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Unity

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS
A SPECIAL EDITION
FROM THE
FACULTY FOR
SOCIAL WELLBEING
UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

HAPPY? EDUCATION MAKES LIFE EASIER

The data bears it out: higher job satisfaction and financial security is found among those with tertiary education

Matthew Vella
MaltaToday Editor

LIFE satisfaction in Malta may be considered a given, according to research commissioned by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing: over 79% of Maltese respondents report they are either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with life in general... and just under 5% think they are not.

The feeling is widespread across various the whole Maltese social fabric. On average, most respondents asked to ranked their life satisfaction from 1 (not satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), scored an average of 4.14.

Indeed, no noticeable difference in results is apparent between the various social groups.

The lowest averages for example, were seen in those not living with a partner (4.04) or those out of a job (4.04). Similarly, low averages could be seen among pensioners (4.06), those with a primary education (4.09), as well the retired (4.07).

Perhaps the most satisfied of all can be said to be homemakers at an average of 4.38, high-income earners (4.20), married people (4.22), and those living in the northern region of Malta (4.25).

Despite overall life satisfaction, respondents views were nuanced by the different stages and aspects in their lives that brought them contentment.

For example, respondents derived more life satisfaction from their family than their local community or financial situation – a sign that family bonds provided more security to individuals than the quality of life expected from outside the immediate family.

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Welcome to Unity! Celebrating 10 years of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing

MEET OUR ACADEMIC STAFF • WHAT WE STAND FOR • OUR LATEST RESEARCH • THE PEOPLE WE SERVE

Welcome to the Faculty

um.socialwellbeing facultyforsw

HEADS OF THE DEPARTMENTS OF THE FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi - Dean
Dr Roberta Attard - Head of Department of Counselling
Dr Claire Azzopardi Lane - Deputy Dean, Head of Department of Disability Studies, and Head of Department of Gender & Sexualities
Dr Kristina Bettenzana - Deputy Dean
Dr Christian Borg Xuereb - Head of Department of Gerontology & Dementia Studies
Prof. Joanne Cassar - Head of Department of Youth & Community Studies
Dr Gottfried Catania - Head of Department of Psychology
Alison Darmanin - Faculty Manager
Dr Ingrid Grech Lanfranco - Head of Department of Child & Family Studies
Dr Sue Vella - Head of Department of Social Policy & Social Work

COURSES ACADEMIC YEAR 2022/2023

Common Degree

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Wellbeing Studies
3 years full-time, 5 years part-time or 3 years top-up

Department of Youth & Community Studies

Master of Arts in Community Action and Development
taught and research (mainly taught) 6 semesters part-time evening

Master in Youth and Community Studies
taught and research (mainly taught) 6 semesters part-time evening

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Youth and Community Studies
3 years full-time or 5 years part-time evening

Department of Child and Family Studies

Master of Arts in Contemporary Family Studies
taught and research (mainly taught) 6 semesters part-time evening

Master in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice
taught and research, 4 semesters part-time evening

Master in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice
taught and research (mainly taught) 8 semesters part-time evening

Department of Counselling

Master in Counselling
taught and research (mainly taught) 8 semesters part-time evening;

Postgraduate certificate in Adlerian Counselling
3 semesters part-time evening

Master of Arts in Transcultural Counselling
4 semesters full-time day taught and research (mainly taught)

Department of Criminology

Master of Arts in Criminology
by research 5 semesters, part-time evening

Master of Arts in Criminology
Preparatory Programme, 2 semesters full-time day

Master in Probation Services
taught and research (mainly taught) 3 semesters full-time day

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Criminology
3 years full-time day

Diploma in Policing
4 semesters part-time evening

Department of Disability Studies

Master of Arts in Disability Studies
taught and research (mainly taught) 6 semesters part-time evening

Bachelor of Arts - Areas of Study: (Disability Studies and Psychology or Disability Studies and European Studies)
3 years full-time day

Higher Diploma in Community Access for Disabled People
2 semesters part-time evening

Certificate in Community Access for Disabled People
2 semesters full-time day

Department of Gender & Sexualities

Master of Gender Studies
taught and research (mainly research) 6 semesters part-time evening

Master of Gender, Society and Culture
taught and research (mainly taught) 6 semesters part-time evening

Department of Gerontology and Dementia Studies

Master of Gerontology and Geriatrics
taught and research (mainly taught) 3 semesters full-time day

Master of Arts in Ageing and Dementia Studies
taught and research (mainly taught) 6 semesters part-time evening

Higher Diploma in Gerontology and Geriatrics
3 semesters full-time day

Department of Social Policy & Social Work

Master of Social Work
taught and research (mainly taught), 4 semesters full-time day or 8 semesters part-time day

Master of Arts in Management of Social Care Services
taught and research (mainly taught) 5 semesters evening including summer period

Master of Arts in Social Work - Preparatory Programme
2 semesters full-time day

Master of Arts in Social Work
taught and research (mainly research), 6 semesters part-time evening

Master of Arts in Social Policy
by research, 6 semesters part-time evening

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Social Policy or in Social Work
4 yrs day for the Social Work area of study and 3 yrs day for the Social Policy area of study; or 6 to 8 yrs day for the Social Work area of study and 5 to 6 yrs day for the Social Policy area of study

Certificate in Safeguarding of Children and Young People
2 semesters part-time evening

Certificate in Volunteering Studies
2 semesters part-time evening

Department of Psychology

Master of Science in Psychological Studies
Taught and research (mainly research), 6 semesters Part-Time evening

Master of Science in Addiction Studies
taught and research (mainly taught), 6 semester Part-Time evening

Master of Science in Mental Health Studies
taught and research (mainly taught), 6 semesters part-time evening

Higher Diploma in Psychology
1 year full-time

Bachelor of Psychology
3 years full-time

Editorial

email **socialwellbeing@um.edu.mt**

OUR MISSION: AN EQUITABLE SOCIETY

Prof. Marvin Formosa
Gerontology and Dementia Studies

COVID highlighted the disgraceful wellbeing disparities among women, persons with disabilities, and older persons who were at greater risk of their quality of life being negatively impacted

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since the setting up of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta back in 2012.

Various challenges notwithstanding, disparate departments, centres and institutes overcame the odds to morph into a Faculty that brings the lens upon human existence in both a holistic and non-pathologizing way through intersectional arenas, such as gender and sexualities, criminology, psychology, social policy and social work, counselling, youth and community, gerontology and dementia, family and children, and disability.

The Faculty was planned from the very beginning to prevent and mitigate against human vulnerability by strengthening academic rhetoric, but most and more importantly, acting as a catalyst for innovative psycho-social and health care policies.

The fact that most resident academics take an active role in the shaping, construction and implementation of welfare services, both nationally and internationally, is testament to the Faculty's coming of age.

There has perhaps never been a greater need for the Faculty's work, research and care ethic.

We are only one-third of the way in 2022 but one would be forgiven for thinking that we are still in the year 2021 or even 2020. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Maltese shores our lives turned upside down, almost suspended in a vacuous space, whereby long-held and steadfast boundaries between work, family and leisure melted in thin air.

The Faculty never stopped working but COVID-19 became an extraordinary rare period for reflection, an atypical moment where one is able to recognise an ongoing key shift in the course of human history. It served to highlight the persistent, cumulative and disgraceful wellbeing disparities among different social groupings as women, persons with disabilities, and older persons, who found themselves at a greater risk of their quality of life being negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, one has to look ahead and concentrate how society needs to change to accommodate an increasingly changing social fabric.

Unity, as a newspaper publication, provides a snapshot of key social problems that Malta is currently facing and wrestling with following the various turning points and transitions experienced during the past decade.

Although some of the stories reported herein make harrowing reads, the Faculty is united in striving tirelessly to work with stakeholders build a more equitable society, to ensure that all citizens have equal access to live a life of dignity and purpose irrespective of income, gender, sexuality, abilities, ethnicity and age.

Since this cannot be achieved in silos, the Faculty's multi-disciplinary context is surely in pole-position to brings us closer to such a reality.

The latest developments in Ukraine have generated great concern, especially for resident academics and students at the University of Malta with personal ties to the region. The Faculty for Social Wellbeing condemns the violence in Ukraine, offers its solidarity with all those who are suffering as a result of the incursion, whilst standing for peace. Please know that there are many resources for students and community members alike who require support. The Faculty for Social Wellbeing is a caring community and we are here for each other through challenging situations.

Beginnings A symbol of hope

Prof. Maureen Cole
Social Policy & Social Work

AUGUST 2012 was not like any other August.

Normally, August is a time for winding down, for some relaxation, for catching up on life. It was not to be. Because the Faculty for Social Wellbeing had just been set up and I had been appointed the first Dean on the 1st August.

Despite the apprehension about what might lie ahead, the excitement of the setting-up of the new faculty, the 14th Faculty of the University of Malta, propelled me during that sweltering August.

There was much to be done so we needed to get to work to ensure that all was in place by October and the start of the new academic year. We needed to hit the ground running… and we did!

The setting up of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing had come about through the initiative of the then-Rector, Professor Juanito Camilleri, who in the spring of 2012 approached various existing departments, institutes and centres with a 'social wellbeing' focus, to explore the possibility of bringing these academic entities together.

The ethos of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing was reflected in its name. The faculty's gaze had to be outward looking

This initiative was received well and after meetings with all the relevant stakeholders, the Rector's proposal for the setting up of the Faculty was approved by the University Senate and Council, the governing bodies of the university.

The ethos of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing was reflected in its name. The faculty's gaze had to be outward looking. However it was now up to the heads and members of the departments of Counselling, Criminology, Family Studies, Psychology, Social Policy and Social Work, Youth and Community Studies, and the Disability Studies Unit (which formed the faculty at the time) to breathe life into that ethos.

I interpreted my role as that of facilitator of this process. We spoke the same language as academics from related substantive areas. However, we still needed to learn to sing from the same songbook.

We were well supported in this process by the administrative staff of the faculty, as we slowly established the internal structures which made it possible for the faculty to fulfil its functions. Not having a faculty building proved challenging, however we learnt to rely on the strengths of our common aims. We were a strong community of interest and that kept us going.

The first weeks were dedicated to finalising the administrative and academic work required for the courses offered by the faculty. These rather fast-paced preparations helped us to coalesce as a faculty.

We also had to select the colour of the hood which students would wear during their graduation in the Autumn – in effect, the faculty colours. These early decisions proved important as they helped to cement our developing identity as a faculty. And we came together as heads of the different departments and deliberated about what colour best reflected the values of this our new faculty.

Green it was to be: the symbol of hope.

First up...

ACADEMICS, WITH THE PROVERBIALS...

Dr Mary Grace Vella
Criminology

IN 1996, during the ceremonial mass commemorating the opening of the University scholastic year, Moviment Graffitti – of which at the time I was and still am an active member – unfurled a banner from atop the roof of the University administration building.

