MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

LGBTQIA+ and Reproductive Rights in Malta

verfasst von | submitted by

Patricia Bliem BA BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	UA 066 824
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree programme as it appears on the student record sheet:	Masterstudium Politikwissenschaft
Betreut von | Supervisor:	Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Barbara Prainsack

Gefördert von der Österreichischen Hochschüler_innenschaft

FRAUEN* REFERAT
AN DER ÖH UNI WIEN

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all persons who have sought abortion care. To all lives lost because of unequal access to bodily autonomy and reproductive justice. It is dedicated to all individuals who have provided reproductive health care, especially in circumstances where it was illegal. And to the people fighting tirelessly to make bodily autonomy a reality for all human beings. Additionally, this thesis is dedicated to all human rights advocates and, specifically, the LGBTQIA+ community, who deserve to feel safe wherever they live. I hope this research contributes, in its own small way, to a deeper understanding of these issues.

Acknowledgements

Taking a moment to acknowledge all the people who have helped bring this thesis to light. It would not have been possible without the support, generosity, and trust of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the study participants for taking the time to speak with me and share your experiences, perspectives, and expertise. Thank you for your support and for trusting me with your eternal wisdom. I would also like to thank all individuals who have connected me with interview participants. Without your contacts and support, this research project would not have been possible.

Thank you also to my supervisor, who remained patient, even when my thesis dragged on for longer than expected. I have sincerely appreciated your guidance, thoughtfulness, and understanding. Your expertise has challenged me to think critically and taught me invaluable lessons that will guide me in the future.

To my colleagues and fellow students, thank you for the insightful discussions, encouragement, and willingness to exchange ideas throughout this journey. To my friends and family, thank you for your continued support, encouragement, and belief in my capabilities. It has meant more than I could ever express.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all those working to improve access to sexual and reproductive health care and to advance the rights and inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ communities worldwide.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AD+PD	Malta's Green Party
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FPAS	Family Planning and Pregnancy Advisory Service
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and all others whose identity falls outside of dominant heteronormative and cisnormative norms
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MGRM	The Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PL	Partit Laburista / Labour Party
PN	Partit Nazzjonalista / Nationalist Party
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics
SRHR	Sexual Reproductive Health Rights
WHO	World Health Organisation

Definitions

Terminology	Definition
Abortion	The termination of a pregnancy by medical or surgical means.
SRHR	"Sexual and reproductive health refers to a broad range of services that cover access to contraception, fertility and infertility care, maternal and perinatal health, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), protection from sexual and gender-based violence, and education on safe and healthy relationships." (WHO 2025b)
Bodily Autonomy	The right of every person to make decisions about their own body.
Queer	The term queer is used as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexuality and more is used to be as inclusive as possible, particularly the + refers to all queer identities currently not included in the acronym.
Sex	Biological and physiological characteristics that classify a person as male, female, or intersex.

Gender	Socially constructed roles, behaviours, expectations and identies associated with women, men, and non-binary individuals.
Intersex	"Intersex individuals are persons who do not match medical and societal norms of so-called female and male bodies with regard to their chromosomal, gonadal, endocrine or anatomical sex." (OII 2026)
Transgender	A person whose gender identity differs to the sex they were assigned at birth.
Cisgender	A person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth.
Heteronormativity	The assumption that heterosexuality and binary gender identities are the norm.
Pro-Choice	Supporting the right to an accessible, safe, legal abortion.
Pro-Life	Opposing abortion in most or all circumstances, on the count of the belief that the unborn life should be legally protected.
Intersectionality	A framework introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw describing how different forms of discrimination and systems of oppression interact and shape people's experiences.

Table of Contents

DEDICATION **3**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS **3**

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS **4**

DEFINITIONS **4**

Correlation Between LGBTQIA+ and Reproductive Rights 9

Malta as a Case Study 10

Inclusivity Statement 11

Thesis Structure 12

Comparison with Latin America 16

Contextualising Malta 20

STATE OF THE ART **21**

CASE STUDY: MALTA **24**

Malta Today 25

Historical Perspective 26

Malta Post-Divorce Referendum 27

Development of Women's Rights and SRHR in Malta 29

Recent Developments 33

METHODOLOGY **38**

Research Limitations 42

Research Ethics 43

Coding and Analysis 44

Interviews *44*

Media and Electoral Programs Analysis *48*

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS **50**

Ideal Circumstances 51

Right Time *51*

Issue Networks *53*

Personal Connection 55

Political Power 57

Party Allegiance 58
Power and Leadership 59
Opposition 60
DISCURSIVE FRAMING 63
MALTESE: VALUES AND TRADITIONS 67
Gender Equality and Patriarchal Thinking 67
Religion and the Catholic Church 68
National Identity: Being Maltese in Europe 69
THEORETICAL CONTEXTUALISATION AND DISCUSSION 71
EXPLAINING MALTA'S DIVERGENCE – LGBTQIA+ RIGHTS AND SRHR 72
DISCURSIVE FRAMING WITHIN MALTA'S DIVERGENCE 78
CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY 81
BUILDING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 83
CONCLUSION 84
REFERENCES 86
REFERENCES MEDIA ANALYSIS 92
REFERENCES ELECTORAL PROGRAMS 93
LIST OF INTERVIEWS 94
LIST OF TABLES 94
APPENDIX 94
INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS 94
DATA SECURITY AND CONSENT FORM 95
STANDARDISED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE 102
CODING SAMPLE 105
MIND MAP - RESEARCH CATEGORIES 107
ABSTRACT (ENGLISH) 108
ABSTRACT (GERMAN) 109

Introduction

After ten years as ILGA's number one-ranked country in its LGBTQIA+ Rights Index, Spain surpassed Malta in 2026, leaving Malta at number 2 (ILGA Europe 2026a). ILGA's Rainbow Map has been released annually for the past 18 years, and it ranks "49 European countries on laws and policies impacting LGBTI people" (ILGA Europe 2026b). In 2025, Malta held first place for the tenth consecutive year. This year, Malta has scored 87.73% out of 100%, while Spain has scored 88.70%. ILGA states that Malta has stagnated due to the fact that it still does not have "a comprehensive anti-discrimination framework, which could be addressed through the Equality Bill that was tabled in 2019 and has been stalled since" (ILGA-Europe 2026a). While Malta went from a deeply conservative Catholic country, with a score of only 35.30% in 2013 in the ILGA Index, to Europe's leader in 2016 with a score of 87.75%, it has remained the country with the most restrictive abortion rights in the EU.

