm not sure my mum had an informed and free choice to wear the scarf and become Muslim. My mum tells me not to talk about the issues, not to expose and sacrifice myself. My parents have told me that they gave Western 'friendly names' to all my siblings to try and cushion the impact. At times when I speak to my parents it does occur to me that probably if I had the opportunity I would not wear the Hijab because of the difficulties I had to face. In terms of solutions, I believe that 'language is a bridge' and that we need a concerted effort 'to create awareness and educate people'. Schools are not doing enough to educate.

Colin, 18-years old

I am not very intelligent. I have been treated very badly by my mother. My father ignores me completely – he is not interested in me. My mother used to throw me out of the house when she had her boyfriend at home. There were times I would be made to sleep out in the public garden and left without any food and nowhere to wash. My mother used to take all my money, leave me hungry and she would give it all to her boyfriend. I was never visited by the social workers and from the staff at *Dar tal-Providenza*. It was only thanks to a neighbour that I didn't end completely homeless and on my own. I've been abused by the people around me when they used to see me roam around on my own. What bothered me most was that I was rejected by my mother and the fact that she did not want me still hurts a lot. The second biggest pain was the nights I spent sleeping in the public garden.

Cindy, 25 years old

I am in constant pain. People think I am being self-centred or making a fuss. They just don't understand how terrible it is to feel helpless and without strength and in pain even when in bed. In a way the worse thing about all of this is that people do not see anything wrong in me and so expect me to carry on as if nothing is happening. At times even if I am standing for a couple of hours in a line or on a bus, the pain gets unbearable. There are times I just want to cry and kill myself, the pain is way too much and so unpredictable. The pills are expensive and the treatment to lessen the pain is expensive. I can hardly work or travel and I am left without any friends. Well really and truly I just have a couple of friends – hardly any. Apart from that, we suffering from Fibromyalgia, are not even recognized as a disability by the Government, which would give us some respite. The worse thing is that there are a lot of family doctors that are not aware of this condition and wouldn't know how to deal with it. I'm not really surprised my own family does not believe me when I explain the pain I get at times. What future do I have? Where are the professionals?

Julianne, 24 years old

I feel so ashamed being in prison but the truth is that I know I have an addictive personality and didn't get the necessary support at any stage of my life. The system has a lot to arrange because our system fails us repeatedly. I admit that I was at fault for what I did and do not in any way try to excuse my behaviour and actions. However, since I was young, the immense problems there were at home were for all to see and being so young if some of those issues were nipped in the bud I would have done well for myself. I knew that with the right type of support I wouldn't have ended up where I am now. The social welfare services left me on my own - I never got any support from them. When I needed them most they turned their eyes away from me. I also attribute my problems with what I had to face as consequence of my character. I have always been a follower and I don't know how to be a leader. I've allowed people to use me and to abuse me. Drugs took it all away from me. I had to sell myself for sex to support my habit. I feel that I was not taught how to love and respect myself. I also feel that the fact that my dad is gay made it immensely difficult for me to integrate serenely in society as I was judged by my neighbours and friends. Everyone used to judge me and point their fingers towards me – I felt self-conscious. I couldn't raise my eyes from the ground. I used to get so many death wishes, however now I am more hopeful even if I am in prison. I believe that in life everything happens for a reason and being in prison one could learn a lesson or two. I used to feel I am different but now even though I feel that my self-esteem is really low during this phase of rehabilitation programme, they might re-open the pain but they do help you to try and sort yourself out. Even if I know that I wasn't very lucky with the services I got, nowadays things are starting to improve and if you really want help you will get it. My life is really complicated but I promised myself not to lose hope and will keep trying to have a better life than I've had so far.