Dignitaries and members of the academic staff were hearing the rector's speech, as down came the banner that read – *'Intelletwali Bla Bajd'* (Intellectuals without balls).

The banner was considered offensive by many. And beyond the crude wording, it struck a negative chord with many of those in attendance: it was the apathy and indifference of the intellectual class to voice itself for progressive social change.

But at that age, driven by idealism, change seemed not only easy and desirable, but also possible. Now with more maturity and jaded hindsight, one can better understand how the forces of change are hampered and thwarted by multiple vested interests, and how the mess of a world we live in, benefits some and not others.

Some would argue that the role of academia and that of the activist are incommensurable – the role of academia being that of knowledge generation, that of activism of promoting social change.

But can knowledge ever be an end in itself, a value-free objective pursuit without any impact on the real world?

And what is the scope of generating knowledge, if not to create a better world for the benefit and wellbeing of all? That is, unless one is happy with the status quo!

In and of itself, pedagogy is a pivotal site of activism. It helps foster critical thinking and reflection, position oneself, and mobilise action towards just causes.

However, the significance of pedagogy goes beyond the lecture room and the transfer of academic knowledge to students, as if they are empty vessels waiting to be filled. By empowering through knowledge, it becomes part of a wider process of transformative change.

From a critical and liberation perspective, pedagogy does not take place in a vacuum but is itself imbued in ideological contestation. Its scope is that of producing knowledge for the promotion of economic, social and environmental justice; a pursuit which necessarily entails challenging the status quo – a status quo which that is inherently unjust; elitist, racist and xenophobic, sexist and misogynist. A neoliberal system which values profit over people, animals and the environment. A bi-partisanship system which favours cronyism and nepotism over meritocracy and the national interest. A system which is unfortunately corrupted on both the national and global level – waging war in the name of peace.

In these circumstances, the role of the academic becomes that of asking questions, revealing and raising contentious and disturbing issues which might not be welcomed by those who benefit from the status quo. It ultimately demands taking a stand and striving for change!

The production of knowledge through action research and contribution in policy debates may help inform progressive or regressive change. It may be used to challenge dominant political and corporate discourses and interests, advocating on behalf of oppressed and disadvantaged groups, or else utilised to safeguard and consolidate the interests of those in power.

Yet, most academics still tend to bask in the 'objectivity' of science, shying away from positioning themselves, and in the process – inadvertently or not – becoming another cog in the machine, a tool to further consolidate the commodification of education and culture, the fuelling of populist discourse over evidence-based practice, and the justification of repressive and unsustainable political and corporate agendas.

Academia often comes under attack for being naïve about the reality on the ground, and rightly so. Academic activism bridges this gap, it provides relevance and applicability to knowledge – from the abstract to the tangible – from theory to practice. It forms part of the practical solutions to conveniently disregarded issues, pressing challenges, unjust laws and unsustainable practices. Whether by acting within or outside, yet ultimately against the system, it challenges the status quo and attempts to offer a more viable alternative.

And that's in my opinion the intrinsic value of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing! It acts as a collective of academic-activists who are engaged and committed – through critical pedagogy, action research, policy formulation and grassroots activism and campaigning – in this call for transformative change.

A just cause for all the seasons. Dr Mary Grace Vella, second from left, with Moviment Graffitti and Kamp Emergenza Ambjent in a protest on shoreline access to the Manoel Island coast

Karen Mamo
Department of Psychology

The introduction in 2021 of the partial decriminalisation of the personal consumption and cultivation of cannabis is a legislative development which has placed Malta closer to a human rights-based approach to drug policy.

A similar approach has been for a long time promoted by various international experts in public health and international human rights law, particularly by the United Nation's Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, who stated: "The criminalisation of drug consumption and possession for personal use has led to negative consequences for the health, security, and human rights of individuals and communities worldwide, [lowering] their chances for employment, education and other opportunities for social inclusion."

A focus on harm reduction, including the establishment of an authority to oversee the operations of not-for-profit associations for cannabis, are in themselves revolutionary policy options. For the very first time, policy recognises and includes people who use drugs as partners – not criminals or patients – and therefore as active agents empowered to take responsible decisions.

Drug users, taking responsible decisions? No, this writer is not *high*. Neither is this article an attempt at promoting a liberal framework built on "freedoms without responsibilities". Valid thoughts though they might be, they miss one crucial point: the unique bond between harm reduction, education and positive behav-

For & Against

Cannabis has been partially decriminalised. Now what?

Stephen Cachia
Church Schools Mission Deputy Coordinator

ioural change.

Harm Reduction (HR) is a holistic approach that includes provisions to promote public health, social justice, and human rights. A HR framework aims to minimise the negative health, social and legal impacts associated with drug use, drug policies and the law. Moreover, by respecting personal autonomy, HR works with, not for people who use drugs.

This is where education, focused on facilitating personal growth through dialogue, respect, dignity, and a non-judgemental approach, becomes the most effective tool to promote positive behavioural change, and responsibility.

By providing information on different THC:CBD levels, by speaking about less risky methods of consumption – such as the ill practice of using tobacco – and encouraging a more open dialogue providing space for different experiences and narratives, we can build a novel bridge between cannabis users and society.

And this is in no way done to promote cannabis use, but an opportunity to better understand local trends and challenges, and together, without coercion, further develop measures to promote the well-being of society.

Crossing this bridge with human rights-based indicators, as opposed to superficial supply and demand measures, local researchers and the political class have a unique opportunity to study and understand this social phenomenon from a broader perspective.

Ultimately, they can be better equipped to design humane and evidence-based drug policies for all.

2021 ended on a celebratory note for cannabis users, ecstatic about the fact that Malta has become a European pioneer in legalising the recreational use of cannabis.

For many others, particularly those of us who work in the educational field with children and youths, the bulldozing method used by Government to fast-track this law with very little genuine discussion or debate, was met with dismay.

Clearly our main concern is that the new law is sending a very wrong and potentially dangerous message. Despite all the platitudes to the contrary spouted by government officials, this new law will undoubtedly normalise yet another substance which increases the risk of abuse and addiction for a proportion of persons who choose to use the drug. Government ignored all the feedback it received from the many professionals, drug rehabilitation experts, educators, academics and others who warned that the country was walking blindly into a risky law without having undertaken adequate local research, and without mitigating the negative effects this law will undoubtedly leave on children and youths.

Of even more concern is the fact that the new law has set up a weak regulatory framework to control legalised cannabis use.

A new authority has been set up which will regulate the cannabis clubs which the law will now allow. However, this same authority will have no regulatory oversight over the other method of cannabis production allowed by the law.

More specifically, the law now allows up to four cannabis plants to be grown at home. This can be carried out without any effective regulation whatsoever by the new authority. With the Cannabis Authority washing its hands from regulating this aspect of the law, who will be responsible for the social impact of this measure on families?

The risk of increasing family tensions within homes and the possibility of children being faced with abusive situations are just two risk examples which come to mind.

The new executive chairperson of the Cannabis Authority has made some positive initial remarks which auger well that she is aware of the huge responsibility she faces. However, these same remarks show that the authority already risks falling between two stools.

On one side we are being told by the chair of the authority itself that cannabis is a potentially dangerous substance and that its recreational use should never be promoted; while on the other hand the authority has a vested interest to ensure that the law is implemented effectively, which implicitly means that the use of cannabis will be promoted by the same authority.

The authority also seems keen to undertake research on the impact of the new law on society. While this begs the inevitable question related as to why such research was not carried out before we ran headlong and blindly into implementing the law, this opens up another debate on the credibility of such research if it is carried out by the authority itself.

The Cannabis Authority will clearly have a vested interest to show that the new law is working as intended.

For such research to be credible, it needs to be carried out by independent researchers, external to the government and its Cannabis Authority, who can study the impact of the new measures in an objective manner.

The role of the University of Malta and possibly the Faculty of Social Wellbeing could be crucial here in providing a voice of independent research to examine the impact of this law.

Time will tell whether the new law will have the negative impact on society which many of us fear. Unfortunately, research available in jurisdictions where cannabis has been legalised is not encouraging at all. For example, research carried out in some US states, already indicates some worrying trends: https://learnaboutsam.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-Impact-Report1.pdf.

One augers that, despite having ignored calls for research prior to enacting the law, Government will eventually realise the importance of a research-based approach when tackling such potentially risky legislative changes and open its ears to future research in this area, even if this may make uncomfortable reading.

The big issue

EDUCATION STILL THE KEY TO TACKLE THE HORROR OF FEMICIDE

Why do more women fall victims of homicide by intimate partners, and why are they often killed by men in different scenarios than man-to-man homicide?

Dr Sandra Scicluna
Department of Criminology

FEMICIDE has been defined by the World Health Organisation in 2012 as the killing of women because they are women, a definition that can also be extended to the killing of girls.

Looking at the murder of women over the years, one can conclude that when the murder of a woman occurs, it is more likely to be at the hands of her partner or spouse (Reckdenwald, 2010).

Such murders are usually the result of domestic violence which turns lethal.

Police data from Malta show that there were 20 female homicide victims between 2008 and 2019 (Cutajar, 2020). However another three cases have been identified via newspapers, giving a total of 23 cases. Another two women have been murdered since 2019 – one by an intimate ex-partner and the other by what seems to be a stranger. This puts the total of 25 cases of women killed between 2008 and 2022.

The data for the killing of women clearly shows that nine of the perpetrators were partners or spouses, and another four were ex-husbands or partners. This means that almost half of the cases of femicide were perpetrated by intimate or ex-intimate partners.

Another six cases were committed by relatives and only in four cases was their no prior relationship – usually the crime remains unsolved.

Calafato's research on homicide in Malta in 2018 paints an even bleaker picture: in an almost 50-year span, 92.9% of female murders compared with 7.1% of male murders were the result of an intimate relationship gone wrong. This compares with international data where a good portion of female deaths occur by partners, compared to only about 5% of murders of male deaths occurring by their intimate partner – and this is usually the result of self-defence after ongoing violence (WHO, 2012).

We need to address the question of why this happens. Why do more females fall victims of homicide by intimate partners, or why are women often killed by men in different scenarios than man-to-man homicide?

Certain factors such as abuse during an intimate relationship or during pregnancy, the presence of a child from a previous relationship, or leaving an abusive relationship, all lead to an increased likelihood of femicide.

However not all femicide cases have a previous intimate component to them. Non-intimate femicide is when a woman is murdered following sexual aggression with no pre-existing sexual relationship. In the police data some four women had had no pre-existing relationship with the perpetrator, rendering the solving of the case more difficult – indeed, three out of these four cases remain unsolved.

On a societal level, as long as women continue to face gender-based violence, cultural violence, poverty and discrimination, femicide will continue. In order to address or minimise the risk of femicide, society must invest in education.