Until 2023, Malta was the only EU member state with a total ban on abortion with no exceptions; only in 2023 was this law slightly changed to a near-total ban on abortion. The slight legal amendment now allows "for abortion if the life of the pregnant woman is at risk" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 3). Malta's opposition to abortion was recently underlined when the European Parliament voted on the "My Voice, My Choice" Initiative which demands that everyone in the EU should have access to safe abortion care (My Voice, My Choice 2026). When the initiative passed through the European Parliament in 2025 by 358 votes to 202, every single Maltese member of the European Parliament (MEP) voted against it (HowTheyVote.eu 2025). This dichotomy of Malta's progressive queer rights stance and its restrictive abortion rights is where this thesis begins.

Most countries with similarly restrictive abortion laws, such as Andorra, Poland, Monaco, and Liechtenstein, score significantly lower on ILGA's index, placing them in the bottom half and below the EU average (ILGA 2026a, EPF 2025). And vice versa, as all countries (i.e., Spain, Iceland, Belgium, Denmark) that have scored 80% or more alongside Malta on the ILGA Index have long had liberal abortion laws. Malta is, within the European context and arguably globally, one of the most significant exceptions to the rule that progressive LGBTQIA+ rights and progressive reproductive rights tend to align.

This thesis sets out to answer the research questions: *Which factors contribute towards there not being a correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta? How does this divergence contribute to the construction of Maltese national identity?*

Correlation Between LGBTQIA+ and Reproductive Rights

Even though reproductive and LGBTQIA+ rights are often discussed separately in academic literature, by activist communities, and in political discourse, this thesis proceeds from the conviction that they must be analysed together because of their connection.

Both sit at the intersection of bodily autonomy, state power, and moral politics. Both have been targets of the same religious and conservative opposition movements. Both are central to anti-"gender ideology" movements and the far-right mobilisation across Europe and Latin America (Biroli and Rousseau, 2025; Verlooy, 2024; Reis Brandão and Cabral, 2019). The rhetoric of groups opposing same-sex marriage, gender recognition for trans people, and abortion access consistently groups these issues together as threats to the family, the nation, and the natural order.

Globally, this connection is further underlined. Across most of the world, countries with high levels of LGBTQIA+ legal protection do indeed tend to have more liberal abortion laws, and vice versa. There are only a few exceptions to this. Malta is the starkest such exception in the EU context, and one of the most striking globally, which is why it constitutes such a valuable case study.

Henry et al. (2022: 275) conducted a quantitative analysis across nearly all countries in the world and found that the legal permissibility of abortion and progressive laws concerning sexual orientation consistently covary, meaning that countries with more progressive LGBTQIA+ rights frameworks tend to also have more permissive abortion laws, and vice versa. The authors argue that this relationship is not coincidental but is instead mediated by a third, underlying factor: gender equality. Where women enjoy greater legal protections, political representation, and social equality, both LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights tend to flourish together, suggesting that both rights regimes are ultimately expressions of the same broader struggle against patriarchal and heteronormative social structures. (Henry et al. 2022: 275).

Further, in most countries “[l]iberal social policy tends to favor both pro-choice and pro-LGB rights, whereas conservative social policy tends to oppose them” (Henry et al. 2022: 275). This

thesis also argues that the divergence between the two rights domains in Malta is not merely a political accident or a curiosity of timing; instead, it is constitutive of Maltese national identity, which is simultaneously progressive on LGBTQIA+ rights and conservative on sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). Unpacking that construction is as much a contribution to the study of nationalism and identity as it is to the study of rights politics.

Malta as a Case Study

"Malta is a small group of islands in the central Mediterranean with a population of half a million" (Harwood 2023: 87). It gained independence from the British Empire in 1964, and in 2004, Malta became a Member of the European Union (EU). It covers about 320 km², with a population of 549,011 (Laenderdaten.info 2026; World Population Review 2026).

Politically, Malta operates as a parliamentary democracy with elections held every five years under a single transferable vote system. In practice, it has become a rigid two-party system. The two dominant parties are the Partit Laburista (PL), or Labour Party (LP), which sits centre-left and has held power continuously since 2013 under successive Prime Ministers Joseph Muscat and Robert Abela, and the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN), or Nationalist Party (NP), which is centre-right and had governed for most of the preceding two decades. Maltese politics are deeply partisan; for example, the main commercial television channels are owned by the respective parties, and party allegiances run deep across generations and communities, meaning elections are often decided by very narrow margins. (Harwood 2023: 87-88).

The Catholic Church occupies a constitutionally enshrined role in Maltese society. The Constitution of Malta identifies Roman Catholicism as the state religion and mandates Catholic religious education in schools. Historically, the Church was among the most powerful institutional actors in Maltese public life, with significant influence over social policy, family law, and cultural norms (Harwood 2023: 88). As this thesis documents, that influence has declined substantially since the 2011 divorce referendum; however, the Catholic identity remains enshrined in Maltese identity.

Women's political representation in Malta has historically been among the lowest in the EU. Prior to the 2022 general election, women held only around 15% of parliamentary seats (EIGE 2022). In 2021, a gender-corrective mechanism was introduced "to ensure de facto equality between men and women in politics" (humanrights.gov.mt 2026). As a result of this mechanism, women now hold approximately 34.2% of seats in the Maltese parliament as of 2026 (Azzopardi 2026a). This is still under 40%, which could be considered gender parity, and

as it still requires a structural intervention to achieve even this level, it is a key indication of persisting patriarchal norms in Maltese political culture.

Inclusivity Statement

This thesis is committed to inclusive language as a matter of both intellectual integrity and political accountability. Several terminological clarifications are therefore necessary at the outset.

First, on the question of whom abortion affects. Public discourse and existing legal frameworks in Malta, similarly to most countries, primarily frame abortion as a "women's issue". While the majority of pregnant people seeking an abortion are cisgender women, this framing excludes transgender men, non-binary people, and others with uteri who may also need reproductive health care. Throughout this thesis, the terms *pregnant people, people with uteri, and assigned female at birth (AFAB)* are used where inclusivity is the primary concern. The asterisk (*), following *women*,* is used in contexts where the historical or legal framing specifically references women, serving as an explicit marker of inclusivity to acknowledge all pregnant people, not only cisgender women. Where the thesis quotes or paraphrases sources that use *"women"*, the original language is preserved, but this should be understood within this broader, inclusive framing.