William, 17 years old

I am 17 years old. I feel so lonely. Day-in day-out it feels as if there is nothing in life for me. I wasn't bullied because my friends knew that I could fight back. However, I did not have friends either and this makes me terribly sad and depressed. I hardly found any support from school even though the teachers were aware that they tried to push me aside. A lot of people were silly with me. The only support I found was from my parents. The school seemed to ignore my needs and acted as if everything was fine. It was only through *Youth.Inc* that I found a true friend whom I could speak with and share my dreams. I realised that the staff at *Youth.Inc* were completely different, they are nice and interested in me. They ask about my life and try to help. I want to learn computing and one day I would like to form a cooperative. This changed my life in a way. Finally, I know there is someone who respects me but also appreciates that I can be of support when called for. I am starting to dream new things for myself. Now I hope to go into the gaming industry. I am working hard so that all the school I lost and all the opportunities that I didn't take up I will make up for it. Before life seemed very dull and sad, now finally it is starting to look good. In fact, a highlight in my life was that I managed to save a horse that had a health problem and this gave me so much satisfaction and confidence in my abilities.

John, 19 years old

I suffer from a mental health condition called bi-polar. I've had to struggle with this condition for so many years. At a certain stage in my adolescence I would drink and smoke and hang around with the wrong crowd which wasn't helping me at all. I think I was doing that because I couldn't take the pressure of feeling so bad at certain moments in my life and so high during others. These so called 'friends' were pushing me towards drug use. They used to tell me that taking drugs makes you deal better with your problems – and I used to believe them. Luckily I was strong enough to realise what this crowd was doing to me and I could get away before the problem got overwhelming. Schooling when still young was also a very negative experience for me. The teachers wouldn't even take me to the outings with the rest of the students. I would be bullied for most of the secondary school. The teachers didn't manage to stop this abuse even though my parents repeatedly tried to get the school to deal with this issue. I was bullied at the worst of times, that is when I was facing a speech impairment and was practically mute. This was the time when students taunted me most. There was a particular scholastic year I remember very well when I was practically depressed all throughout. At a certain point the psychologist and the psychiatrist did try to help me, with little success. Their fees were too expensive and my family couldn't afford this cost. Unfortunately, the biggest humiliation came from the parish priest who used to put a sheep on my head and make me go round with it during catechism classes to humiliate me. We spoke to the social workers on this issue but in all truth they never gave me practical solutions to resolve my problems.

Daisy, 23 years old

I believe that my first encounter with this problem was when I checked for my Body Mass Index (BMI) in front of the other children in my class. That was a really humiliating situation for me. I consider this as being the main reason that triggered my problems. However, that was not the only reason. Eventually the more time passed my eating disorder became more serious and difficult to cope with. I put the blame on the fact that my mum was very controlling, hardly affectionate and never had a good rapport with me or the rest of the family. I believe that my mother was very controlling even because when she was young she had an eating disorder herself and was never supported. I always felt that there was something not right with her. At a certain point I was 35 kilos and I just didn't like myself, feeling continually exhausted. There were moments I was so desperate I wanted to die but you just cannot stop fighting. I didn't believe them when they used to give me compliments, I would take laxatives to make sure nothing stays in me - at times I even took up to 60 laxatives a day. I believe that treatment requires a team approach. I am infinitely grateful for the work done by the members of staff at *Dar Kenn ghal Saħħtek* who were absolutely fantastic. When I used to visit the mental health hospital prior to the setting up of *Dar Kenn ghal Saħħtek* the situation was incomparable - every time I went to hospital I only felt worse. When I attended the mental health hospital the people in the hospital did not even know why I was there. I reiterate the importance of *Dar Kenn ghal Saħħtek*, it is the best thing that has happened to me since I developed anorexia. I'm still not out of the woods. I have lived a lie, probably even I believed those lies but there is a silver lining as slowly I'm learning to love myself and allowing people to love me.

