

Sexual Behaviour Trends among Young People in Malta

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic literature review about the sexual practices of young people who live in Malta. These include surrounding issues such as age at first sexual experience, reasons for engaging in sex, number of sexual partners, contraception use and teenage pregnancy. The systematic literature review is also guided by key elements related to young people's perspectives and knowledge base about sexual rights and sexual health. The review presents and critically explores research based on quantitative samples and also draws on findings from qualitative interviews, observational studies and young people's writings on sexuality issues. The review shows that young people in Malta are exploring and engaging with post-traditional sexual lifestyles in which they are culturally and socially immersed. The review is intended to inform policymakers and practitioners working with young people. It also aims to identify preventive factors that are deemed important for securing young people's sexual health and wellbeing. Finally the article identifies gaps in the literature on sexual behaviour and knowledge among young people in Malta.

Keywords: *sexuality, young people, sexual behaviour, systematic review, sexual health, Malta*

Introduction

Young people's engagement in sexual behaviours and their involvement in romantic relationships are considered normative and an important part of their development across different cultures and social contexts (Van de Bongardt et al. 2015). The recognition of young people's sexual behaviour as an integral part of their development, has led to a global intensification of research on adolescent sexuality (Aggleton et al. 2012). This expansion has led to a broader focus on young people's sexuality that is not limited to potentially risky aspects, but also on positive outcomes associated with sexual experiences during adolescence and emerging adulthood, such as sexual pleasure, satisfaction and happiness. Research about young people's sexual behaviour in Malta and their viewpoints on sexuality issues is also taking ground. This small but

growing body of research revolves around research agendas that concern both its normative and risky aspects. This article presents a systematic review of literature about the sexual practices of young people who live in Malta and their perspectives on a number of issues that are related to sexuality. These include topics on age at first sexual experience, reasons for engaging in sex, number of sexual partners, contraception use and teenage pregnancy. The selection criteria used to determine which studies are included in the review focus on (i) published studies in scholarly journals and books about sexual behaviour trends and perspectives among young people in Malta (ii) unpublished doctoral theses on sexual activity among young people in Malta (iii) research published between 2000-2020. The review includes 35 studies; 21 of which draw on findings from a quantitative sample and 13 studies that adopt a qualitative methodological approach. One study (Bugeja 2010) adopted a mixed methods approach that included data collection from both a quantitative questionnaire and focus groups discussions. All the studies were conducted with informants aged 13-35 years, residing in Malta. Each study was coded according to themes it presented. Relations between codes showed that findings formed four main categories, namely (i) informants' sexual activity and behaviour as reported by them (ii) informants' perspectives on sexuality issues and (iii) informants' knowledge about sexual matters. The review is dependent on the findings of numerous studies that employ various methodological and theoretical approaches. Research bias among the corpus of reviewed literature is not excluded and therefore causal conclusions about the sexuality of young people in Malta are tentative and suggestive. Contradictory conclusions emanating from the reviewed literature also need to be taken into account. The article suggests directions intended to bring forward research in the area of young people's sexuality in a Maltese context.

Sexual Activity

Issues surrounding sexual initiation during adolescence often bring up numerous questions that intrigue young people. This is also the case for Maltese young people. Queries about whether to have sex and thoughts related to sexual expression and possible consequences circulate within student cultures in Maltese schools and are debated through the hidden curriculum (Cassar 2014; Cassar 2017). A major quantitative study about sexual activity and behaviour among 14 and 15 year old students in Malta was published in 2010 by Bugeja. The findings showed that 12.3% of participants had sexual intercourse and the mean age at first intercourse was 14 years old (Bugeja 2010). The review of literature demonstrates that the rate of sexually active young people varies according to gender and age. Among 329 adolescents aged 16 to 18 years, 41% reported having had sexual intercourse (Ministry of Health 2012). The mean age at first sexual intercourse among the respondents aged 16 to 40 years was found to be 18 years (Ministry of Health 2012, p. 31). The main reasons for having sexual intercourse among the 16-18 year old age group were being in love (47.5%),

knowing it was the next step in the relationship (44.7%) and being old enough (25.4%). The findings also show that 8.3% mentioned giving in to their partner's wishes as the reason for having sex (Ministry of Health 2012). Within the same age group 56.8% claimed to have had one sexual partner in last six months, 20.3% had none and 10.8% stated that they had three to five sexual partners (Ministry of Health 2012). The same study found out that among respondents aged 19 to 29 years, 27.6% reported doing "more sexually than they planned", because of the influence of alcohol and/or drugs (Ministry of Health 2012, p. 30). Male and female Maltese adolescents aged 19-29 years are more likely to disagree with "one night stands" than the younger generation aged 16-18 years, as 32.2% of the former and 27.4% of the latter reported being against casual sex (Ministry of Health 2012, p. 46).