Second, on LGBTQIA+ terminology. The acronym LGBTQIA+ is used throughout this thesis to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual people, as well as all others whose sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) fall outside dominant heteronormative and cisnormative norms. Some of the literature referenced, particularly older sources and some interview participants, may have used a different acronym (e.g., LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTIQ). This has been preserved when cited directly from these sources, but it should be understood that Malta's contemporary rights framework and the political context analysed in this thesis encompass the full spectrum of SOGIESC. For Malta's case, especially, this is particularly relevant as their legal rights encompass the whole queer community too, not solely same-sex relationships.

Third, considering the term "queer" more closely. This term has historically been used as a slur against LGBTQIA+ people; however, it has since been reclaimed by the community and is therefore used as an umbrella term for the whole community while considering its painful history. This thesis uses *"queer"* as a reclaimed umbrella term, without intending to reproduce the harm of its historical use.

Fourth, on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). SRHR is a framework developed within international human rights and public health discourse that encompasses the right to make decisions about one's own body, sexuality, and reproduction free from coercion, discrimination, or violence. It includes access to contraception, comprehensive sexuality education, maternal health care, and abortion. The WHO found abortion to be an essential health care service (WHO 2025a). Per the WHO (2025a), "[a]bortion is a simple health care intervention that can be safely and effectively managed by a wide range of health workers using medication or a surgical procedure" (WHO 2025a). An abortion may also be safely self-managed at home with an abortion pill up to the 12th week of pregnancy (WHO 2025a). For an abortion to be safe, a pregnant person must have "access to accurate information, quality medicines and support from a trained health worker" if needed or wanted (WHO 2025a). Comprehensive care includes "the provision of information, abortion management and post-abortion care" (WHO 2025a).

> "Abortion management includes induced abortion (the deliberate interruption of an ongoing pregnancy by medical or surgical means), care related to pregnancy loss (e.g., miscarriage/spontaneous abortion, missed abortion and intrauterine fetal demise), and management of complications after an abortion" (WHO 2025a).

Fifth, on the language of pro-life and pro-choice. These terms are most commonly used by the two opposing camps in abortion politics. The thesis uses these terms descriptively, to refer to the self-identified positions and movements involved, without endorsing either framing. *Pro-life* refers to the political position opposing abortion access, typically grounded in arguments about the moral status of protecting the life of the foetus. *Pro-choice* refers to the political position supporting access to abortion as a matter of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured to move from contextualisation through empirical analysis to the development of a theoretical framework. After this introduction, the contextualisation chapter follows, outlining the state of LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights globally and in Europe, identifying the countries that share Malta's pattern and those that diverge from it, and explaining why Malta represents a distinctive and analytically productive case. Then the thesis presents the State of the Art of existing literature on the relationship between these two rights domains, drawing on comparative work from Europe and Latin America.

Next Malta is introduced as a case study in depth, tracing the political, religious, and social developments of the past five decades that have produced the current configuration: the rise of

the Labour Party's progressive LGBTQIA+ agenda from 2013 onwards; the role of the 2011 divorce referendum as a political turning point; the persistent foreclosure of reproductive rights debate; and key moments such as the Morning-After Pill controversy, the Embryo Protection Act of 2018, and the Andrea Prudente case of 2022.

Before starting with the analysis, the methodology is introduced. This thesis employs a qualitative research design combining grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and the Discourse Historical Approach (Wodak 2001; Reisigl & Wodak 2015). Grounded theory provides the inductive framework through which patterns were developed from empirically collected data, while the DHA enables systematic analysis of the discursive strategies through which abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights are framed, contested, and embedded in constructions of national identity.

The results of the empirical analysis are shared, drawing on interview data, analysis of the 2026 electoral programs, and a media analysis over the past two years, to identify the key factors contributing to the divergence between LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights in Malta. These results are then contextualised within the Maltese context and considered alongside the previous literature to develop a theoretical framework, situating the findings within the relevant discussions. The thesis is guided by the following research questions: *Which factors contribute towards there not being a correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta? How does this divergence contribute to the construction of Maltese national identity?*

Contextualisation

Having outlined Malta as an interesting case study in the introduction, the contextualisation provides further information on how this divergence is situated within a broader academic context.

Across most countries worldwide, the legal frameworks for LGBTQIA+ and SRH rights see a strong positive correlation. Countries with the most progressive LGBTQIA+ legal rights are likely to also have some of the most permissive abortion laws, and countries that heavily restrict abortion tend to also restrict queer people's rights (ILGA World 2026b; Center for Reproductive Rights 2026). Henry et al. (2022: 271) confirmed this pattern in their quantitative analysis, which covered nearly all countries worldwide. In most countries, as the authors note, "[l]iberal social policy tends to favor both pro-choice and pro-LGB rights, whereas

conservative social policy tends to oppose them" (Henry et al. 2022: 275). This alignment is not merely statistical, but also ideological. Previous research has shown that anti-gender movements across Europe and Latin America consistently view LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights as threats to the heteronormative traditional family and national as well as cultural identity (see Biroli and Rousseau 2025; Verlooy 2024; Reis Brandão and Cabral 2019). The Catholic Church formalised its opposition to both homosexuality and abortion in a series of authoritative documents from the 1960s onwards, framing both as violations of natural law and human dignity (Turiño González and Martínez Rosón 2025: 5-6). Hence, the two distinct rights groups share structural conditions and opponents.

Most countries' abortion laws sit between these two extremes, "meaning that the legality of abortion can either be subject to a gestational limit, to the presence of a risk to the woman's life or health, or to a fetal impairment. Exceptions also exist in cases of rape or incest" (Guedira & Penfold 2025: 130). The dominant global trajectory has been towards liberalisation, with the most significant recent developments occurring in Latin America and in a small number of European countries such as France, which enshrined abortion as a constitutional right in 2024 (Wright 2024).