Giving more educational opportunities to women reduces the risk of poverty and enables economic independence. Educating men on zero-tolerance towards violence, helps reduce the risk. Another factor is the training of police and other professionals. Police must become more empathic towards female victims of intimate partner violence. On the other hand, they must be given the appropriate structures to help these women.

Looking at past cases of femicide can teach us about what could have been done differently in each case. We will not save all potential victims, but saving the life of one person is enough.

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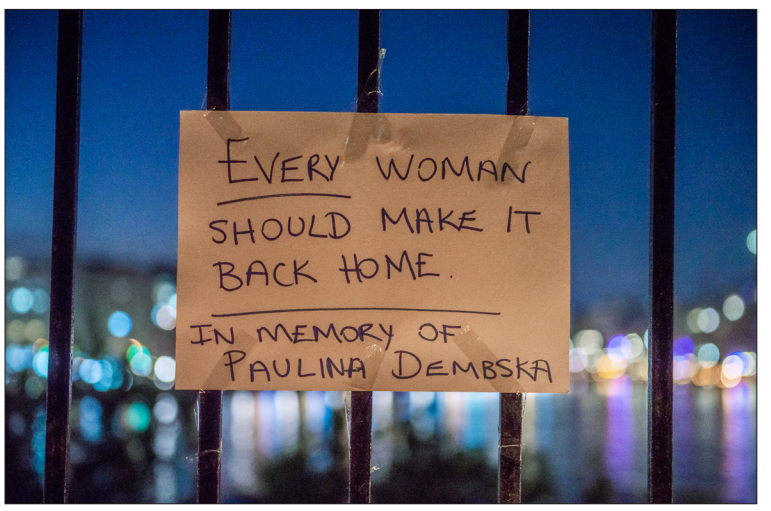
DATA >

Sources: CMRU, newspaper reports, list from LovinMalta.com article

CULTURE CHANGE ON GENDER: THE MEDIA'S ROLE

We should not wait until we have another femicide for this issue to be once more in the media limelight



A harrowing timeline of death

Year	Date	Cause of Death	Relation	Info	Status
2008	25/02/2008	Shots	Mother-in law		Solved
2009	08/05/2009	Stabbing	Daughter's ex-boyfriend	Theresa Vella	Solved
2009	13/07/2009	Stabbing	Husband	Catherine Agius	Solved
2009	09/11/2009	By Fall	Husband	Lyudmila Nykytuik	Solved
2010		Shot	Ex-Partner	Christine Sammut	Solved
2011	31/10/2011	Asphyxia	Mother		Solved
2011	04/06/2011	Multiple stabbing		Irena Abadzhieva	Unsolved and ongoing
2011	12/07/2011	Asphyxia/drowning	Partner	Karen Cheatle	Solved
2012	19/04/2012	Asphyxia	Former partner	Margaret Mifsud	Solved
2012	25/09/2012	Blows and blunt object		Meryem Bugeja	Unsolved and onging
2012	27/11/2012	Multiple stabbing	Partner	Yvette Gajda	Solved
2014	18/03/2014	Fall from Height	Tutor/boyfriend	Lisa Marie Zahra	Solved
2015	12/03/2015	Stabbing	Husband	Silvana Muscat	Solved
2015	24/07/2015	Asphyxia/Physical Force		Vera Holm	Unsolved and onging
2016	03/07/2016	Blows	Husband	Eleanor Mangion	Solved
2016	30/09/2016	Stabbing	Boyfriend	Caroline Magri	Solved
2017	16/10/2017	Bomb explosion	No relationship	Daphne Caruana Galizia	Solved
2018	23/07/2018	Stabbing	Son	Maira Carmela Fenech	Solved
2018	23/07/2018	Stabbing	Nephew	Antonia Michallef	Solved
2018	03/08/2018	Stabbing	Ex-boyfriend	Shannon Mak	Solved
2018	15/09/2018	Asphyxia	Partner	Lourdes Agius	Solved
2019	30/03/2019	Stabs and shots	Son	Marija Lourdes Bonnici	Solved
2019	30/03/2019	Stabs and shots	Brother	Angele Bonnici	Solved
2020	3/02/2020	Stabs	Former Partner	Chantelle Chetcuti	Solved
2022	2/01/2022	Strangulation	No relationship	Paulina Dembska	Ongoing
2022	26/02/2022	Asphyxia	Partner	Rita Ellul	

Dr Marceline Naudi
Gender & Sexualities

Paulina Dembska was murdered in Sliema early on 2 January. Her killing was a tragic catalyst to the recognition of femicide in Malta's criminal code as an aggravating circumstance in homicide

A lot has been written and spoken about femicide in Malta these last few weeks, following Malta's first femicide of 2022 on 2 January.

Print media reporting and TV/radio programmes have been plentiful, several referring to the link between violence against women – including femicide – and gender inequality.

However, once the hype is over, the media will move on to other more interesting matters, until the next time… And so it was and so it will be.

One thing that has been mentioned time and again is that we need to change the culture, mentalities, move away from harmful attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes. These maintain the patriarchal culture, gender inequality, and by default, make violence against women less unacceptable, more normalised.

Violence against women is a continuum ranging from sexual comments thrown at women in the street to the killing of a woman because she is a woman, i.e. femicide.

Whilst we still have men who believe it's okay to pass sexual comments on women they don't know, that it's a laugh to feel a woman up in a crowded club, that sexist jokes are funny, etc. we will continue to have violence against women in all of its forms, including femicide.

The media have a role to play in changing this culture.

First of all, of course the media needs to be careful how it reports incidents involving any form of violence against women.

However, more than that, journalists need to keep this issue on the agenda, because it is a valid and important one, not only for women but for society as a whole.

Media informs. Media can educate. Media can influence. Media can create change. Media can either work to maintain gender inequality – and by default, disrespect and violence against women – or it can challenge it.

Violence against women is a continuum ranging from sexual comments thrown at women in the street to the killing of a woman because she is a woman, i.e. femicide

Through informative pieces and programmes it can help to 'normalise' respect and equity between the genders.

We should not wait until we have another femicide for this issue to be once more in the media limelight.

Family

ACCESSIBILITY FOR PARENTS WITH DISABILITY: FACT OR FANTASY?

Malta already has laws catering for the rights of parents with disability. So the onus of responsibility falls on the service provider

Amy Zahra
Disability Studies

ARTICLE 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) affirms the right of disabled people to accessibility in all spheres of life, including the right of access to venues, properties, facilities, provision of goods and services for persons with disability.

The right to found a family is also affirmed in Article 23 of the UNCRPD. Malta ratified the UNCRPD in 2012 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability Act (Chap. 627) was passed by Parliament in August 2021.

Long before that, the same rights were also enshrined in the Equal Opportunities Act (Chap. 413) which was passed by parliament in 2000.

Notwithstanding these rights enshrined in legislation, persons with disability who decide to have a family still encounter a number of obstacles when accessing services, facilities and activities related to this phase in life (Azzopardi Lane, 2021; Callus & Azzopardi-Lane, 2016).

Research carried out in Europe and the US shows that a number of services related to pregnancy do not always include or accommodate disabled women's access requirements (Iezzoni et al., 2015; Malouf et al., 2017; Mitra et al., 2016).

The situation is not very different in Malta: the lack of accommodations, including accessible parking, accessible facilities, accessible equipment such as weighing scales for mothers who use a wheelchair and height-adjustable examining tables, and accessible information particularly for mothers with a visual impairment, hearing impairment or an intellectual impairment...

Some mothers with a physical impairment also find that in the maternity environment, that is in the few days before and after giving birth, some basic facilities in hospitals such as showers, toilets and baths are inaccessible.

Disabled parents also often find it harder to access sources of support during family planning, pregnancy, maternity and child-rearing for reasons such as inaccessible environments, negative attitudes and structural disadvantages (Parchomiuk, 2014).

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The need for support is even greater for parents with intellectual disability who are at a higher risk of having their children taken away from them (Callus & Azzopardi-Lane, 2016). As the babies grow, parents with disability also realise that most of the services and activities aimed towards their children are inaccessible for them. Most 'mother and baby' clubs and organised activities for children and parents are held in inaccessible venues with long flights of steps, making such services inaccessible for parents – both mothers and fathers – with disability.

Examples include extracurricular activities for children where a parent needs to accompany the child, venues for children's parties and doctor's appointments.

Another example is the baby-changing stations in toilets, which are not accessible for parents with disability who use a wheelchair since they are too high.

Research shows that a minority of women with disability do have positive experiences when it comes to pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing (e.g. Hall et al., 2018).

Most of them cite that a person-centred approach was adopted, with their requirements being accommodated on a case-by-case basis. Although this is welcomed, the problem with this approach is that not all parents might feel empowered enough to put forward their needs and requirements at every stage of parenthood and some might miss out on important milestones.

Since we do have legislation catering for these rights, the onus of responsibility should fall on the service provider.

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SUPPORTING PARENTING: SECURING CHILDREN'S FUTURE WELLBEING

Supporting parents is crucial to avoid stress. Specifically supporting them to support their relationship as partners is the key to better parenting, even when a couple is parenting separately

If one or both of the parents were to be struggling with mental health issues, the levels of stress would be expected to rise, and the quality of care and interactions with the child would reflect this

Dr Ingrid Grech Lanfranco
Child & Family Studies

THE anticipation of becoming parents for many couples, usually involves quite a substantial amount of preparation. A lot of energy is dedicated to how and where and when things will happen, and the inevitable arrival of the new family member. From visits to the gynae, setting up the baby's crib, preparing baby clothes, juggling around work arrangements, to childcare support, to mention just a bit of what goes on.

The transition from couple to parents, whilst carrying its own excitement, is undoubtedly one of the major life transitions involving a big adjustment, the reality of which usually hits soon after the baby arrives. Coping with this transition provides a number of challenges, including maintaining and caring for the mental well-being of both parents.

Screening for mental wellbeing at ante-natal and post-natal periods are both equally crucial, so parents can be offered the support they need to cope with the changes in their lives, and most importantly to provide the necessary care to their baby.

We know from research that the environment in which a child grows will interact with that child's wellbeing and future development on different levels – emotionally, cognitively, behaviourally, academically, socially.

The early environment for the child is the relationship between the parents, including not only their mental wellbeing, but also the quality of their relationship.

"Let us continue to develop the means to invest in supporting couples in their relationship to be better parents"

If one or both of the parents were to be struggling with mental health issues, the levels of stress would be expected to rise, and the quality of care and interactions with the child would reflect this.

It is also evident from recent research, that a child in such an environment can become more irritable and difficult to soothe, which inevitably elicits more stress from the parents and vice-versa.

Supporting parents is therefore crucial to avoid such stress. Parents need and deserve all the help they can get. Specifically supporting them to support their relationship as partners is the key to better parenting, even when a couple is parenting separately.

The quality of the couple relationship is fundamental to how effective their parenting would be. Sadly, the couple relationship is one of the first things put on the back-burner, because the baby takes so much time and energy. If the couple relationship is forgotten, it is likely to be a matter of time before other difficulties start to show up.