While 44.8% of University of Malta students claimed to be single and had no sexual partners, another 10% reported having 2 sexual partners or more (Cefai, Camilleri 2009, p. 57). Respondents who had at least 2 sexual partners were more likely to be single or dating (Cefai and Camilleri 2009, p. 57). This suggests that the phenomenon of "hooking up" and "nonrelationship sex" is also present among young people in Malta (Manning et al. 2006). More male (25%) than female (19%) young people living in Malta, who are 15 years old, reported having had sexual intercourse according to a study conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2016, p. 180). Four years later, this rate remained the same for Maltese males (25%) but decreased for females (15%) of the 15 year old age group (WHO 2020, p. 76). With regards to sexually acquired infections 10.2% of Maltese respondents aged 19-29 years reported that they were told by a medical professional that they were infected (Ministry of Health 2012, p. 55). Table 1 shows a summary of quantitative findings during the last two decades.

Table 1: Sexual Activity per Decade

Date	Author	Informants' Age and Sample Size	Results
2000-2010	Cefai and Camilleri 2009	95.1% 25 years or younger 4.3% older than 25 years N=494	(i) 44.8% were single and had no sexual partners (ii) 10% had 2 sexual partners or more (iii) Respondents who had at least 2 sexual partners were more likely to be single or dating
	Bugeja 2010	14-16 years N=1310	(i) 12.3% had sexual intercourse (ii) Mean age at first intercourse was 14 years

Date	Author	Informants' Age and Sample Size	Results
2011-2020	Ministry of Health 2012	16-18 years N= 329	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) 41% had sexual intercourse (ii) The main reasons for having sexual intercourse: being in love (47.5%), knowing it was the next step in the relationship (44.7%), being old enough (25.4%) and giving in to their partner's wishes 8.3%. (iii) 56.8% had 1 sexual partner in the last 6 months, 20.3% had none and 10.8% had 3-5. (iv) 27.4% were against casual sex
	Ministry of Health 2012	16-40 years N=1200	Mean age at first sexual intercourse was 18 years
	Ministry of Health 2012	19-29 years N=554	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) 27.6% reported doing "more sexually than they planned", because of the influence of alcohol and/or drugs (ii) 10.2% were told by a medical professional that they had a sexually acquired infection (iii) 32.2% were against casual sex
	WHO 2016	15 years N=645	25% of males and 19% of females had sexual intercourse
	WHO 2020	15 years N=app 1500	25% of males and 15% of females had sexual intercourse

Contraception

Among the Maltese population reliance on natural methods of birth control such as abstinence, the rhythm method and withdrawal has been gradually decreasing

during the last four decades (Savona-Ventura 2012). Although there has been a gradual shift towards the use of more effective measures of contraception by means of barrier methods among the Maltese population aged 40 years and less (Savona-Ventura 2012), the change in attitude has been slow. More than a decade ago, nearly 50% of students of the University of Malta, who claimed to be sexually active, did not use a condom or used it occasionally or rarely (Cefai, Camilleri 2009, p. 57). Potential risks associated with unplanned pregnancy however, were of concern to other Maltese female students attending a postsecondary school, who shared advice on protecting themselves from unwanted sexual experiences, sexually acquired infections and pregnancy (Cassar 2009). The review of literature consistently shows that contraception use among the Maltese population aged 35 years and less at the time of first sexual intercourse is lower when compared to that in other European countries (WHO 2016; Bugeja 2010; Mifsud et al. 2009). Condom use during the last sexual intercourse among 15 year-old Maltese boys and girls was the lowest among young people from 45 countries in regions across Europe and Canada (WHO 2020, p. 77). Less Maltese girls (33%) than boys (46%) aged 15 years reported having sex with a condom. The prevalence of not using either a condom or contraceptive pill during the last sexual intercourse for Maltese boys and girls combined, was also the lowest (WHO 2020, p. 79). More Maltese girls (61%) than boys (43%) reported not using either of these two methods with their sexual partner (WHO 2020, p. 79). The review of literature shows that there isn't one type of contraceptive method that was used by more than 50% of the young Maltese population. For example with regards to condom use 41% of males and 41% of females (both aged 15 years) stated that they made use of it during their last intercourse (WHO 2016, p. 185). In the same study 5% of 15 year old Maltese females reported that they used the contraceptive pill during the last intercourse and 16% of boys reported it was used when they had sex (WHO 2016, p. 185). In another study among 16-18 year olds about contraception use during the first sexual intercourse, 41.6% used condoms, 36.4% did not use any method at all, 22.1% used withdrawal, 5.2% the contraceptive pill, 1.3% the intra-uterine method and 1.3% the natural family planning method (Ministry of Health 2012, p. 50). A longitudinal qualitative study covering a two year period, conducted by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) among 103 Maltese respondents who were teenage parents, showed that there was a lack of sufficient knowledge among participants on the efficacy and side effects of some contraceptives, who thought that "certain methods are safer than they actually are" (NCPE 2012, p. 15). After the pregnancy, 66% reported that they started using contraceptives, but the remaining 34% stated that they were still risking getting pregnant again, since no contraceptive means were being utilised (NCPE 2012, p. 14). In Malta a medical doctor is not legally obliged to tell the parents of a girl under the age of 16 about her request for the contraceptive pill. Yet 61.3% of 16-18 year old do not know this (Ministry of Health 2012, p. 22). Table 2 shows a summary of findings from quantitative research conducted during the last two decades.