As previously stated, Malta ranked number one in ILGA's LGBTQIA+ rights for 10 years. In 2026, Malta moved to second place for the first time since 2016, being overtaken by Spain, which has made immense strides in their equality agenda. Similarly, abortion is legal in Spain up until the 14th week of pregnancy (Center for Reproductive Rights 2026). Additionally, Spain is discussing making abortion a constitutional right, after France did so in 2024 (Latona 2025). Simultaneously, Malta remains the only EU Member State with an almost complete abortion ban, only slightly lifting it in 2023 (Debono 2025b). In 2023, the Maltese parliament decided that if three medical professionals agreed that a pregnant woman would die without the pregnancy termination, they could proceed with an abortion (Debono 2025b). A move that pro-choice activists in Malta have strongly criticised, as this was already often common practice in Maltese hospitals and the legal change has made it now more difficult for doctors to save people's lives, as they first have to find two other medical professionals for them to sign the medical advice, which may be increasingly difficult in a country that does not approve of abortion, it also costs time that the pregnant person might not have (Center for Reproductive Rights 2023).

Abortions have and are always happening, regardless of the legal status. The only distinction is whether they are happening in a safe or unsafe environment. The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes unsafe abortion procedures as "a procedure for terminating a pregnancy performed by persons lacking the necessary information or skills or in an environment not in conformity with minimal medical standards, or both" (WHO 2025a). Per international human rights standards, access to information for safe abortions is an international human right. This is not always provided, including in Malta. If people can afford it, they may travel to another country to receive their abortion care, or they may try to follow through with an unsafe abortion method. Nowadays, ordering abortion pills online is taking place more frequently, especially in Malta. Therefore, clearly proving that abortions continue to happen, whether it is legal or not, but they should be able to take place safely (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 14). Globally, it is obvious that "restrictive abortion laws do not stop abortion but can make access more difficult" and it can lead to potentially more harm as people may be forced to use less safe options (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 16-17). This will directly affect people from marginalised communities, making "geographic, socioeconomic, and ethnic disparities in access to abortion services" greater and more intense (Beckman 2017: 103). In comparison, queer rights have been perceived "as an issue that crosses class and socioeconomic lines, whereas abortion is seen in terms of policy as a problem primarily affecting women with low incomes and women of color" (Beckman 2017: 109). Intersecting inequalities may greatly affect people's access to health care.

Considering the case of Malta, it is one of the few countries that may be considered a major exception, as it has an almost complete abortion ban, while being considered one of the most progressive countries concerning LGBTQIA+ rights. This makes Malta an interesting case, as in most other countries, there is a significant relationship between restrictive abortion and queer rights (Henry et al. 2022: 275). Most of the countries that are restrictive towards abortion are also restrictive towards LGBTQIA+ rights.

In Europe, one such country is Poland, ranking among the lowest five countries in the European Abortion Policies Atlas (2025) and in the bottom quarter of ILGA's Rainbow Map. Ireland is another country where, for a long time, both abortion and marriage equality were seen as taboo. It was unimaginable to assume it would ever be legalised, until in 2018 Irish voters voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to repeal the country's abortion ban (BBC 2018), following as a direct result of the success of the 2015 referendum where Irish citizens voted

overwhelmingly for the legalisation of marriage equality (Caollaí & Hilliard 2015; see also McDonagh 2020). Therefore, in Ireland, the liberalisation of marriage equality followed with the overturning of the abortion ban, showing one example of the correlation between reproductive and LGBTQIA+ rights.

Hayes and McKinnon (2018) found that in Northern Ireland, high church attendance can indicate that people are less likely to agree with reproductive and LGBTQIA+ rights (Hayes & McKinnon 2018: 359). They found additional determinants of a person's opinion on these rights beyond religious affiliation, including gender, age, and education (Hayes & McKinnon 2018: 361). For Northern Ireland, "females and the educated were notably more supportive of both gay marriage and abortion rights than either males or those with no educational qualifications; older individuals were significantly more negative than their younger counterparts in terms of their views" (Hayes & McKinnon 2018: 361).

Comparison with Latin America

Perhaps more like the case of Malta are some countries in Latin America, where several countries have seen a large push towards queer rights in the 21st century, while many still only consider abortion legal in strict cases, such as rape, incest, and maternal mortality. Latin America is such an intriguing case because of the "divergent speed and scope at which 'gay rights' have erupted across the region (Encarnación 2018: 194). Much of the previous research on the dichotomy of abortion rights and queer rights has focused on Latin America. The progressive movement, initiated in the late 90s and early 2000s, is also known as Latin America's Pink Tide (Molina 2022: 1293). The Pink Tide refers to "an unprecedented surge of left-wing leaders who assumed power in twelve of the eighteen countries in the region, embracing a narrative on egalitarianism and equality" (Molina 2022: 1293). The Pink Tide gave Latin America a significant push towards decriminalizing abortion, at a time when Latin America was seen as one of the most regressive regions in the world regarding abortion (Molina 2022: 1300). There are some limitations, as today many Latin American countries have not fully decriminalized abortion, instead it often only remains possible in the exceptional cases (Molina 2022: 1299).

Latin America saw a massive push and pull throughout the 2000s and 2010s; while progressive leaders were in power, it came with strong political movements towards queer feminist rights,

which then found themselves being countered by Catholic or Evangelical religious movements and their anti-gender ideals, promoting patriarchal heteronormative policy orientations (Biroli & Rousseau 2025: 672). One of the leading examples regarding queer rights is Argentina. They enacted Latin America's first same-sex marriage law in 2010, and it did not stop there; it became a "gay rights champion" in the region (Encarnación 2018: 195). Notable legislative developments since then have been the introduction of trans rights, banning conversion therapy, and supporting fertility treatments for queer couples (Encarnación 2018: 195). In Argentina, progress has been introduced by heads of state and governments committed to it, while Brazil's leaders, by comparison, have not followed the same path (Encarnación 2018: 197). Thus, a push towards progressive rights may be impacted by political parties, but also other "explanations can be found in the cultural, social, and economic environments" (Encarnación 2018: 197). In Brazil, the largest push for queer rights came through activists and political movements until they received support from the Brazilian Workers' Party (Encarnación 2018: 199). Encarnación (2018: 197) offers one explanation in Brazil's higher percentage of Protestants (26%) compared to Catholics (61%), whereas Argentina's population consists of more Catholics (71%) than Protestants (15%). Quoting the Pew Research Center, "Protestants especially Evangelicals […] are more likely to harbor negative attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights than Catholics" (Encarnación 2018: 197, see also Corrales 2017). Hayes and McKinnon (2018) found similar results in Northern Ireland, where "Catholics were notably more likely to support gay marriage than Protestants, they were significantly less likely to so when the question of abortion rights is considered" (Hayes & McKinnon 2018: 362).