Therefore the importance of nipping the relationship in the bud, supporting it throughout the transition to parenthood and beyond, cannot be underestimated. Evidence from co-parenting programmes held with couples of infants clearly showed us that when the couple invests in the quality of their relationship as a couple, the frequency and level of conflict between them decreases, the interactions with between them and with their child improves, and their baby becomes easier to soothe.

Therefore, let us continue to develop the means to invest in supporting couples in their relationship to be better parents.

Doing so is investing in the future of our children, and in the future of our society.

Spirituality A beacon of light in troubled times

Dr Claudia Psaila
Social Policy & Social Work

A lesson that we have learnt over the past two years is that life is fragile. The pandemic created a huge disruption to our daily lives. What we normally take as 'given': our relationships, work, health, education etc. were threatened.

This sort of upheaval is also experienced on individual levels when something out of the ordinary happens, such as a terrible accident, the loss of a person we love, or serious ill-health. Communities can also be affected by such distressful disruptions, such as natural disasters, violent crime, injustice, poverty and so on. Such experiences shatter the status quo and threaten our sense of safety and security.

At times like these, what we 'know' and what we take for granted, is shaken: our sense of comfort, inner stability, worldview, assumptions, values and beliefs. This can be a very scary and disturbing time where we suddenly question everything. So, what is going to anchor us during these times? How are we going to cope, survive and thrive? How can these experiences also be a time of new discoveries, opportunities and personal growth?

Research has found that what can ground us is our spirituality. There is no universal definition of spirituality although many agree that spirituality is a multi-dimensional and personal construct. Canda and Furman (2010) explain that "spirituality refers to a universal quality of human beings and their cultures related to the quest for meaning, purpose, morality, transcendence, well-being, and profound relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality." The latter dimensions are found in most definitions of spirituality.

In recent times, across the Western world, the term spirituality has gained popularity, particularly because it has been divorced from the concept of 'religion'. We have seen a drop in church attendance and an increase in voices that criticise and challenge religions. This is due, in part, to individual and societal clashes and conflicts with religion.

Take as an example, hurtful and offensive comments towards LGBTIQ+ people by religious individuals. Such experiences upset and anger individuals and communities.

People may generalise such comments and attribute them to the religion that these individuals represent causing them to question whether they can embrace or subscribe to a religion that is hurtful, rejecting and condemning.

These doubts may turn into an anxiety-provoking crisis for individuals for whom their religion is very important and is a part of their identity. The very source of their inner strength and social network can be shaken to the core.

For this reason, and others, some persons decide to leave their religion. Such experiences may initiate an internal searching process in people where they conclude that they are spiritual but not religious or that they believe in God but do not want to belong to a religion. For others, a distinction between the institutional aspects of religion and the faith, values and beliefs of that religion becomes essential.

One's spirituality – meaning-making, sense of purpose, values, connection with others, nature and higher power/God – can be religiously inspired but it can also be secular or non-religious.

We do not have to throw away the baby with the bathwater.

Spirituality, whichever way a person defines it, can still be a lens with which to view the world. It can still be a resource (whether internally or relationally) that anchors and sustains us in difficult times; a beacon of light guiding us and giving us hope in troubled times.

Security, family and job quality, essential for life sastifaction

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Family life: better when older

In general, almost 95% are satisfied with family life, with women being 'very satisfied' (76%) at a higher rate than men (67%).

The highest concentrations of family satisfaction can be found across all ages. But the older one gets, it seems, the more one is 'very satisfied' with family life, peaking at middle-age (46-55) with 81%. This rate then tapers off gently after 56, with 78% 'very satisfied' with family life; and down to 74.8% for those aged 66 and over. Indeed, in this age bracket, outliers who say they are 'absolutely not satisfied' with their family number only 1%.

As expected, respondents who are married were more likely to say they are 'very satisfied' with family life (81.2%) as opposed to those not in a relationship. Here, there was a higher degree of respondents who said they were 'not so satisfied with family life at 11%, compared to 1.3% among the married. But unmarried respondents still registered an overall satisfaction of satisfaction – 88.4% or both 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied'.

But in general, the highest rates of satisfaction were found among those with a secondary education, the self-employed, homemakers and in respondents residing in Gozo – all above 80%.

Clearly, out-of-work respondents were definitely 'not so satisfied' with their family life at 25.5% – a rate that was clearly out of step with other groups and demographics, where similar negative ratings were less than 10%.

Another visible sign of discontent was found in the western region, where 14.8% of respondents said they were 'not so satisfied with family life.

Social life – more money, more fun?

Again, rates of 86.8% satisfaction for all respondents point to a general approval for their social life, with only 11% saying they were 'not so satisfied' – in this last category, women (14.5%) being more pronounced than men (7%).

Across age groups, life satisfaction ('very' and 'satisfied') climbed to over 80%, while similar levels of dissatisfaction fluctuated between 9-13% among all age groups – again, reflecting overall sentiment. The same pattern was observed among the married and single persons.

Clear rates of satisfaction with one's social life however emerge in those with high incomes and paying tax of over 35% – 80% said they were 'satisfied' with their social life. Unlike lower earners, this group did not register any levels of dissatisfaction with social life. Indeed, the higher rate of those 'not so satisfied' with their social life was found among those paying 15% tax (12.5%) or those with the lowest incomes at zero tax (9.5%).

Again, a clear demarcation of satisfaction with social life can be in Gozo: in this case, Gozitan respondents were the least likely to be dissatisfied with their social life, just 2.5% compared to higher rates of dissatisfaction elsewhere.

Money: education matters

A different pattern on life satisfaction emerges where money concerns come in. In general, satisfaction is high across the board (over 67%), but this is nuanced by those who say they are simply 'satisfied' at 45% and a good 25% who say they are 'not so satisfied' with their financial situation.

While such levels of preoccupation with money find no noticeable differences among genders, the higher rates of dissatisfaction (above 25%) are found among adults aged 26, right up to senior working age. Equally, these groups among the lowest levels of respondents who were 'very satisfied' with their financial situation.

Further down the demographic divide, these rates of dissatisfaction were mostly pronounced among those with a post-secondary education (35.9% 'not so satisfied') and least among the tertiary educated (19.9%). Conversely, tertiary educated were the most likely to be satisfied with their financial situation (80.1%) and post-secondary respondents the least (58.2%), a sign that educational attainment delivered some form of financial security.

However, the highest rate of financial satisfaction was evident among the self-employed, with 90% overall satisfaction (80% said they were 'satisfied'),

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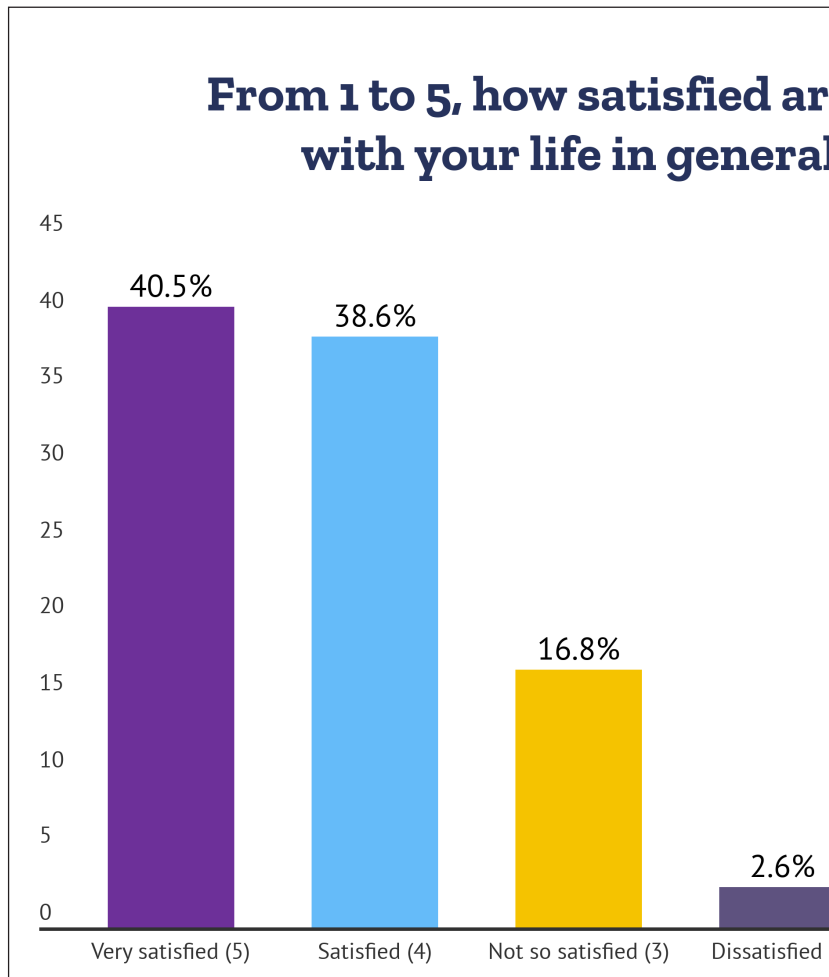
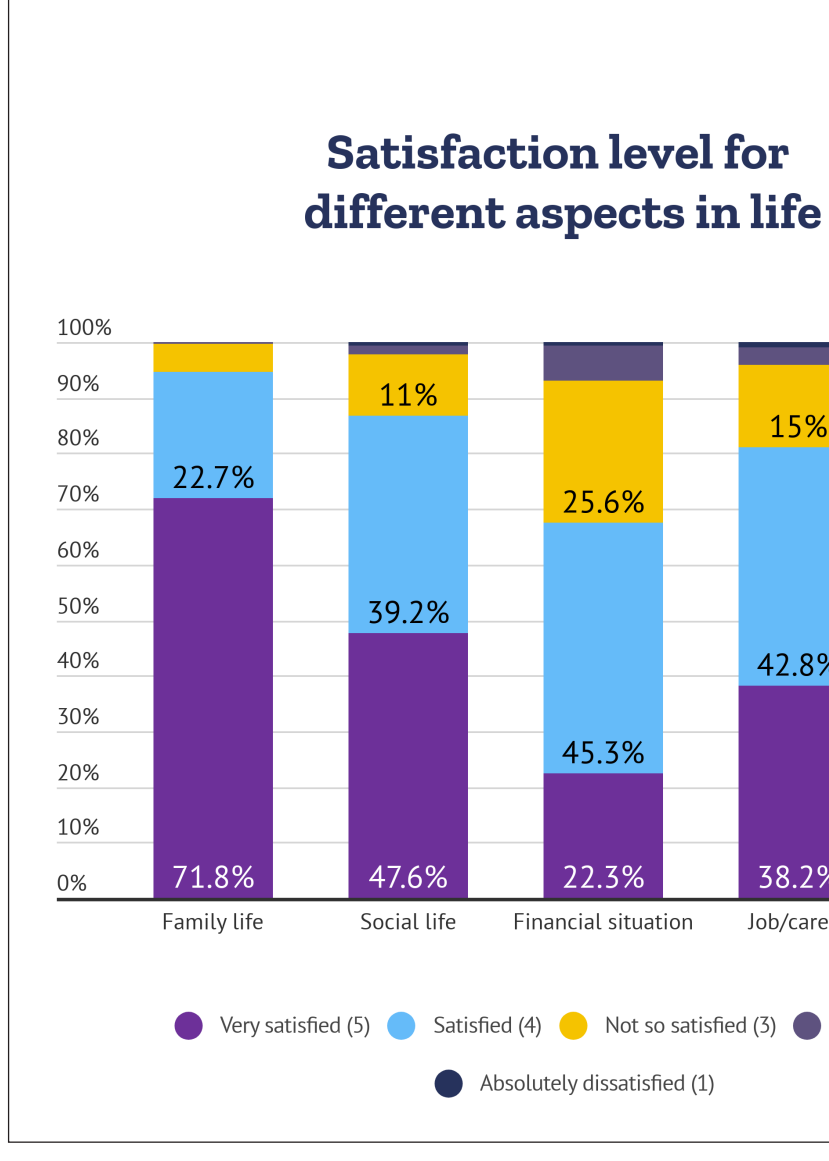
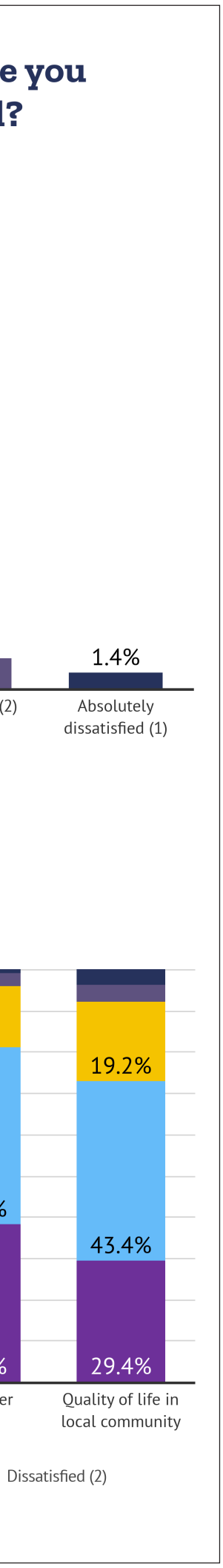
Data compiled by Sagalytics for the Faculty for Social Wellbeing