Table 2: Contraception Use per Decade

Date	Author	Informants' Age and Sample Size	Results
2001-2010	Cefai and Camilleri 2009	25 years or younger (95.1%) older than 25 years (4.3%) N=494	32.5% sexually active students never used a condom
2011-2020	Ministry of Health 2012	16-18 years N= 329	(i) 41.6% used condoms (ii) 36.4% did not use any method at all (iii) 22.1% used withdrawal (iv) 5.2% used the contraceptive pill (v) 1.3% the intra-uterine method (vi) 1.3% the natural family planning method 61.3% do not know that a medical doctor is not legally obliged to tell the parents of a girl under the age of 16 about her request for the contraceptive pill.
	WHO 2016	15 years N=645	
	WHO 2020	15 years N=app 1500	41% of males and 41% of females used a condom (i) 46% of males and 33% of females used a condom (ii) 5% of girls and 16% of boys reported the contraceptive pill was used when they had sex (iii) 61% of girls and 43% of boys used neither a condom nor a contraceptive pill during the last sexual intercourse

Teenage Pregnancy and Abortion

The review of literature indicates that the majority of unmarried mothers in Malta are not teenagers. Data collected from the National Statistics Office (NSO) shows that teenage parents in Malta represent less than a third of all unmarried mothers (2011). Compared with earlier decades the number of births pertaining to teenage parents has increased (NSO 2011). In 1960 the total number of teenage unmarried mothers, who were less than 19 years old was only 9. This went up to 250 in 2008 (NSO 2010, p. 25). Of these there were 55 single teenage mothers (1.3%) aged 17 years and younger (p. 23). In 2001, 52.9% of single teenage mothers were less than 18 years old and in 2006 this percentage increased to 67% (NSO 2010, p. 23). In 2010 the fertility rate for Maltese girls aged 15 to 19 years was nearly 0.2% (European Commission 2012). When comparing teenage pregnancy rates in Malta with those of other EU Member States, Eurostat (2010) reports that in Malta there was a small increase in births to teenage parents, while in most Member States there was a decline. The review of literature shows that in Malta stigma attached to teenage parenthood is less prevalent than before and in general family support is still strong (Cutajar 2006; Savona-Ventura 2009; Dibben 2015). Similar to other teenage parents in different countries, those living in Malta reported experiencing financial difficulties. Almost 50% of teenage parents in Malta are classified as working class (NCPE 2012, p. 8). Almost 75% of Maltese respondents who were teenage parents claimed that their salary and their social welfare package were insufficient for them and their child (NCPE 2012, p. 41). Comparative data from different developed countries demonstrates that socioeconomic status is a predominant factor in predicting teenage pregnancy (Singh et al. 2001).

Public and private debates surrounding abortion in Malta are generally laden with discourses of guilt, sin, blame, promiscuity and shame (Dibben 2015). Existing taboos that surround abortion shroud it in secrecy (Cassar 2007; Cassar 2019). The official position of the major political parties in Malta continues to affirm that abortion should not be decriminalised. Only 1% of Maltese respondents of a comparative study among 32 European countries approve the legalisation of abortion (Lottes and Alkula 2011). Nearly three decades ago the younger Maltese generation was already more in favour of decriminalising abortion than older adults (Abela 1991, p. 206). A number of Maltese women travel abroad to undergo abortion. In 2001, legal abortions carried out in England and Wales by Maltese women totalled 57 and 32 of them were aged 25 years and over (NSO 2010, p. 199). In 2002 there were 69 terminations and 30 of them were under 25 years of age (NSO 2010, p. 199). In 2007 there were 69 Maltese women who underwent a legal abortion in England and Wales. The number decreased to 38 the following year. For both 2007 and 2008 the majority of Maltese women who aborted in England and Wales were aged 25 years and older (NSO 2010, p. 199). On average around 60 abortions each year are carried out in England and Wales (Mifsud et al. 2009). These amount to 1.5% of all deliveries

in Malta (Mifsud et al. 2009). A number of Maltese women travel to other European countries to terminate unwanted pregnancies (Mifsud et al. 2009). Table 3 shows a summary of quantitative findings per decade.