By the time the push for abortion had arrived in Latin America, activists were confronted with "highly organized foes", yet the ideal time for activists' push came through "opportunity structures", which allowed issue networks to use the slightest openings between Church and state to push for their progressive agenda (Harwood 2023: 84-85). Clearly, a large push towards social progress in Latin America happened through issue networks and political movements taking an interest, framing a topic appropriately and having the right timing, giving some indication why there was more significant progress with some areas of civil rights but not with others (Harwood 2023: 97, see also Corrales 2017). Other aspects, aside from mainstream Catholic and Evangelical religious groups, that have impacted the civil rights progress in Latin America include "alliances between movements and political groups, degree of party competition, degree of federalism, and degree of court assertiveness and progressiveness" (Corrales 2017: 54).

In many Latin American countries, the push towards LGBTQIA+ rights was a bottom-up phenomenon, often being led by social movements (Corrales 2017: 57, see also Encarnacion 2022), whereas Malta's case could be seen as more of a top-down approach, where most of the changes were initiated by the governing Labour Party (see Pierson & Caruana Finkel 2025; Harwood 2023). Social movements often find greater success "due to their advocacy efforts", especially when they "are strong and active they typically force political debates", which often leads to "changing public opinion" (Corrales 2017: 60). In these social movements, activists often found certain terminology and framing to be particularly successful. For example, in the US, pro-choice activists primarily lobbied abortion based on individual choice and bodily autonomy, but in Latin America activists framed it as a matter of human rights (Encarnacion 2022: 90). Thus, Latin America has found itself in this dramatic transformation period over the past two decades, leading to significant progressive legal changes (Corrales 2017: 76).

However, there are Latin American countries with complete abortion bans as well; these include Nicaragua, Honduras, Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Centre for Reproductive Rights 2026). All four are comparatively restrictive regarding LGBTQIA+ rights as well (ILGA World 2026a). These countries follow a similar path as many others in the world, concerning restrictive SRHR and LGBTQIA+ rights. On the opposite end, one may find Argentina, where abortion is legal up to 14 weeks, and the country has some progressive queer rights in place as well (Centre for Reproductive Rights 2026; ILGA World 2026a).

However, as mentioned above, there are exceptions to the global rule, similarly to Malta. Regardless, they are not quite as extreme in their dichotomy. Brazil may be considered one such example. In Brazil, abortion is banned, other than in cases of rape and to save the mother's life; simultaneously, the country is one of the most queer-progressive countries in Latin America (Centre of Reproductive Rights 2026; ILGA World 2026a). This provides insight into Malta's stark dichotomy between queer and reproductive rights, which forms the basis of this thesis. It remains an extreme example, seeing as many of these similar cases may have restrictive abortion laws. However, they provide certain exceptions, such as in cases of rape, incest and the potential death of the pregnant person, that do not all apply in Malta's case.

On the other hand, one can find countries that are particularly liberal. Spain, for example, has become a massive frontrunner on LGBTQIA+ rights in recent years. This year, it even passed

Malta in the ILGA Europe LGBTQIA+ ranking, coming first place and making Malta second place for the first time in 10 years. Encarnación (2025: 96) attributes Spain's push to progressiveness to the social changes the country has experienced since becoming a full democracy in 1978 (Encarnación 2025: 96). Since then, Spain has changed from a confessional state to one of the most secular societies in Europe (Encarnación 2025: 96). Once countries become more secular, "they also tend to have greater levels of gender equality (such as in educational attainment, labor force participation, career opportunities, and fewer legal barriers for women)" (Henry et al. 2022: 266).

A common denominator affecting the restrictiveness of these civil laws is gender equality/inequality (Henry et al. 2022: 275). This aligns with people's needs to uphold traditional values and roles. A factor impacting how people may view queer and reproductive rights includes traditional values, including the traditional behavioural expectations of men and women, which queer people often defy (Henry et al. 2022: 265). Sexist and patriarchal beliefs are often interlinked with opposition to abortion and queerphobia (Henry et al. 2022: 265). This has been underlined considering that many countries, which generally score lower on gender equality indices, are more likely to have restrictive LGBTQIA+ rights (Henry et al. 2022: 265). Additionally, "countries with lower fertility rates also have greater gender equality", and people's beliefs about bodily autonomy and sexual liberation may be linked to gender equality as well (Henry et al. 2022: 266).

A common thread in many of these countries is religion, as it may have a potentially massive impact on a country's abortion laws. This is true for the Catholic Church, who has "formalized its doctrinal positions on abortion, homosexuality and the ordination of women through a series of authoritative documents (Turiño González & Martínez Rosón 2025: 5). Even today, the Catholic Church continues to take a stance against "gender ideology", which includes matters of abortion, queer identity, and gender equality (Turiño González & Martínez Rosón 2025: 6). Despite the impact religion may have, and regardless of how strong the opposition to abortion is, abortions still take place every day. Too often, people remain ignorant about abortion facts. This ignorance is more pronounced in countries with more restrictive abortion laws, as the taboo may often lead to a lack of knowledge and information sharing (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2). Furthermore, abortion remains highly stigmatized and, in many cultures, and societies it remains a taboo topic, meaning many people who have had abortions struggle with sharing their experiences (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 6). Activists in Malta have tried to

destigmatise this problem, by helping people to open up and sharing their personal narratives to provide insights and dispel abortion myths, leading to a better understanding of how common abortion truly is (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 6).

Contextualising Malta

In Malta, most of the population are members of the Catholic Church (World Religion Database 2025). Religion has a significant impact on people's opinions, as many Catholics may be more likely to oppose marriage equality or abortion based on their beliefs (Hayes & McKinnon 2018: 352). This is underlined by the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion and homosexuality (Turiño González & Martínez Rosón 2025: 6). This is perhaps an indication why there is an association in Western countries between how regularly the population attends religious services, and how recently the countries have introduced same-sex union laws, clearly indicating that religious countries took longer to adopt these laws (Henry et al. 2022: 265). Even Malta's progressive, queer push came under the Labour Party while the Nationalist Party (PN) was in power; the Catholic Church had greater influence on politics (Harwood 2023: 90). While the PN was in power they joined in with other states to support the Vatican in its attempts to stop liberalisation of abortion laws within the UN (Harwood 2023: 90). Similarly, Malta has opposed EU efforts to fund stem cell research because of the use of embryos (Harwood 2023: 90).