while those mainly 'not so satisfied' were the unemployed (34%) and homemakers (34.3%).

Again, those who earn the most naturally registered very high levels of satisfaction with their financial situation: 73% of those paying the highest tax rate said they were 'very satisfied' with their financial situation. And while general satisfaction rates were over 60% for most socio-economic groups, it was the group in the 25% tax band that registered the highest rate of dissatisfaction (37% in total), followed closely by the 15% taxpayers (36%).

And clearly, the lowest wages or lack of financial security is prevalent in Gozo: here 43% said they were 'not so satisfied' with their financial situation.

Work: study hard for a job you like

Again, high satisfaction rates for work and career across Malta clock in at an overall 80% rate.

Curiously, the level of dissatisfaction ('not so satisfied') can be seen growing from 9.4% for the 26-35 age group, steadily across all age groups to 24.5% for those 56-65, before this drops to 0% at pensionable age: perhaps, less work is better?

What is sure is that education is a key to both financial satisfaction but also job satisfaction: radical differences were clearly evident here, with tertiary-educated respondents saying they are 'very satisfied' (43.1%) with their jobs, compared to 0% of primary-educated people; the latter even registered the highest level of dissatisfaction with their jobs (60%).

This finding perhaps shows clearly that highly-educated respondents find it easier to access jobs that provide long-term career mobility or higher-salaried and motivational careers, compared to lower-skilled respondents.

A further degree of satisfaction is found among the self-employed, wit 63.8% saying they are 'very satisfied' with their job, suggesting how a high level of control on management and finances allows people to influence their career progression.

Job satisfaction is also closely linked to wages and salaries. High earners who paid the highest rate of tax were the ones most likely to say they were 'very satisfied with their job at 73%.

Solutions

THERE IS A WAY WE CAN MAKE SOCIAL POLICY WORK...

Do you know how many Commissions Malta has? It's bedlam, and it's time to streamline their modus operandi

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi
Dean, Faculty for Social Wellbeing

OUR social sector is becoming increasingly complex.

We do not think about social policy as an isolated segment of public policy anymore, but as an integrated course of action linked to all aspects of our social wellbeing, ranging from the economy to environmental issues, from transportation to climate change, from institutional correctness to community development.

Because of all of this, a phenomenon that we saw unravelling before our eyes during these past few years was the number of government ministries taking on angles that are relevant to our social policy.

This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. But we all know how politics works in Malta and this situation has only, ultimately, encouraged the creation of more silos, and in some cases, even fortress thinking. Not only, some issues... take as an example 'gender-based and domestic violence', have been dissected to the extent that they are being addressed by two, sometimes even three ministries, which only serves to add to more confusion and weakened response.

To be quite honest, with all the ministries and parliamentary secretaries sprouting like weeds, and with political decisions taken solely on the basis of appeasing a partisan political strategy, it only makes it even more difficult to converge all these interests.

However, there might be a way of merging the cause without upsetting the apple-cart.

We currently have the following: the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Mental Disorders; the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women; the National Commission on Active Ageing; the Commission for Refugees; the Commission on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence; the Commission for Children; the Commission for Voluntary Organisations; the Commission for Animal Welfare; the Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability – amongst other entities and councils that have similar raison d'être or could potentially do so.

> *"I believe the work of these commissions and their prospective impact is mostly going to waste"*

The current situation is that most of these commissions have different operational models, different lines of accountability, different conditions of work, governed by different legislations, SOPs, polices and procedures. Some are run by full-times, others not, some have been there forever and their voice is hardly recognisable, some are in awe of 'their' minister, others are independent thinkers. Some are practically dead wood and others are active and leave an imprint on our social policy. Some of the people in these commissions are political appointees whilst other are clearly competent and in fact leaving an indelible mark.

Well, it's complete bedlam.

I believe that the work of these commissions and prospective impact is mostly going to waste. Once again, we have entities building a fortress social policy that is hypothetically in isolation from the link to ongoing social proceedings. I will spare the embarrassment of giving examples but it is both clear and logical that all the commissions listed above should be working conjointly if proper and real effectiveness is warranted.

Following the general elections a new government could provide us with a sterling opportunity to solve the problem of a sporadic and isolated social policy once and for all.

A new government provides us with a golden opportunity to bring in an integrated approach by getting the commissions streamlined by 'falling' under one legislation with a common modus operandi. They can be brought together physically under one roof and answerable to Parliament.

Not only, they should have an overarching structure that sees to recruitment, training, policy development, research analysis and all the works. There would be a chair who heads a council that sits these entities together. Such a procedure will get these offices working together similarly to the way the Ombudsman's office operates.

Moreover, the biggest benefit of this transversal structure is that it will divorce the commissions from the politicians, some of whom are more interested to make hay while the sun shines and milk the photo-ops, than really taking on board the serious issues at stake, all of which need to be handled urgently and expediently.

Finally, this structure will be in the best possible position to act as a 'whip' for government and to insist that state agencies take on their duties and responsibilities, whilst also bringing all the social partners together.

Eating disorders

FOUR IN 10 TEENS SAY THEY MAKE THEMSELVES THROW UP WHEN FULL

Nearly two-thirds of teens and 50% of women say food dominates their life. And 57% of teens know someone who has an eating disorder

James Debono
MaltaToday

39% of teens aged between 15 and 17 are sometimes making themselves throw up when they feel uncomfortably full, a survey on eating disorders conducted by statistician Vincent Marmara for the Faculty for Social Wellbeing reveals.

The survey also shows that respondents aged under 50 and living in the southern districts were twice more likely to make themselves throw up when feeling full, than those living in northern districts.

Overall, the survey shows that teens and women are the most likely to have a problematic relationship with food.

Slightly over half of Maltese women aged under 50 and nearly two-thirds of teens aged 15-17 say that "food dominates their life".

In contrast, less than 35% of men and 38% of 18-30 year-olds, say that food dominates their life.

Moreover 46% of teens aged 15-17 and 39% of women believe that "they are fat, even though others say that you are too thin".

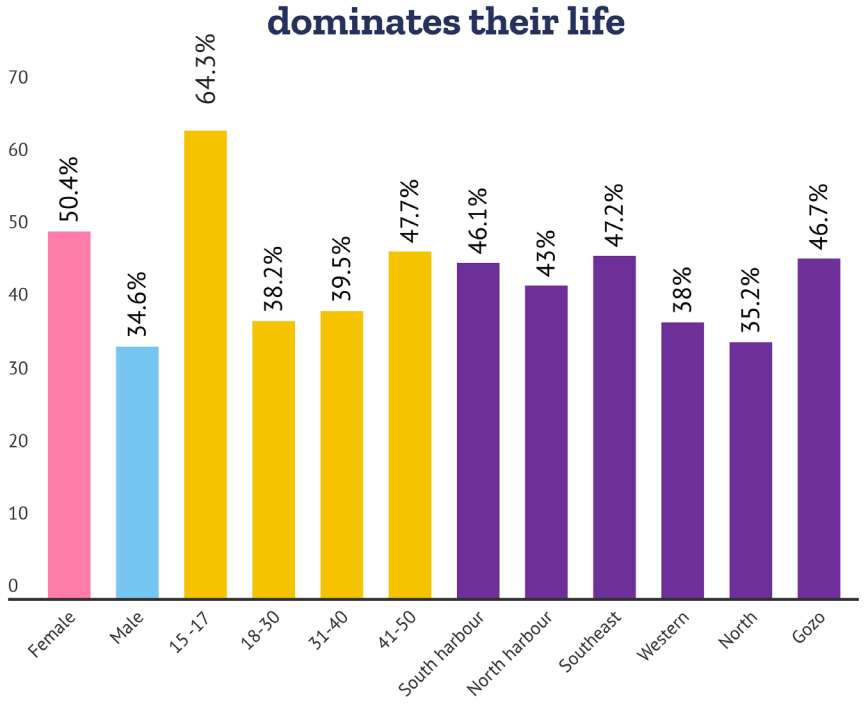
In contrast, only 29% of men and 31% of those aged between 31-40 think likewise. The concern with body image is much higher in the more cosmopolitan and diverse north harbour region (41%) than in the more rural Gozo (17%).

And while 42% of all respondents worry that they have lost control over how much they eat, the percentage rises to 50% among women and to 64% among teens.

