



Tying the second knot

*In May 2011, three quarters of the electorate went to cast their vote on whether or not divorce should be legal in Malta. The verdict came in strong with 53% voting in favour of legalising divorce. But how do people really feel about love and remarrying? Words by **Emma Clarke**.*

Earlier this decade, Malta was one of three countries in the world where divorce was illegal, the other two being the Philippines and the mostly celibate Vatican City. When the votes came in, a majority of 53% opted to legalise divorce, despite massive campaigns against it by the Catholic church and then-Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi.

Joseph Muscat, who was Opposition Leader at the time, proclaimed that this was 'the birth of a new Malta'. But are citizens as open to using this hard-won right as they were in voting for it? In a changing cultural landscape, this step's significance might not be immediately obvious. How do the people of Malta feel about love the second time around? And how important is it to them to have the freedom to make this love official through marriage?

Before the legal changes, Maltese couples had been separating, falling in love again, and cohabiting with new partners for decades. Yet the new legislation has allowed an important new freedom: remarriage.

THE RESEARCH BEHIND DIVORCE

Prof. Angela Abela, a clinical psychologist at the University of Malta, has long been interested in family relationships. When the referendum rolled around, it inspired her to make a constructive contribution to the impassioned discourse around divorce. 'I wanted our [team] to make a contribution to the debate in an empirical way, to give people food for thought and an opportunity for reflection,' she says. This was how the study of attitudes towards remarriage among married or previously married individuals came about.

Abela believes that the liberalisation of divorce is fascinating, as it highlights the mixed attitudes of a culture in transition. In particular, a shift towards secularism has altered the role of the Church in Maltese society. 'When it comes to family and relationships, the changes happening are unprecedented, perhaps not only in Malta,' she says. 'The interesting thing about Malta is that it went from a very traditional country to being much more secular. Before, the Catholic Church

had always had a large influence on society.' This transition was perhaps evident even to the Church itself: as the referendum neared, the Bishop of Gozo published an unprecedented apology for demonising those who advocated for legalising divorce.

Abela also believes that Malta's island culture has, in the past, affected attitudes towards family and relationships. 'Parents used to have a strong grip on their children,' she says. 'And gossip was often used as a form of social control, to keep people in the mainstream.' In the 21st century though, Abela speculates that globalisation and the technological revolution have changed the cultural influences on society.

People, especially young people, the researcher notes, are travelling more. In addition, social media may have allowed the spread of ideas.

These changes might account for the generational divide in attitudes towards remarriage that was identified in the study. Seemingly, the younger someone is, the more open they are to remarriage, with nearly a third of people below 40

considering remarriage, in contrast to just 7.5% of those who were 61 or older. The group most likely to consider remarriage were those who were under 40 who had already been previously married. Abela speculates that this apparent generation gap may signal a shift in thoughts about relationships and family.

People with higher educational attainment were more likely to consider remarriage. This was true regardless of whether or not someone had been previously married, and Abela speculates that it could reflect differences in financial security. 'There is this additional socio-economic aspect to it,' she says, 'because it costs money to settle down.'

Parents were less likely to consider remarriage than others, and it's clear to Abela that despite social change, many people still prioritise what they think is best for their children. Parents who had children from outside of their marriage, however, were overwhelmingly more likely to consider remarriage, especially when asked if they would do so for their children's sake. It's