Simone, 24 years old

My problems started surfacing when I was 11 years old. Nothing was more important than my weight at the time. This spilled over during my time at secondary school and I started binge eating and no one was realising what I was getting into. I used to feel bad with myself but still eat non-stop. At a certain point I would spend till 6am watching people eat on TV especially when I was at the worse time of my anorexia. I had got to 51 kilos, I was losing my hair and I was still unhappy with my size feeling I was fat and ugly. I had suicidal thoughts because of my condition. I wanted to die, I wanted to end it all then and there. In fact, I got so obsessed with my situation that I would look for weights everywhere I go. I would even weigh the milk I put in my tea. I just felt I couldn't control my weight. It all boiled down to lack of self-esteem. At times I would sleep for a whole day, almost two, to forget how hungry I was or I would chew gum continuously to remove my drive for food. My relationship with my mum was very turbulent. I used to shout at my mum all the time. My parents were helpless and it was my boyfriend who helped me most, much more than my parents did or could ever do. One of the solutions to avoid having people in this situation is by experiencing good model behaviour, that is seeing people eating in a balanced way is one of the solutions.

Michael, 22 years old

I always had a problem accepting myself knowing I wanted to be accepted by others. Initially when I started realising I am gay I was on the verge of a depression. This was the time I was at Sixth Form. I even had suicidal thoughts. At that point in my life the biggest wound and pain I had was that I did not have any friends. I felt lost at times, abandoned and with no one to comfort me. This made it even more difficult for me to accept my homosexuality and I kept denying it and there were moments I even tried to force myself into a heterosexual relationship. I remember being called 'pufta' all the time. To add to this, I had these big guilt feelings because of my inability to relate my sexuality with my beliefs and faith thinking it was sinful to be gay. There were moments I even considered becoming a priest to suppress my sexuality and create a safe comfort zone where I could hide my attraction to men. I was getting aroused when I see men and I felt so bad that people would realise what was happening. I felt lonely, depressed and ashamed in this transition phase. Bullying at a certain point in my adolescence was ripe and it was creating in me a sense of social anxiety. I would be called names and would be made to feel abnormal. The worse thing about all of my story was that I was never made to feel normal and I was obsessed with what people would think and say about me. My father could never understand that I was gay not out of choice but because it was who I was. I only told him I was gay a year or so ago. It was unfortunate that my parents were absent from this experience and choose to deny it completely. My mother was a bit more forthcoming. The moment when I felt suicidal there were no services to support me. All this blather that there are so many services doesn't make any sense to me, when I needed help I saw no one coming. I am particularly convinced that if teachers were more on the ball and were trained in how to support me in the first place I wouldn't have experienced so much pain and distress.

Charlotte, 25 years old

I was happy until I was young. I had friends at school and I used to forget I have a disability. I used to play and do all the things that the other students did. I use a wheelchair but at school there weren't any problems. Except for the doctors I never went to any professionals. My life started getting complicated when I was growing. Since I finished school my friends were slowly slowly disappearing. Nowadays I only communicate with people through Facebook, I don't have real friends, no job and no boyfriends. I am sad. This isn't a nice life. No social workers, psychologists or youth workers have ever taken notice of my needs - I cannot understand how they say there are a lot of professionals because no one ever comes here.