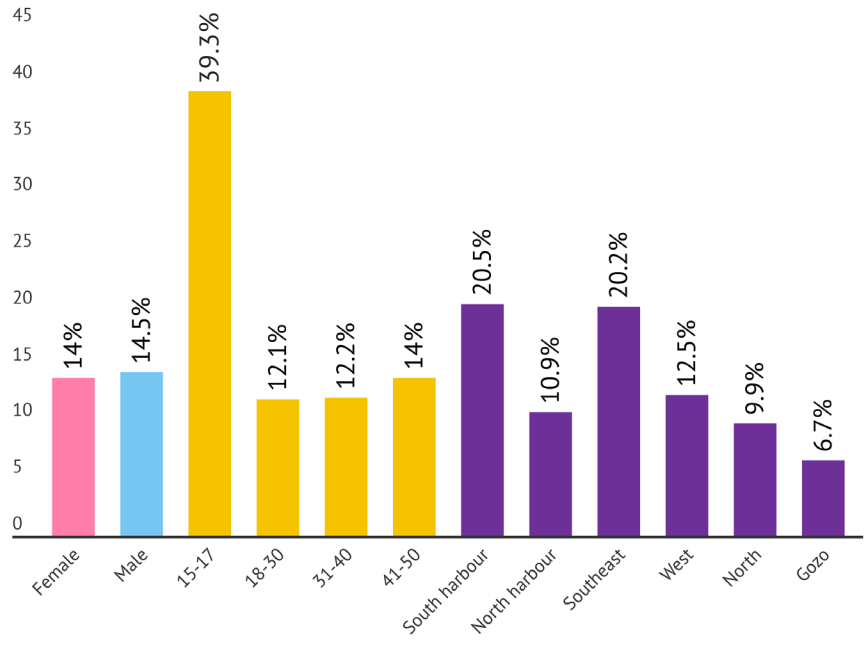
More than a quarter of the respondents know someone who has been diagnosed with an eating disorder (26.6%). Moreover, 2.9% of the respondents said that either themselves or a close family member is diagnosed with an eating disorder.

Significantly among those aged 15-17, 11% replied that either themselves or a close family member is diagnosed with an eating disorder. In this category, 57% report that they know someone suffering from an eating disorder. Significantly,

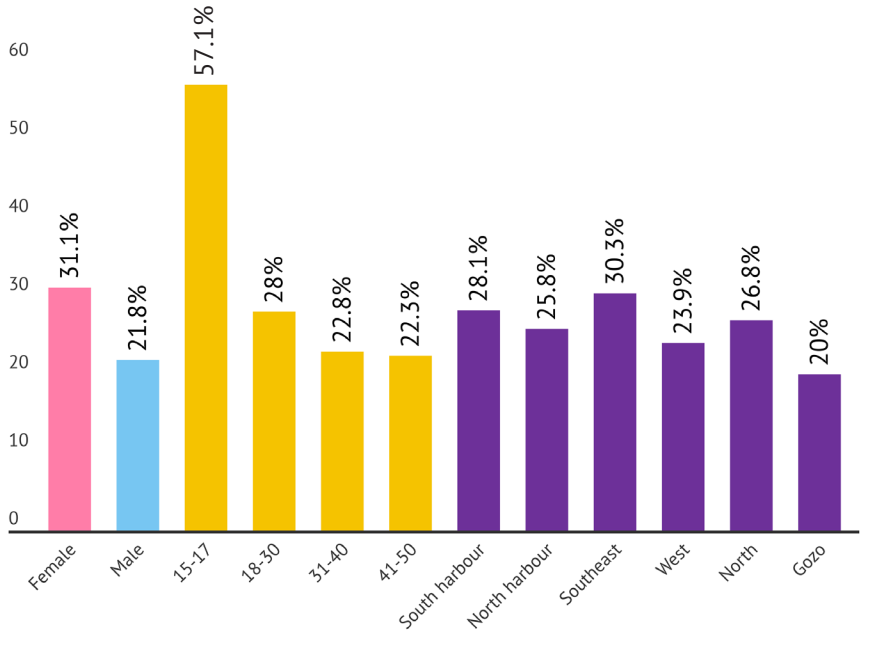
Respondents who said food dominates their life



Respondents who said they make themselves throw up because they feel uncomfortably full?



Respondents who said they know someone diagnosed with an eating disorder



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Data compiled by Sagalytics for the Faculty for Social Wellbeing

Slightly over half of women aged under 50 and nearly two-thirds of teens aged 15-17 said "food dominates their life". In contrast, less than 35% of men and 38% of 18-30 year-olds said likewise

61% of teenager respondents suspect they know someone who has an eating disorder.

The survey suggests that most people are aware of eating disorders: 93% say they have heard about eating disorders. When asked to mention some eating disorders, 84% referred to anorexia while 65% referred to bulimia. But only 12% referred to binge-eating as an eating disorder.

The survey also shows that the vast majority (96%) think that eating disorders are serious life-threatening conditions.

76% also agree that not eating enough to sustain oneself, throwing up after eating, or over-exercising are all symptoms of eating disorders.

But a considerable minority (38%) still blame the victims by subscribing to the mistaken idea that people with eating disorders are not trying hard enough to eat properly.

Eating disorders Not just the girls

Research shows us eating disorders are far more widespread and do not distinguish by race or ethnicity, much less gender or socio-economic background

Annabel Cuff
Research Support Officer II, Faculty for Social Wellbeing

EATING disorders (EDs) are psychological disturbances that seriously endanger sufferers' health and have hugely adverse effects on their psycho-social functioning.

Although most of the negative effects of EDs can be reversed, especially if the illness is caught early, these disorders greatly impact the life of sufferers and are more widespread than we would like to acknowledge.

The most commonly-known EDs are Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder. More recently Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder has also become increasingly recognized and prevalent.

However, there are also sub-clinical and a-typical manifestations of these EDs that may be more common in the general population and less recognizable, as there is not the whole range of symptoms of a full-blown ED.

Until quite recently it was commonplace to view EDs as mainly affecting young females, particularly those coming from the middle and upper classes.

Research however has shown us that they are far more widespread and do not distinguish by race, religion or ethnicity, much less gender or socio-economic background.

EDs devastate the lives of males, middle-aged women, LGBT+ persons and ethnic minorities, as well as younger women, although the latter remain the most at-risk population. What the other demographics have in common however, is that they are less likely to get diagnosed, tests designed to pick up eating disorders are not devised with these alternative sufferers in mind, and because of this EDs are often overlooked in these populations.

The recognition that males make up about a quarter of eating disorder patients has led to increased study of how these disorders manifest in males.

It has become recognised that males often over-exercise rather than restrict eating, that the main aim is to gain muscularity rather than slim down, although both are body-image issues. Since much of the research of EDs is about how they manifest in women, the ways in which male pathways differ from female ED pathways are not fully recognised and bear further investigation.

Likewise, as EDs were historically seem as primary relating to young females, the ways in which EDs manifest and develop in older women and even older men are not fully known.

It is thought that transitional life-phases such as menopause are times of vulnerability, similar to puberty. Since little is known about EDs in older persons, this may hinder recognition and treatment, allowing the disorder to take greater hold, making the effects more severe.

Similarly, little is known and very little research done about EDs in ethnic minorities and members of the LGBT+ community, yet we know that they are also prevalent in these communities.

With atypical demographics, there are issues of delayed recognition, the shame and stigma surrounding EDs are even more pronounced in these communities, and there is a lack of support aimed specifically at these communities, so treatment and healing are delay and suffers may to plough on either oblivious to their disorder, or unaware of how to reach out for help.

In 2020 the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, together with Dar Kenn għal Saħħtek, undertook a nationally-representative study to examine the prevalence of eating disorders in young people in Malta aged 10-16.

The findings were surprising, in that although the study revealed that the majority of young people do not have an eating disorder, it was discovered that for this age group, the number of affected males nearly equals that of females.

This study was important as it raised awareness and hopefully recognition of eating disorders in young males as well as females. It was a step in acknowledging the difficulties faced by our communities and using empirical evidence to take steps towards putting in place the necessary infrastructure.

We would like to see more studies about EDs in all sorts of manifestations, so that persons suffering from these disorders can seek and find the help they need.

Mental health, and COVID-19

MENTAL HEALTH AND COVID-19 IN AN AGEING POPULATION

As opportunities to interact in the outside world become more limited, the risk on developing mental health disorders is exponentially increase

Dr Christian Borg-Xuereb
Gerontology and Dementia Studies

THE world's population is rapidly ageing. Indeed, the proportion of the world's older adults is estimated to almost double from about 12% to 22%, between 2015 and 2050. In absolute terms, this is an expected increase from 900 million to 2 billion people over the age of 60.

This is one of the most significant demographic and socioeconomic developments that is happening on a global scale. Malta is not exempt from this phenomenon, as about 20% of the Maltese population is already over the age of 60%.

Ageing is not a homogenous process; indeed, research shows that we become increasingly diverse as we get older.

However, older people sometimes face certain physical and mental health challenges which need to be recognised and addressed.

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act as we cope with life. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.

Mental health is important at every stage of life, including as we age. Many older adults are at risk for mental health problems. But this does not mean that mental health problems are a normal part of ageing. Studies show that most older adults feel satisfied with their lives, even though they may have more illnesses or physical problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put older people in a disadvantageous position. Ageism and age discrimination violated the human rights of older persons and exacerbated inequalities in different ways, including leaving older persons behind in our increasingly digitalized world. For example, ageist assumptions make it more difficult for older persons to get equal access to medical care. The use of telemedicine and remote technology sharply increased during the pandemic without equivalent attention to improving digital literacy and access to digital technology, infrastructure and devices. This aggravated inequalities in the enjoyment of the right to health and social interactions by older persons owing to the existing digital divide and exclusion from information related to the pandemic and health care when provided only in digital or non-accessible formats.

Many older adults manage to adjust to important life changes, including the death of a loved one, retirement, dealing with a serious illness, or the fear of contracting a disease. However, some older people will have more trouble adjusting, especially due to the demands of COVID-19, such as isolation. This can put them at risk for mental disorders such as depression and anxiety.

The impact of depression on health in older adults can be severe; much research has reported that depression is associated with poorer health outcomes in older people with conditions like heart disease, diabetes, stroke or if they develop dementia.

Depression can complicate the treatment of these conditions, including making it more difficult for someone to care for him- or herself and to seek treatment when needed. In older adults, depression may be disregarded as frailty, or it may be viewed as an inevitable result of life changes, chronic illness, and disability. Older persons themselves may not recognise or understand their symptoms and instead refer to physical symptoms.

Apart from the rampant ageism, the isolation caused by the ongoing pandemic has had a negative impact on many intimate relationships, even more so older people. Restrictions imposed on older people may have isolated this age group specifically from interacting with others.

As opportunities to interact in the outside world become more limited, the risk on developing mental health disorders is exponentially increased.

After almost 2 years into this pandemic, we need to proactively work on systematically assessing the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on older people's mental health and address it.