Generally speaking, "[l]iberal social policy tends to favor both pro-choice and pro-LGB rights, whereas conservative social policy tends to oppose them", explaining why Malta's progressive push happened under the Labour Party but only took place for queer rights (Henry et al. 2022: 275). Malta's two biggest political parties, the Nationalist Party and the Labour Party, have historically often stood on opposite ends. While the Nationalist Party certainly now also considers LGBTQIA+ rights, when they were in power, before the 2013 election, they were against opening marriage up to all people, regardless of sexuality. Instead, the Labour Party ran an LGBTQIA+-focused political campaign in 2013 and won the election by a landslide, becoming the party pushing most strongly for queer rights. Nevertheless, both major Maltese parties oppose the decriminalisation of abortion. Publicly, the Volt and Green Party have been the only two Maltese parties actively promoting abortion rights.

However, Malta is peculiar here as well, seeing as only until recently the country had a complete abortion ban, with no exceptions. Only in 2023 did they slightly lift this ban, although

many reproductive rights activists were unhappy with this development as they felt it was not a real win; instead, it made many high-risk situations even more dangerous for pregnant people. To better understand why activists feel this way, the following state-of-the-art chapter draws on prior research on the Maltese case before introducing the major historical developments that led to Malta's current civil rights laws.

State of the Art

Social liberal rights, such as abortion and queer rights, have often been paired in research (see Durham 2005; Edwards 2015; Eaves & Hatemi 2008). As the previous chapter has shown, most countries have either comparatively progressive LGBTQIA+ and abortion rights or are restrictive on both LGBTQIA+ and abortion rights; there are only a few outliers to this. As indicated, Malta is one of the strongest outliers, especially in the EU but also globally. This chapter aims to provide a broad overview of prior research on the topic, beginning with reflections on other global examples, such as Latin America, and then offering a narrower analysis of research on the Maltese context.

As previously outlined, this dichotomy has mostly been analysed in a Latin American context; Harwood (2023: 84) has drawn some comparisons, noting that the Catholic Church has played a prominent role in both Malta and Latin America. The two topics are often interlinked in research (see also Tabbush et al. 2019; Htun 2003; Ahluwalia 2015). Other research on Latin America has emphasised understanding the dichotomy in Church-state relations, executive leadership, framing, timing, and public opinion (Harwood 2023; Molina 2022), especially amid recent developments in Latin American countries that have lifted abortion bans and even decriminalised it. Guedira and Penford (2025) focus their research on Latin American countries and "the correlation between the variations in the severity of abortion laws and the evolution of two distinct groups of Christianity, Evangelism and Catholicism" (Guedira & Penford 2025: 130-131). This is relevant because of the growing number of Protestants and Evangelicals in Latin America and the decline in the Catholic population (Guedira & Penford 2025: 130-131). The authors found that in Brazil, for example, Evangelicals have replaced Catholics as the leading group in the anti-abortion movements (Guedira & Penford 2025: 138).

Religion is often connected in literature to the opposition of abortion; de los Ángeles Roberto (2024) outlines the position of the Catholic Church on this over the past century and how the

Church's opinion influences Latin America's position. Turiño González and Martínez Rosón (2025) further reflect on the beliefs set by the Catholic Church and how they influence Latin American legislators on abortion and queer rights.

Comparing this to Europe, Ireland, for a long time, was another case of a Catholic country with restrictive abortion and queer rights, until two referendums changed this. Turtle (2024a; 2024b), for example, focuses on religious communities in Ireland opposing abortion. Paul Blokker (2024) focuses his analysis on social movements and their potential influence on political change, particularly from the perspective of groups pushing against the liberal paradigm.

In Europe, many EU Member States have seen a resurgence of anti-gender movements in recent years, who see SRHR and LGBTQIA+ rights as a threat to traditional values and a moral danger to nuclear families (see Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Graff et al. 2019). Some of the previous research also sheds light on anti-gender mobilisation in Europe, referencing pushbacks on trans rights and abortion (see Verlooy 2024; Guasti & Bustikova 2023; Paternotte & Kuhar 2018). Gender is a joint factor in these debates. Anti-gender activists are using the narrative of wanting to protect children from the "gender ideology" (Verlooy 2024). Many anti-abortion and pro-life movements are taking a stance for the rights of the foetus or embryos, showing "a move away from religious arguments towards emotional and scientific-juridical arguments" (Verlooy 2024: 356). "Much like homonationalist discourses, arguments against feminism also inform anti-gender narratives" (Verlooy 2024: 358).

As of this year, Spain has become the number one country in Europe in ILGA's rainbow ranking, knocking Malta off its number one spot and making it second (ILGA Europe 2026a). Encarnación (2025) explains how Spain became a leader in LGBTQIA+ rights. Encarnación (2025: 96) sees the beginning in Spain's democratisation and secularisation processes in the 70s and 80s. He sees this secularisation mostly being driven by a lower Church attendance rate and has the sense that the Catholic Church's beliefs are outdated for the younger population (Encarnación 2025: 96). In 1985, Spain first partially decriminalised abortion; since 2010, it is legal up to the 14th pregnancy week (Center for Reproductive Rights 2026).

One of the most prominent researchers in Maltese social sciences is Mark Harwood, who has published several articles on Malta within the EU, including on how the Europeanisation process has affected progress in LGBTQIA+ rights in Malta (Harwood 2015: 114, see also Cachia 2023). Malta became a member of the EU in 2004 (Harwood 2023: 83). In his research, Harwood reflects on how Malta came to adopt same-sex unions and what effect the EU might have had on this process (see Harwood 2015). At the time, the EU's primary focus on LGBTQIA+ rights was on equality and anti-discrimination, not yet on the legal recognition of same-sex unions (Harwood 2015: 114). In Malta, however, the discourse was that "the state should offer same-sex couples some form of recognition and that to fail to do so constitutes discrimination incongruent with liberal democracy" (Harwood 2015: 115). The Maltese Labour Party made the promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights a massive part of their political agenda ahead of the 2013 election (Harwood 2015: 121). Harwood (2015) found that while same-sex unions being legalised in Malta may not be a direct result of the EU, his empirical research showed that without EU membership, it would have taken far longer for Malta to arrive at this point in LGBTQIA+ history (Harwood 2015: 128). Europeanisation opened doors and opportunities; it led Maltese citizens to believe they should have the same rights as other Europeans, and these, at least in part, led Malta to legalise same-sex unions in 2014 (Harwood 2015: 128).