Table 3: Teenage Pregnancy and Abortion

Date	Author	Results
2001-2010	Mifsud et al. 2009	An average of about 60 abortions (1.5%) each year are carried out in England and Wales.
	NSO 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) In 2001, 52.9% of single teenage mothers were less than 18 years old and in 2006 this percentage increased to 67%. (ii) In 2008 there were 250 teenage unmarried mothers, who were less than 19 years old. (iii) In 2008 there were 55 single teenage mothers (1.3%) aged 17 years and younger (iv) In 2001 legal abortions carried out in England and Wales by Maltese women totalled 57 and 32 of them were aged 25 years and over. (v) In 2002 there were 69 terminations and 30 of them were under 25 years of age. (vi) In 2007 there were 69 Maltese women who underwent a legal abortion in England and Wales. The number decreased to 38 the following year. (vii) For both 2007 and 2008 the majority of Maltese women who aborted were aged 25 years and older
	Eurostat 2010	In Malta there was a small increase in births to teenage parents, while in most European Union Member States there was a decline.
2011-2020	Lottes and Alkula 2011	1% of Maltese respondents of a comparative study among 32 European countries approve the legalisation of abortion.
	NSO 2011	Teenage parents in Malta represent less than a third of all unmarried mothers.
	European Commission 2012	The fertility rate for Maltese girls aged 15 to 19 years was nearly 0.2%.
	NCPE 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) 50% of teenage parents in Malta are classified as working class (ii) Almost 75% of Maltese teenage parents claimed that their salary and their social welfare package were insufficient for them and their child.

Sexual Minorities

Legislative and policy developments in the area of sexual minority rights are providing more visibility and equality to persons considered diversely gendered. The civil status of same-sex couples has been aligned to that of married couples and marriage acquired a gender neutral status with an amendment to the Marriage Act (House of Representatives 2017). Yet lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning, intersex plus (LGBTQI+) young people living in Malta still struggle with coming out as they experience social exclusion (Clark 2012). They have inherited a tradition that generally regarded sexual minorities as a threat to religious values and also to the family as a revered institution around which Maltese society revolves. The privileging of heteronormativity had often resulted in social pressures on sexual minority young people to conform to heterosexual roles. Consequently they often shrouded themselves in secretcies, invisibility and silence that closeted their aspirations, desires and needs (Cassar, Grima Sultana 2016, 2017). The review of literature consistently shows that LGBTQI+ young people living in Malta suffered the consequences of discrimination in important areas of their life, such as those related to employment and education and were victimised through appalling physical and emotional abuse (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014; Malta Gay Rights Movement 2003). Maltese LGBTQI+ young people have also been victims of harassment and violence in public spaces (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014). These violent incidents are hardly ever reported to the authorities (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014). None (0%) of the Maltese respondents “who had been a victim of harassment in the past year because of being LGBT reported the last such incident to the police” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, p. 100). In Malta “54% of young LGBTI respondents reported suffering psychological harassment during their schooling, whereas 13% reported experiencing physical violence” (Council of Europe 2018, p. 10). Maltese LGBTQI+ young persons keep back from being open about their sexual orientation with their relatives and avoid holding hands with their same-sex partner in public, as they fear victimisation (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014).

For Maltese LGBTQI+ young people, coming out to parents is still an emotional ordeal (Cassar, Grima Sultana, 2016). Parents’ acceptance of their children’s sexual orientation in Malta often entail painful experiences marked by anxiety, fear, shame and sense of confusion (Cassar, Grima Sultana, 2017; Cassar, Grima Sultana, 2018). The effects of heteronormative dominance on intimate and sexual relationships are reproduced by students in Maltese schools but these are also actively contested by others who challenge established norms of sexual relations (Cassar 2015). The review of literature also shows that perspectives with regards to LGBTQI+ persons rights are shifting. Whereas an earlier study found out that 66.5% of Maltese adolescents did not consider cohabiting gay and lesbian couples as a family (Inguanez et al. 2012), another study claimed 77% of Maltese citizens believed that the same legal rights

should be granted to both homo and heterosexual persons (European Commission 2015, p. 3). Table 4 illustrates a summary of quantitative findings from research conducted during the last decade.