Fayette, 20 years old

I am 20 years old. When I was young I never felt any different from others especially when I still lived in the Netherlands where being black is not an issue at all. However, when I started growing up and there were so many people coming into Malta by boat I started experiencing discrimination and I fought and resisted discrimination in school as much as I could. School made me self-conscious. At school the only person who supported me was the librarian who used to ask me to come and spend time at the library instead of staying in the yard. There was a time when I didn't have any friends at all. Maltese people started saying that I'm not Maltese, even though my mum is Maltese (my dad is Ghanian). I never felt African really and truly and I always spoke Maltese and felt Maltese. All these insults they threw at me made me grow even though till this day it has become increasingly difficult for me to understand and accept. To add to this when I got into an argument I was always referred to as a clandestine even though they knew I wasn't. This hurt a lot. My friends were doing everything possible to ostracise me. Calling me black was starting to become a problem for me as I was growing up. It felt as if it was a defect. It took very little for people to insult me and call me black. This entire situation was further perpetuated by the lack of support from school. In the meantime, my school grades were degenerating very quickly. Being black is not bad but the language people use and the idioms like, '*mela jien iswed*' show that people with a black skin are interpreted as being essentially different and less than others. I know I'm going to face all of this throughout my life but that doesn't mean we should be victims of hate crime, a situation my family has to deal with all the time. People see us as a different type of family and that being black for the people out there means we are Muslim which puts added pressure on the family. The irony is that my father is a Christian pastor. Some time ago we even had a lecturer in the Faculty who addressed a friend of mine who wears the *hijab* telling her to remove the scarf because we are not in the Sahara Desert – and all the students burst out laughing, making me feel so angry and insulted myself, let alone her. This same lecturer a couple of days later asked for me by saying, 'where is the black girl, did she go to Libya?' The worse thing about this situation is that the Faculty did not take any action against this lecturer even though I reported him. People still treat me differently, not necessarily badly but differently. If services even existed, they do not seem to be working at all. Not even PSD at school served a purpose and teachers would tell me to learn how to absorb the negative attitude rather than fight it. I was the one who was expected to understand them. I cannot count the number of times I have been treated badly on the public transport at times even the same busses would keep driving if they saw me waiting. When it comes to the police it is no different. Whenever I needed the support of the police I never found it and now I do not trust them because they take our issues lightly. The solution is that people talk about their story but also focus more on their language. It is so difficult living in this situation where racism is all around us and happening to me all the time. Other minorities like disabled and gay people are now much more accepted and given space in the community but with black people the road is still long and far. However even though it is a very difficult situation to live like that I have learnt to pick my battles. I am studying to be a human rights lawyer to make sure that discrimination ends because I am worried that there are black people who do not have the social capital to fight for their own rights.

Simon 20 years old

I don't feel vulnerable because I was always able to take tough decisions in my life. At 5 years I already had to take care of my sister and cook for her. It is a fact that there were moments when I wanted to hide my past, to forget all I went through because of the pain that that created in me but now I feel relaxed and I accept myself. I remember having to bandage my breasts so that I would look like a boy. I obviously couldn't go swimming because I was so embarrassed to do so. I was so confused at the time. At 17 years of age I started having operations which caused a great deal of physical pain but I was always satisfied and happy that I took that decision. I started taking decisions on the operations I needed to do when I was still young. In fact, I had to do a hysterectomy, remove my breasts and am now preparing for the most difficult and complicated operation which is the change in the genitalia. When still very young I wasn't happy and comfortable with myself. I always felt that I was in the wrong body. But I believe that at the end of the day it's up to 'you' if you want to live a lie. It is a fact that I still suffer at times because of what people say and do but my focus is to get on with life. For example the parents of my girlfriend (with whom I have been going out with for these last two years) do not accept me at all. I've also had a turbulent relationship with my dad - he was never supportive of what I was going through. On the other hand, my relationship with mum is perfect, it is very good. I feel lucky in that respect because my mum never judged me but provided me with all the necessary support and was close to me. She allowed me to take my own decisions. I feel that my mother not only understood me but provided me with all the support required. I wasn't bullied too much because my friends remained loyal to me both when I was still a girl and even during and after the transition. In terms of services I was left completely on my own and no services supported me in any effective way. I only went to the psychiatrist because it is obligatory to do so as part of the transition process. Having said that the psychiatrist was extremely supportive and understanding. When I asked for some help from the school counsellor at secondary school he had no idea how to help me. Nowadays I live a normal life, 'I work, I study, I go out with friends'.

Faud, 23 years old

I don't know why I am in prison - I did nothing wrong. It is all because I am a Libyan - it is always the same story, Maltese people hate us. I have to stay in prison for three years because I stole - it is not true. I didn't even have a proper lawyer. My family doesn't know where I am, they think I work in Malta. I am afraid to tell them because they don't have money to come to Malta and they will worry more. At times I want to die. I speak with the guards here, they are very nice people. They make us participate in what is happening in the prison. We clean, we wash our clothes, we cook and we play football - but there are no helpers and social workers. At times I want to kill myself, I feel very sad but some of my friends here help me.