As Malta became the LGBTQIA+ frontrunner, Mark Harwood (2023) published an article researching Malta's progressive role model position on LGBTQIA+ rights and their complete abortion ban at the time. While this thesis focuses on the legal aspects of this dichotomy, Harwood (2023: 84) analysed social movements to understand why the LGBTQIA+ and pro-choice movements experienced such different outcomes in Malta. In his analysis, he depicts how both issues "were framed and represented over the last decade" in public discourse (Harwood 2023: 87).

Moreover, for Malta, some of its research has focused on how the country became a queer rights role model (see Harwood 2014; Harwood 2023). There is limited research on Malta's feminist history, current women's rights movements (see Borg 2025) and even less so on SRHR (see Harwood 2023; Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025). Research on abortion legislation is rather limited in the Maltese context, albeit it is growing over recent years with the growth in the reproductive rights movement (Harwood 2023: 86). Pierson and Caruana-Finkel (2025) found that the reason why the dichotomy between queer rights and abortion rights is so significant

may be a result of the Labour government's top-down approach, as they primarily pushed for LGBTQIA+ rights and the public adapted (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2). The Labour Party never pushed for abortion as significantly and a relative male dominance in the Maltese LGBTQIA+ movement has seen a lack of support for reproductive rights in these groups too (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2).

Other abortion related research concerning Malta focused on the conditions of ordering the abortion pill online; Dibben et al. (2023) examined who the people are who are seeking at-home medical abortion care and their reasons for this method. Pierson and Caruana-Finkel (2021) published a briefing paper on abortion care in legally restrictive countries, such as Malta, by interviewing health care professionals on their experience of pre- and post-abortion care of patients. They continued this work in a research article, published in 2025, where they discuss abortion ignorance in Malta through the lens of feminist epistemology, and how it prevents people from accessing abortions, but also accessing information on abortion (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025). Their research showed that even many health care professionals are unsure of the legal limits and are therefore often hesitant to provide patients with information (see Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025). Additionally, they found that Malta's progressive LGBTQIA+ push was largely top-down, and that male dominance within queer rights movements has contributed to the lack of support for reproductive rights (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2).

The previous literature has established parameters for Malta's legal divergence and provided initial explanations for why the queer and reproductive rights movements developed differently. The closest research comparison is Harwood (2023), which focuses on Malta's political movements; this thesis discusses Malta's legal frameworks and provides a systematic analysis of how divergence in legal rights between queer and reproductive rights contributes to the construction of Maltese national identity. To answer the research questions, the following chapter provides a historical breakdown of Malta's legal progress over the past fifty years.

Case Study: Malta

Having outlined the contextualisation of the topic and the previous research on the dichotomy between abortion and queer rights in Malta, this chapter discusses Malta as a case study. It traces the specific historical steps that have led to the current legal situation.

Malta Today

As mentioned above, Malta was ILGA Europe's number one queer-friendly country for 10 years. However, when ILGA-Europe first published its ranking in 2010, Malta was ranked 33rd (Harwood 2023: 83-84). In 2026, it was dethroned by Spain, now number two, due to its stagnation on its path towards equality. As of June 2026, Malta allows abortion but only when the pregnant person's life is at risk, and a team of three medical professionals has to agree that an abortion is the only possibility for the pregnant person to survive. The law, ACT No. XXII of 2023 was amended and signed by the then-President, George Vella. The official legislation states:

> BE IT ENACTED by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the House of Representatives, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same as follows:
> 1. The short title of this Act is the Criminal Code (Amendment No. 3) Act, 2023 and this Act shall be read and construed as one with the Criminal Code, hereinafter referred to as "the Code".
> 2. Immediately after article 243A of the Code, there shall be added the following new article:
> 243B. No offence under sub-article (2) of article 241 or article 243 shall be committed when the cessation of a pregnancy or damage to the foetus results from a medical intervention carried out for the purpose of saving the life and protecting the health of a pregnant woman suffering from a medical complication which may put her life at immediate risk or her health in grave jeopardy which may lead to death:
> Provided that the exemption from criminal responsibility by virtue of this article shall apply only when, after having considered the medical practices current in Malta, circumstances of necessity still subsist which dictate that the medical intervention be carried out and if the following conditions are fulfilled:
> (a) in the case of a pregnant woman suffering from a medical complication which may put her life at immediate risk, the medical intervention is done when, in the reasonable opinion of the medical practitioner carrying out the intervention, the foetus has not reached the period of viability; or
> (b) in the case of a medical intervention carried out due to a medical complication which places the health of a pregnant woman in grave jeopardy which may lead to death:
>
> > (i) that in the reasonable opinion of the medical team the foetus has not reached the period of viability and cannot be delivered according to the standards of the medical profession; and
> > (ii) that the medical intervention is carried out only after the medical team has confirmed the necessity of the intervention; and
> > (iii) that the medical intervention is carried out in a licensed hospital having the facilities required for the necessary medical intervention to be carried out;
> > (c) for the purposes of this article:
> > "medical team" means three (3) medical practitioners registered as specialists with the Medical Council under the Health Care Professions Act,

> two (2) of whom being obstetricians or gynaecologists, one (1) of whom being the obstetrician who carries out the intervention, and the third medical practitioner being a specialist in the condition from which the pregnant woman is suffering;
> "period of viability" means the point in a pregnancy at which the foetus is capable of living outside the uterus according to current medical practices. (Criminal Code Amendment No. 3 Act, 2023).

The Act was passed by the House of Representatives at Sitting No. 140 of the 28th of June 2023. This amendment provided the given exceptions to the complete abortion ban, which is outlined in the "Criminal Code of Malta, under Title VIII 'of Crimes against the Person,' Subtitle VII, Articles 241-243A" which "criminalises both the person accessing the abortion and whoever assists in the termination" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3). If found guilty, a pregnant person may be charged with up to 3 years in prison and the health professional assisting might lose their medical license and risk up to 4 years in prison (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3).