Confessions of a nobody
A brief thought about life, death and dementia

Prof. Charles Scerri
Associate Professor in Dementia Studies

JIMMY* was a good friend to my father and a joyful companion during the weekends when he occasionally came over for lunch. As a retired engineer, his hands could do marvels that the rest of us could only dream of. Living on the same street, I grew up kicking ball with Robert*, his only son, now a well-respected lawyer.

But one day, Jimmy called the police on not finding his beloved Ford Escort which he painstakingly had restored back to its former glory. That beauty became the love of his life following the death of his wife due to cancer. But his car was not stolen. It was parked round the corner.

He simply forgot.

And that is how his journey into Alzheimer's began. At first it was his sporadic forgetting. On hindsight, Robert knew that something was amiss. A few weeks prior to the car incident, Jimmy was complaining of having a hard time finding his 'stuff'.

So, Robert decided to take away his car keys and with that, a big chunk of Jimmy's independence was gone, forever.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. It is characterised by loss of memory, impairment in communication and decline in activities of daily living. It is a progressive disorder slowly eating away brain cells in parts of the brain that control cognition. It is the betrayal of the mind as it erases who we are.

In the Maltese Islands, there

are around 7,300 individuals living with dementia and a further couple of tens of thousands family members caring for them.

It was on a rainy morning last November when Robert called.

"Should I let him go? When does death become acceptable and fair?" he asked me

His father, now having severe dementia, suffered a fall and broke his hip bone. He was rushed to hospital and had surgery. During his recovery, Jimmy was constantly confused. Then, he stopped eating altogether and although inserting a feeding tube was suggested, he wouldn't have any of that. He made it clear from the start. Prolonging suffering was not on his wish list.

"Should I let him go? When does death become acceptable and fair?" he asked me.

I get such questions quite often and I'm not surprised. Modern-age society often looks at disease as something that needs fixing, unmindful to the fact that we cannot mend all and trying to can end up in destroying the true meaning of life.

People with dementia have priorities besides prolonging their lives and to many, that includes maintaining personhood and avoiding suffering. It's what Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich endeavoured to but that no one, not even his family members, could understand.

Fortunately, Jimmy knew what he wanted and put it all on paper on diagnosis. He desired dignity, respect, self-determination and the best that life could still offer. He did not want to become a nobody.

Having such advanced directives in place helps when decisions about end-of-life need to be taken. They express the values and desires to family members and friends when the person becomes incapable of doing so. It is undoubtedly a challenging topic to discuss, but a necessary one.

Chapeau Jimmy. You lived and died under your own terms.

**Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality*

STRESS: FROM FAMILY TO WORK, A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

Stress is real. And COVID-19's effect on our mental health is yet to be fully established

Dr. Gottfried Catania
Psychology

ISSUES around mental health are being discussed much more nowadays. In the past mental health issues were considered a taboo subject and rarely discussed, with society preferring to close both eyes and confine persons suffering from serious issues to specialised hospitals.

Nowadays, it has become clear that most of us will suffer from mental health issues sometime during their lifetimes, with some issues being more serious than others.

Stress is one of the main contributors to mental health issues. Unfortunately, stress seems to be on the rise in our society. The ever-increasing expectations of what we need to be fulfilled result in people working long hours in order to make ends meet. In almost all families it is a must to have both partners working, as otherwise the family would not be able to make ends meet. The situation is not made any easier by ever-increasing property and rental prices, as well as the wish of most couples to lead a more affluent lifestyle in order to keep up with the Joneses.

Workplaces keep increasing their demands, with workers expected to work longer hours, shoulder more responsibility, and be constantly on call

Most couples also expect to welcome children into the family. Apart from the increased financial burden children involve, the stress mentioned earlier can even influence the couple's capacity to conceive, increasing the vicious cycle of stress and consequently affecting the mental health of the individuals concerned.

Work can also be a source of stress. Workers are not content with just getting their pay packet at the end of the month, but expect their job to also be satisfying.

As a result, working in a job which is not perceived as being satisfying by the individual can result in increased stress. At the same time, many workplaces keep increasing their demands, with workers expected to work longer hours, shoulder more responsibility, and be constantly on call. Technology, while essential in most workplaces today, has also tended to increase stress in most workers, with most workplaces requiring workers to be available even outside normal working hours, a situation which has been called the "always on" culture.

The last two years have presented a specific stressor – new for most of us. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the corresponding fear of contracting serious illness, lockdowns and restrictions, and the effect on the economy, work practices, and employment, left most of us suffering from stress and feeling burnt out.

Many social scientists feel that the effect of the COVID situation on the mental health of many, while still to be fully understood, will almost certainly be significant.

All of the above necessitate a better understanding of the effect of stress on mental health. While people nowadays are much more willing to seek help for such issues, more information about the services available would help make sure that those who need help are able to find it.

Crime and punishment

CRIME THRIVES WHERE COMMUNITY IDENTITY IS WEAK

Over a century later, Emile Durkheim's ideas on crime and deviance still hold true: where institutions fail, crime escalates beyond control

Effective rule of law, community policing, a strong safety net that identifies those most at risk of criminal careers and victimisation, are tantamount to a holistic and effective national crime prevention strategy.

Dr Albert Bell
Youth and Community Studies

DESPITE being penned more than a century ago, Emile Durkheim's ideas on crime and deviance still hold relevance today.

For this eminent French sociologist, deviance and crime – the latter existing at the extreme end of the deviancy continuum – are universal: they exist in all societies, irrespective of their size and form.

Deviance and crime are also relative to, and contingent upon social and historical context. So what is considered as deviant or criminal varies across societies and time, even within the same society.

Moreover, Durkheim also asserts that crime and deviant behaviour can somehow prove functional to society – for example, they help re-evaluate, clarify, and re-affirm moral boundaries.

However, when a society's institutional and regulatory framework fails to provide and maintain the requisite moral compass to keep its members in check, crime and deviance can escalate beyond control and may contribute to social collapse. In other words, in such circumstances, societies fall prey to normlessness, or what Durkheim terms Anomie. Here, crime and deviance become dysfunctional in nature.

Anomie, for Durkheim, is more common in industrialised, complex modern societies as due to their fragmented and segmented nature, heterogeneous social structures find the task of keeping a watertight collective conscience increasingly challenging.

Perhaps, more controversially, for Durkheim, crime and deviance are normal and are to be expected wherever human beings conglomerate. This is because humankind's nature is governed by what he terms the homo duplex, where the impulse to deviate is central.

It is the person's social being – built through interaction with significant others and where ideas on normative and non-normative behaviour are internalised – that controls the primal impulse to deviate.

So for many Durkheimian criminologists, the fundamental question to be asked is not why individuals deviate and commit criminal acts. The key issue to address is what helps keep us in line and functioning along this normative framework.

Apart from the importance of effective socialisation and moral development, various sociologists lay emphasis on the importance of strong communities for crime prevention.

For example, the seminal post-war American sociologist Travis Hirschi focuses on the centrality of effective social bonds to combat the rise of anonymous communities.

These act as fertile ground for societal de-regulation and the unshackling of the deviant impulse. Without the requisite community identity, attachment, participation and involvement, communities risk atomisation and the erosion of the informal social sanctioning power that more cemented communities possess.

The ramifications for understanding why crime tends to proliferate among weakened communities and neighbourhoods are enormous. Moreover, social control theory provides a strong case for the community-oriented scaffolding that national crime prevention strategies should ensure. What are we doing, as a nation, to ensure that our communities do not spiral into a fragmented aggregate of people, versus spaces where there is meaningful interaction that cultivates a sense of belonging and fulfilment, and thus act as strong buffers against the deviant or criminal impulse?

Quite often, this important debate is lost amidst the cacophony – often short-lived – following the perpetration of serious criminal offences.

Safer and stronger communities will not rid and eradicate crime. But they will go a long way to ensure community and societal integration.

And the latter, along with effective rule of law, community policing, a strong safety net that identifies those most at risk of criminal careers and victimisation, are tantamount to a holistic and effective national crime prevention strategy.

The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention

Dr Roberta Attard
Counselling

OUR Faculty's 10th anniversary, a celebration of its history, affords a brief amble down the pathways of time, to consider perhaps, the lessons afforded by experience.

In this respect, I would like to share some thoughts from writer, academic and helping practitioner, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952):

"Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted… And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief."

History is strewn with examples of such beliefs, of which some have changed the face of entire populations such as the slavery of black persons, the inhumane treatment and disenfranchisement of Native American Indians and Indigenous Australians, the killing of six million European Jews and five million prisoners of war, including Romany, persons with disability and gay and lesbian persons, and as I write this piece the invasion of Ukraine. The list is lengthy and reads like a walk of shame for humanity.

We perceive others through our own personal lens, coloured and distorted by our needs, experiences and desires, and this perception can give rise to misperception which, in turn, can be a catalyst for conflict and strife. If we allow our actions to follow our perceptions, with little or no reflexive thought, we react in ways confluent with these phantom perceptions.

As students, academics, researchers, professional helpers and staff within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, we are compelled to make our voice heard where there is injustice and strife, and sow the seeds of understanding, equity and compassion.

Oscar Wilde once remarked that "The smallest act of kindness is worth more than the grandest intention". May these acts be the hallmark of our history.

PHOTO **JOANNA DEMARCO**

Almost three years since the vessel El Hiblu 1 arrived in Malta, the prosecution hasn't formulated an official charge. The charges brought against the three young men cannot be justified, their treatment to date beyond reprehensible

DROP THE CHARGES AGAINST THE EL HIBLU 3

Dr Maria Pisani
Youth & Community Studies

THREE years have passed since Abdalla, Amara and Kader fled the shores of war-torn Libya in the hope of reaching security, a safe destination, and an opportunity to pursue the kind of dreams any teenager hopes for. THEIR aspirations suggest nothing out of the ordinary: to pursue an education, play football, find peace of mind, make their families proud. Three years have passed since these three African teenagers, aged 15, 16, and 19 at the time, were asked to mediate and translate between the captain of the El Hiblu vessel, and 100 migrants, scared out of their wits at the prospect of being returned to Libya.

Three teenagers, two of them boys, the other barely on the cusp of adulthood, were able to understand the panic of the other passengers and the need to convey their shared fears to the Captain. They had no knowledge of the 1951 Geneva Convention, and yet, in spite of their young ages, they had been exposed to enough terror in their lives to understand that a return to Libya and the horrors that awaited them would be cruel, wrong, and also criminal.

As the captain steered his vessel back towards Malta, the political fallout was already becoming clear.

The Italian media had already reported that the vessel had been 'hijacked' and Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Salvini branded the incident as "the first act of piracy on the high seas with migrants". A special unit of the Maltese military stormed the vessel.

Met by a scene of calm, there was no need to take control, but simply to escort the captain as he continued to steer his ship towards Malta.