Table 4: Sexual Minorities

Date	Author	Results
2011-2020	Inguanez, Gatt and Schembri 2012	66.5% of Maltese adolescents did not consider cohabiting gay and lesbian couples as a family
	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014	(0%) of Maltese respondents who had been a victim of harassment in the past year, because of being LGBT, reported the last such incident to the police.
	European Commission, 2015	77% of Maltese citizens believed that the same legal rights should be granted to both homo and heterosexual persons
	Council of Europe 2018	(i) 54% of young LGBTI respondents reported suffering psychological harassment during their schooling (ii) 13% reported experiencing physical violence

Research Gaps

This section identifies areas that are under-researched. The review of literature indicates that there are no clear results about whether and to what extent the sexual behaviour of young people in Malta is directly related to their perspectives, beliefs and sexual attitudes. Research that studies these links and correlations is largely absent. Additionally research on young people living in Malta who have not yet had sexual intercourse, but have engaged in sexual behaviour in other ways is largely missing. Young people typically follow a progressive sexual trajectory before engaging in intercourse, irrespective of the cultures and places they live in (Hipwell et al. 2010). This study therefore identifies the sexual practices of “technical virgins” (Uecker et al. 2008) as an area for future research. Research on the predictors of the timing of sexual initiation is also lacking. Other gaps in the academic literature concern issues surrounding asexuality, pornography use, sexting, hooking up sex, abortion, hyper-sexualisation of girls and sexual objectification, hyper-masculinisation of boys, use of online dating sites, young adult sex workers and non-monogamous relationships. All these issues intersect with gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and social

class and collate with cultural differences that determine sexual behaviours. These issues are also linked with psychosocial factors associated with sexual behaviours and concerns on body image, self-esteem and ability to self-reflect and evaluate one's sexual behaviour. Research on interpersonal factors associated with the sexual experiences of Maltese young people that are related to family structure, level of education, type of sexuality education received (if any) and peer influences is limited. Young people's sexual activity and behaviour is likely to be similar to that of their peers (Sumter et al. 2009). Perceived peer sexual risk-taking is also related to adolescents' own sexual risk behaviour (Van de Bongardt et al. 2015).

Other important areas that call on the need for further investigation among the Maltese young population concern empirical research on sexual consent and protection from sexually acquired infections. These are directly related to other complex issues which could lead to stigmatising infected partners, mistrust, giving in to social expectations, and safeguarding one's reputation and gender stereotypes. How youth sexuality is understood and lived out is also determined by social displays of young people's sexual activity, as mediated through communication technology and therefore research in this area located in the Maltese context holds paramount importance. There is also a general lack of research on dating violence, sex offending and sexual assault. A study has been identified and it reports one case of date rape and 20 unwanted sexual experiences that occurred among 150 Maltese female students (The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies 2008, p. 27).

Studies on the sexuality of young persons with a physical and/or intellectual disability are largely missing. Research in this area informs the development of new legislative measures concerning persons with disability and the revision of existing legislation and policies. In Malta, policymaking about the sexuality of young people who have a disability is considered challenging (Azzopardi-Lane, Callus 2014). From a wider perspective, research on sexually inexperienced youth in Malta is also limited. Empirical studies on the accessibility of sexual and reproductive health services by Maltese young people are also lacking in general.

The review of literature presented in this article indicates a need for cross-sectional studies that focus on positive sexual health that is not solely marked by the absence of sexual problems and diseases but also affirm overall wellbeing in relation to the sexuality of Maltese young people. Research on how social and cultural influences impact sexual behaviour and attitudes reveals an intensification of diversity in lifestyles including those related to cohabitation, single teenage parenthood, non-monogamous relationships and non-heteronormative sexual identities. The literature suggests that the sexual activity of young people in Malta is being shaped by globalisation and the influence of western European culture in varying degrees. More than two decades ago there were already signs indicating this direction, as the influence of a strict and traditional sexual morality was waning and gradually giving way "to a more open discourse on sexuality and its ensuing secularisation" (Abela 1998, p. 66). The identified gaps in research as well as the

lack of longitudinal studies point towards a lack of theorization on sexual behaviour trends among young people in Malta, which indicate a fragmented overview of available knowledge. This could however also open up new avenues for much needed research on an aspect of young people's life that I find so fascinating.

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