Vincienne, 24 years old

I am 24 years old and consider myself as a mental health survivor. When I used to go to school I enjoyed myself a lot. At a certain stage I developed a nervous tick and people would laugh at me including teachers and I didn't want to go to school anymore. Eventually I started collapsing every time I felt stressed - I started passing out. I did not have any friends my only friend was at secondary school. When I went to Junior College I enjoyed it there. However, at a later stage I started developing depression and got suicidal. There was a period in my life when I was constantly sad and depressed, spending all my time in my room. It was the moment when I realised it was time to be admitted to Mater Dei Hospital for treatment. Consequently, I attempted suicide because I didn't want to go to Mt Carmel Hospital and because I was feeling very sad and depressed. I was chronically unhappy. I would spend all my time on the computer, sleeping or listening to music. I was especially afraid of facing the night. Something that happened that has marked my life was when I was going to be raped after I got to know someone on the internet and made a blind date. I get moments when I want to harm myself. I don't know if it has anything to do but my father was on medication as well. Since my father died my eldest brother has taken on the role of parent. One of the lowest moments in my life was when my father passed away. Luckily my brother is a doctor and he is able to guide me well. I am very critical of the teachers in general and some teachers in particular. They never supported me in my life. There was a teacher who even made fun of me. Examinations were another big problem. They didn't help because they created more pressure and anxiety on me.

Sandro, 18 years old

I feel I am vulnerable at times. There were moments I found it increasingly difficult to accept myself - this even affected my relationships. In fact, I had sexual attractions but always had a big difficulty trying to ask a girl out most probably because of my low self-esteem. Not having a girlfriend made me feel abnormal. In my adolescence there were a lot of moments when I felt unhappy. I had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and I knew it. This influenced my speech immensely. My friends treated me differently and made me feel as if I was an outsider. I feel that in life what is important is to have people who try to understand me. There were moments where my family told me to learn to 'run and survive' especially when faced with bullying. Unfortunately, when it comes to adults I feel rather disappointed. My parents did not understand me and most of the teachers treated me as if I was an alien. School was a horrid place to be at, it was like a prison. Once I was faced with my Headmaster because I was a victim of bullying. What I got was 'Sandro, bullying happens everywhere there is nothing I can do'. This is what the Headmaster said to me and my parents as well. How can I have trust in adults and in those who should be there to help. One solution that is helping me a lot is drama. It is an excellent opportunity for me to express my pain and concern.

Colin, 18 years old

I don't have too many contacts in my life. One of the few persons who helps me on a day-to-day basis is my sister. I don't like to go out on my own and prefer going out with my mum. I think it is because I don't believe in myself. I am on Facebook all the time because it is the only place where I find some solace and friendship. I did get some help from adults. A youth worker is helping me to find a job, the parish priest encourages me to go to a youth center but the truth is that I am tired of trying and I still feel that no one is doing the right thing to help me, I feel alone and isolated. I am sad. I am deeply disappointed with the politicians who did not do much to help me either. What I need is a simple job which is close to home and with not too many responsibilities. I want to become a cleaner and I would be more than happy. The only job they offered me was in Qawra which was impossible for me because I do not know how to use public transport. Offering me this job is like making a joke on me. Some people have mentioned Jobs Plus but I don't know what it is and what services they offer. My low self-esteem is the result of what happened at school. I was continuously bullied and students in my class always broke my spectacles and nothing happened. I was beaten up and teachers just ignored me. The only action that the Head of School took was that they would tell me to go near his office. The thing is that the children who bullied me were never punished by the teachers. The teachers were afraid of the students and left them to do this to me. School was a traumatic experience. I've had enough going round different professionals and politicians, they never help me - I keep going round in circles.

Hector, 23 years old

I have been living with the priests for some time now. I came to Malta because of the problems there are in my country. I used to try to work but in most cases I used to spend hours on the street and if I was given work they would not pay me. I started getting depressed and if it wasn't for this Religious Order who gave me a roof I would be desperate, I would kill myself. The social workers didn't know how to help me all they could do was give me a space in a porta cabin. For months I couldn't contact my family. With the help of the priests now I call them often. I am happy they have helped me but I don't know what is going to happen to me in the future.