The Armed Forces of Malta released footage of the military exercise that was subsequently broadcast by national and international media, the display of sovereign muscle framed and supported the political narrative of border politics within the Mediterranean and broader EU context.

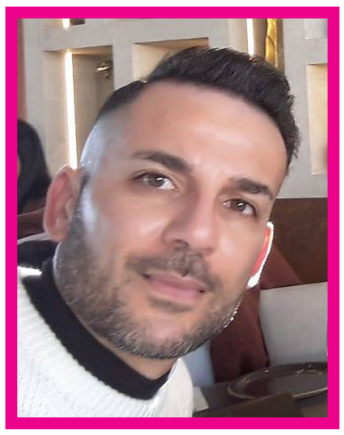
Upon arrival in Malta, the three boys were handcuffed, imprisoned and charged with terrorism. They face a lifetime in prison.

The ElHiblu3 Freedom Commission is a newly formed and independent alliance of human rights advocates demanding freedom of the ElHiblu3.

Almost three years since the vessel El Hiblu 1 arrived in Malta, the prosecution hasn't formulated an official charge. The charges brought against the three young men cannot be justified, their treatment to date beyond reprehensible.

The Commission is calling on Malta to immediately dismiss the proceedings against the three youth.

JOSEPH DEBATTISTA



What is your role at the Faculty? I'm the messenger and beadle

How long have you been working at the University? Approximately 13 years

Any children? Three

What is your favourite pastime? Going to the gym

Do you like sports? Yes

What is your favourite sport? Football

Do you practice any sport? Mostly jogging and work-outs at the gym

What is one experience you recall when you were young? When I met Alessandro Del Piero

Which is the country you would keep visiting? I would say Italy because I never get bored of visiting Turin. Sicily is another favourite

What is your favourite football team? Juventus... of course!

Which song would you hum in the shower? Naturally, the Juventus hymn

Which is your favourite Netflix series? Breaking Bad

What are you afraid of when you grow old? To remain alone... therefore loneliness

What is one item you cannot live without? I cannot live without my kids for sure, but if I had to pick an item, I'd say... TV

Do you believe in God? Yes

Do you have pets? Yes, a female cat – she's currently very old and I'm trying my best to lengthen her life

Should animals have the same rights as people? I believe that animals need to have rights yes. I'm against animal cruelty, definitely

What is your favourite meal and drink? Pizza and beer

What is one value in life that guides you? The values my father taught me: respecting and valuing the family

FRANCES MALLIA FORMER SOCIAL WORK MANAGER

"I didn't have it easy. But looking back, I believe life is what you make of it"

Prof. Andrew Azzopardi caught up with Frances Mallia, whom he has known for almost half his life. For a number of years Frances and Azzopardi crossed paths when they studied social work together. Prof. Azzopardi has always been fascinated by her sense of self-giving...

At what age did you start studying social work at university?

I went to university at the age of 40.

Why did you leave it so late in your life to start your university course, when I've always known you speaking about your love for studying since you were very young?

Precisely because I didn't have the resources to study before. When I was at school I was always completely focused on my studies and loved learning about everything. Nothing else mattered. Somehow, I knew that if I take my studies seriously I will manage to get out of the darkness that characterised my childhood and youth.

And why social work?

Probably it was the fact that I was always empathic and wanted to help other people.

Where did this passion to help others come from?

Family always turned to me for advice and guidance. I was always a good listener even when the friends of my children came to our home. Relationships are very important to me and I developed many special bonds with them. One particular situation I remember was when a friend of my daughter Abigail was 'coming out' and he wanted to talk about this transition. I felt very humbled and very special that he chose me. It meant he felt safe confiding in me. I think that the fact that others felt they could trust me made me even more eager to help.

I did not have an easy childhood, and this is putting it mildly. My father was an alcoholic, a good man nonetheless, but this problem ate him up. Even though he had a good salary very little ended up in the family coffers. We lived in poverty with very limited if any resources whatsoever. We lived in a slum area (*kerrejja*) in Hamrun. It was chaotic. We lived in two rooms and had a very tiny toilet. As children, we would only wash completely once a week in a basin. We were the underdogs in our community and indeed, we were pushed aside by those around us because of where we lived, and because of our dysfunctional family. My mother had to keep borrowing money to be able to sustain us. We always seemed to lack the essentials in life. I remember very distinctly that as a 14-year-old girl I used to promise myself that when I have my children of my own I would make sure they would not go through this. Family for me was always important.

Was it all doom and gloom?

No... I remember going to the

PHOTO **JAMES BIANCHI**

beach, or going out on Sundays with my aunt and uncle. This brought some respite to what I would be experiencing on a day-to-day basis. We also had the love of my grandfather, which I treasure to this day. Other than that, as a little girl it was a cycle I thought I would never manage to break away from.

Was going to university a dream that developed in time?

No, no. I always wanted to go to university but I knew it was impossible for me to achieve that target. We just couldn't afford it and I had to go out to work. I remember once being on a school visit to the University of Malta, hoping that one day I would come here too. Somehow I didn't believe that dream would materialise.

I always refer to you as our own 'Florence Nightingale', taking on children and rescue animals...

[Laughs] Yes, I was always taking on children who had problems – either at home or refugees, or people dealing with personal issues! I wanted to be there for them.

Some stayed on for as long as 13 years; others I have adopted, others know they will find me whenever they need. It also created quite a financial burden on me. I would have to cook and pay bills for 10 people at a time. Somehow, I managed but it became quite a chore.

But there was no way I could abandon these children. Most still keep in touch with me. I was actually the first separated person to adopt in Malta, and it took the court magistrate some convincing, but I managed at the end.

I believe that children need a strong adult's presence and I tried to fill in this role when the children who crossed my path did not have that presence.

What are your core beliefs?

I believe in goodness. And I love doing what is right and helping others because it gives me satisfaction. To a certain degree there is an element of selfishness, but it is why most people do good things. I am also motivated by other peoples' pain. Let's face it: it's enjoyable to help. I am also motivated by other peoples' pain.

What is so special about social work?

It is the opportunity to connect with people. It is the satisfaction of seeing people grow. It is a profession that gives hope to so many people who are at the margins of society.

What kept you going in life?

Notwithstanding the difficulties I had to face during most of my life, such as the issues I had to tackle as I was growing up, or my broken marriage, which did not work out, and the serious and difficult problems my son Jon got himself into, the struggles my daughter Abigail endured growing up, or the endless number of children needing my help, I still believe that what made me get on with life is eliminating the emotion of bitterness and anger and instead transforming that into positive energy with tangible, practical actions.

How did your children feel about the fact that you shared your life with so many other children?

They had no issue as far as I know. They considered them brothers and sisters. Obviously, when they were going through difficult times and I was all alone trying to sort out these problems, it was very difficult to manage – but I never gave up on them.

How many children did you support?

This is a difficult one. I cannot remember exactly but there must have been at least 15 children I was directly involved in from all walks of life, from so many different countries, backgrounds and religions.

What do you think is the biggest satisfaction in your life?

I believe that seeing my children settle down, establishing themselves in the professions they are so passionate about, is what makes me happy. My achievement in life is that the people I met and who crossed my path every day made me a better person, and I hope I have contributed positively to their life.

...and animals?

Oh, they are of the most importance in my life.

Why?

Because they depend entirely on me.

And I always go for rescue animals. I love them so much. They make me happy.

Final words...?

I didn't have it easy.

But looking back I believe that life is what you make of it!

And in closing...

GORG MALLIA

RUNNING A FACULTY

Alison Darmanin
Faculty Manager

I have worked at the University of Malta for over 20 years, with these past four years as manager of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing.

The day-in, day-out journey of coordinating undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, managing over 20 members of staff and troubleshooting problems, is what takes up most of my day.

As a faculty we have grown exponentially in these last years in terms of numbers, delivering over 50 programmes, coordinating various logistics ranging from examinations to student special requests, supporting scores of PhD Candidates and consistently maintaining a high level of expectations and standards to make sure we deliver the goods.

But what really keeps me going is the Faculty's passion to provide the best possible service to students.

The Faculty is focused on making sure our graduands are prepared to face life

Students choose to study with us and we want to return that trust and belief by making their experience a memorable one in the good sense of the word.

The Faculty is focused on making sure our graduands are prepared to face life.

Come on take the plunge and study with us!

Energetic and spreading its wings

Prof. Carmen Sammut
Pro-Rector for Student & Staff Affairs and Outreach

SOCIAL Wellbeing is the youngest Faculty in a University that boasts 430 years of history.

Since its nascence, the Faculty of Social Wellbeing experienced significant developmental milestones: it asserted its existence, developed its own 'language', and above else, participated in enriching collaborations with a range of other faculties, centres and institutes, as well as with key governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations.

The Faculty also evolved its special interests and championed the focus of each and every department. As its academic and administrative staff swelled to meet student demand, the Faculty contributed to the development of a Maltese body of research and knowledge, whilst it is also asserting itself at par with other long-established faculties in universities overseas.

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing assumed that organisational growth patterns are generally faster during early years, as any promising new set-up finds its feet and grows its own teeth. However, the Faculty soon showed that it had the potential to endure, to flex and expand its muscles and to enjoy esteem and attention from both locally and on international platforms.

At ten years of age the Faculty is progressing from its infancy into its adolescence and adulthood. How will it meet new challenges? How will it face unexpected turbulences and unavoidable growing-up pains? How will it deal with the attention that it attracts? How will it respond to a society that tends to present complex and perhaps contradictory pressures? What sort of reflection does it need to engage in, to check its impulses and to ensure reactions that are mature and correct?

In the coming ten years, I am sure that the Faculty will spread its wings even wider.

Its development will certainly also depend on the existence of the University vis-a-vis national goals and within the bigger global picture. We all need to keep responding to social, political, economic, and cultural processes in order to touch the pulse of our society and remain relevant.

Each year the Faculty of Society Wellbeing generates an average of 260 professionals in crucial disciplines that include the mental health professions, preventive therapies, social and community work, the areas of inclusion and mainstreaming particularly the fields of gender, ageing and disability.

It also looks at issues that touch the heart of communities: families, children, youth and older persons. It does not merely provide a better understanding of specific socio-economic groups, but also deals with policy and big questions that are closely related to social justice.

The Faculty constitutes a pillar of the institutional development of the University of Malta. An inclusive university contributes to an inclusive society.

The *University of Malta Strategy 2020-2025* outlines our institutional commitment to the areas of equity, diversity and inclusion. The *Gender+ Equity Plan* that was adopted by the University in early 2022 is a historical commitment to these principles. Here, I wish to take the opportunity to commend and thank all those academics from the Faculty of Society Wellbeing who give their valuable time to support the rectorate in its endeavour to develop the various University policies and procedures and to implement numerous initiatives that will help us reach these aims.

At ten years of age the Faculty of Society Wellbeing is commemorating its successes thanks to the energy and commitment of many. The whole University augurs you well and joins you in the well-deserved celebrations of this special anniversary.