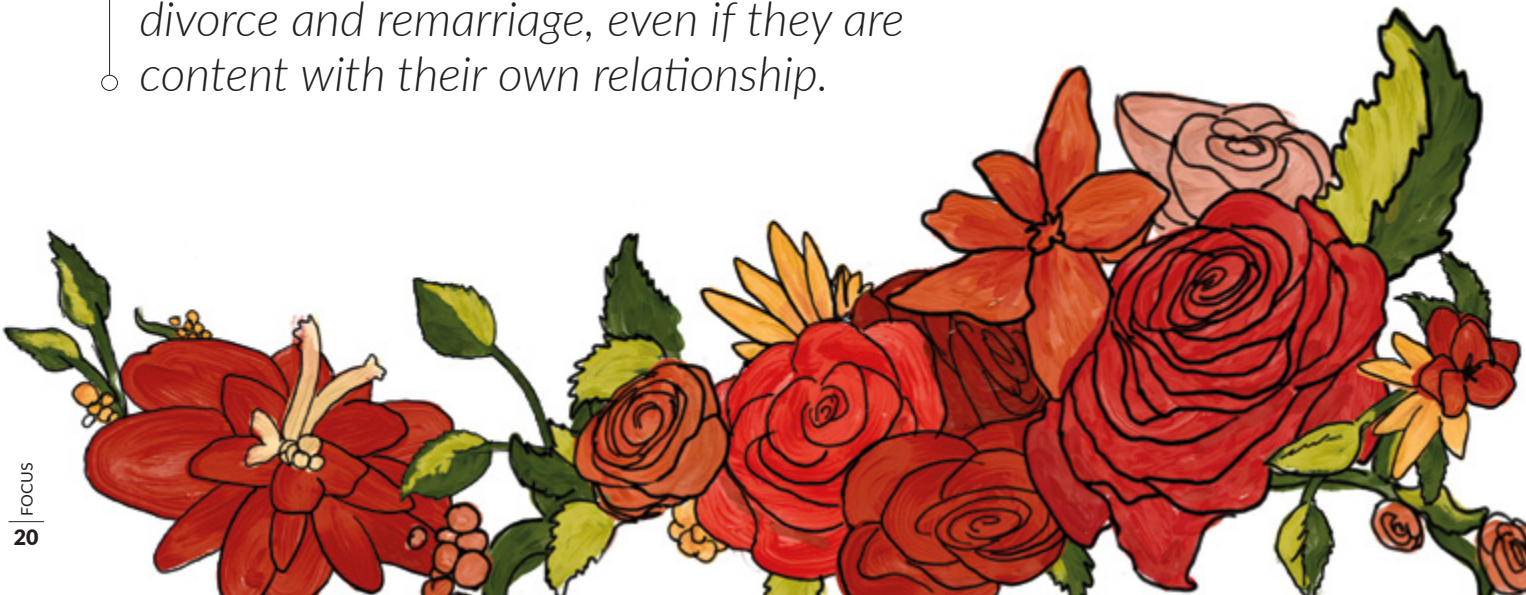
also plausible that having children shapes one's chances of meeting and connecting with someone new.

SURPRISING FACTS ABOUT DIVORCE

For Abela, one of the more striking findings of the study was that the majority of participants, 67.5% of the 2,006 surveyed months before the referendum, said that they would not consider remarriage if divorce was legalised in Malta. In fact, only 18.5% said that they would, while 14.8% remained undecided. Abela believes the study suggests that a lot of factors affected how people voted, not only or necessarily a simple personal desire to remarry.

So why does the researcher believe that most participants would not consider remarriage? For one thing, separation rates in Malta are relatively low compared to the global average. A previous study by Abela in 2014 indicates that, in general, marital satisfaction in Malta is high. For many, then, separation and divorce are not something they feel the need to consider for

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their own lives, let alone the possibility of remarriage. Nearly 20% of the respondents said they would not want to relive past bad experiences. Still, the result of the referendum suggests that a majority of people wish to live in a society that allows divorce and remarriage, even if they are content with their own relationship.

When they voted, people may have been thinking of the rights of friends and family members. After all, Malta is a small island with a culture of closeness, so people have ample opportunity to discuss values and beliefs, and to consider the views of others they are close to. People felt that the right to divorce is inherently important, even without the desire to use it themselves.

LOVE CONQUERS ALL

So for those who would consider remarriage, what were their reasons? The most common answer people chose was love, followed by the desire to live in the company of someone, and then because it is a right.

Though some other explanations cropped up, such as consideration of the children and to have more entitlements, it seems that people still think of remarriage primarily as a romantic and emotional decision.

Abela believes that our mindsets are key determinants in our behaviour and decision-making. For a long time, the family bias in Maltese culture and the strong presence of the Catholic Church may have meant that people were making decisions following a sense of obligation. In younger generations, the winds of change now seem to be picking up. This vote helped people whose relationships failed, for whatever reason, to have the option to try again, safe within a legal framework that looks after their interests. **T**

Further reading:

Abela, A., Casha, C., Debono, M., & Lauri, M. A. (2015). 'Attitudes about remarriage in Malta'. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56(5), 369-387.

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