Silvio, 20 years old

I had difficult times as I was growing up. My parents weren't good role models but I still wanted to have a family. My life was so hard. I know I am a good person deep down. I am so angry at my parents, I lacked so much love. I was brought up in a children's home and the experience was terrible. I had a family history of family members taking drugs; my grandfather was on drugs and so were my mother and father. Eventually even I started taking drugs – it was almost a natural thing to do. I'm not feeling sorry for myself but nothing comes easy for me in life as it is all uphill. The situation that had the biggest impact on me was when I finished off a relationship which for so many years and in so many ways was such a good experience. After this relationship I got to know this girl whom I didn't know was underage. I would go to Paceville every day and drink through the night. We used to take videos as we were having sex. When I felt that this relationship had to stop she sent the video images to the police and they arrested me because I was having a relationship with a minor when I was over 18 years old. I didn't know her age and the Courts did not believe me. I do know that this is a terrible moment for me and this follows another situation I found myself in when I had to defend my sister from her ex-husband some years before because she was going to get raped. I drew a knife and almost cut him up. In fact, I stabbed him with a kitchen knife to defend her. At that time the police and the Courts did not find me guilty of any wrong doing because I was just defending my sister from domestic violence. With the issue of sexual relationship with a minor the decision was a different one – the courts decided to check my records and they considered me as dangerous and having a problem managing my anger. In prison I've learnt to appreciate and enjoy my own company. I try to make the best use of my time whilst I am here but I must say that there are no services. Even YOURS lacks services. There are no counsellors I can refer to and no youth workers or any other professional. However, my biggest pain is that at times I feel so isolated and alone, forgotten by everyone.

Ferdinand 28 years old

I am so lonely. I have been bullied all my life. All the NGOs do is try to find me friends but no one likes my company because they say I am strange and I am a loner. I don't like to talk a lot because I am shy. I am also afraid of girls and they laugh at me when I am in the village square. My only nice week in the year is when there is the festa. That is the nicest time. I help in the Church as well but this new parish priest has decided that he doesn't need me so much and he keeps telling me not to stay all the time in the Church. He told me that he said this to me so that I get friends. I think he does not want me and full stop.



Nelly, 24 years old

If I had to pin point an experience that had a major effect on me was when my parents were getting separated. I saw too much fighting and I felt a great deal of instability. When my parents tried to sort things out the situation became even worse. My mother tried to be as present as possible but my father was completely disinterested in me. Even though I was young and had nothing to do with the clashes at home, my father would offend me and call me names. My only link to sanity in the family was my grandfather whom I loved immensely - he died not too long ago. I used to blame myself for the problems between my parents but soon realised that this wasn't the case. This was the biggest loss for me which I couldn't manage to cope with. I felt that all had finished. This situation made me very anxious and made me worry all the time. At 7 years old I was already thinking and desiring death. I had so much fear building up in me. This situation eventually shifted into Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). I became obsessed with cleanliness but on the other hand this created so much stress that there were moments where I would not wash for weeks on end. At times I would go weeks on end not washing myself because I thought that I would be throwing away the germs outside. The need to have rituals so that I feel secure was crucial. There were moments when I thought that I was so different from other people that I was sent from outer space. My experience of bullying was most often shown by being left alone with hardly any friends at all. OCD made me suffer a lot. Even though 179 was very supportive there wasn't too much continuation of support. I'm tired I just cannot take it anymore.

Olga, 22 years old

I came to Malta because they told me there are a lot of work opportunities and I could also study. What is really happening is that I work for little money from day till night and because I am a migrant from the eastern part of Europe people think I came here for other business. It is unfair that because I am blonde and look different all people think is that I came to Malta to be a prostitute. I want to study not only work in Malta. Malta is a rich country and I want to live here but at times I get homesick.

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