The legal change in June 2023 moved Malta to the second place in most restrictive abortion rights in Europe, with Andorra in top position, as they still have a complete abortion ban, similar to the one Malta had before 2023 (EPF 2025). Although Andorra's abortion law is under discussion for change too (INFOVATICANA 2026). In the EU, Malta has the most restrictive one, followed by Poland, which only "allow abortion exclusively in cases where a woman's life or health is at risk or when the pregnancy results from sexual violence" (Center for Reproductive Rights 2025). Overall, there are only five countries (listed in order from most restrictive: Andorra, Malta, Liechtenstein, Poland, Monaco) in Europe that "do not allow abortion on request or on broad socio-economic grounds" (Center for Reproductive Rights 2025).

Historical Perspective

The question remains: how did Malta arrive at this legislative situation? Catholicism has had a significant role in Malta. The Catholic Church's influence is even recognised in the Constitution, which states that "[t]he authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach what principles are right and which are wrong" (Constitution of Malta 1964: Art.2(2)). The Church was directly involved in politics, "declaring in the 1930s that it was a mortal sin to vote for parties promoting a separating of Church and State" (Harwood 2023: 88). Historically, the Labour Party was increasingly seen as the Church's

principal antagonist since Malta's independence from the UK in 1964 (Harwood 2014: 118; Harwood 2023: 83). In 1960, this was exemplified as the Church declared that "it was a mortal sin to read the PL's newspapers or vote for the party and interdicted its leaders" (Harwood 2014: 118). Moreover, the Church has had closer ties to the PN, while the PL are considered more secular (Harwood 2023: 88). To this day, most of the population identify themselves as Catholic (see also Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025; Harwood 2023). However, the Church's influence has declined, with weekly Church attendance having decreased significantly and younger generations opting out of religion classes in school (Harwood 2023: 88).

During British colonisation, anti-sodomy laws were introduced in Malta through the British penal code until the PL were in power and decriminalised homosexuality in 1973 and adapted an equal age of consent that was set for both same-sex and different-sex activity (Harwood 2023: 88). While the PN was in power from 2004-2013, progress towards LGBTQIA+ equality remained limited as the party remained largely hostile towards queer civil rights, nevertheless, they did extend civil rights in 2008 "to the LGBTIQ community due to the obligation to download EU anti-discrimination laws and in the face of the European's Commission's threat to open an infringement procedure against Malta" (Harwood 2024: 4).

Malta Post-Divorce Referendum

A major jumping point that indirectly led to Malta's progressive push was Malta's divorce referendum in 2011 (Harwood 2023: 83). "Malta became the last European country to legalise divorce" (Deguara 2020: 373). When the referendum was held, the Nationalist Party, which was in power at the time, did not expect the public to vote in favour of divorce; the party and the Church were rattled, and a collective shift was evident in Maltese society and politics (Harwood 2015: 120). The PN struggled with bridging its "internal discord between its progressive and ultra-conservative members" (Harwood 2015: 120). Moreover, the PL used the period following the 2008 election to its advantage by completely rebranding itself as the progressive party that pushed for LGBTQIA+ rights (Harwood 2015: 120, 123).

The divorce referendum was a significant turning point for progressive rights, as it was considered a "moral issue" in Malta, which eventually led to a decrease in the influence of the PN and the Church in Malta (Harwood 2015: 123). At the time, divorce was discussed within its religious frameworks, implicating it as a matter of morality (Harwood 2015: 123). Seeing

as “the Church was unable to sway voters on a ‘moral’ issue had huge implications for both parties” (Harwood 2015: 123).

However, this came to the advantage of the Labour Party. Joseph Muscat, the then leader of the PL, wanted to turn Malta into the queer progressive leader in Europe (Harwood 2015: 120-121). In 2009, the PL founded its own LGBT branch within the party, which even had some informal links to the MGRM, the biggest queer rights NGO in Malta (Harwood 2015: 121). With the support of the party’s youth forum, LGBT Labour was founded in Malta (Harwood 2015: 122). This ensured activists a guaranteed link to a major political party and the opportunity to engage in political discussions (Harwood 2015: 125). After the divorce referendum’s result in 2011, the PL pledged to legalise same-sex unions, and a substantial shift in Maltese society could be seen (Harwood 2015: 121). At the same time, the PN pledged to draft a cohabitation bill for same-sex couples, which would apply to all individuals living together, including siblings (Harwood 2015: 121). The PN bill faced backlash from queer rights activists, further reducing public support for the party (Harwood 2015: 121).

In the meantime, Maltese public opinion had shifted significantly by this point; Harwood (2015), quoting a Eurobarometer poll which “in 2006 showed only 18 per cent of Maltese supporting gay marriage, 2012 polls showed the number to have risen to 41 per cent, with 60 per cent of 18-35-year-olds in favour of same-sex marriage” (Harwood 2015, 121). The younger generation, at the time, was largely in favour of queer rights. Harwood (2023: 88) shared that surveys in 2008 found that only 7% of Maltese citizens agreed with same-sex couples getting to adopt, this was the lowest rate in the EU (Harwood 2023: 88). And even though people’s overall attitude towards queer people had improved since the 1980s, 73% of Maltese in 2008 still believed that it was proper for the Church to speak out against homosexuality (Harwood 2023: 88). Thus, the public opinion was not exactly in favour of LGBTQIA+ rights and when the Nationalist Party won the 2008 elections, it was only by a thin margin, leaving them in a vulnerable position (Harwood 2023: 89).

From the elections in 2008 to 2013, the PL elected “a new leader whose central aim was to rebrand the party into a socially progressive movement” and the public demand for same-sex civil unions increased, which the PN adamantly prohibited (Harwood 2023: 89). Thus, at the 2013 election, the Labour Party won a nine-seat majority in Parliament thanks to their progressive queer agenda and “Malta went from being relatively hostile to LGBT rights to a

poster boy for LGBT equality within a month" (Harwood 2015: 122). The PL turned from an anti-EU party towards supporting EU membership (see Harwood 2015; Harwood 2023) by arguing that LGBTQIA+ rights were "simply an extension of the same rights granted across Europe" (Harwood 2015: 124). Malta's biggest queer rights NGO, MGRM, believed that EU membership had a major impact on the rapid progress of Malta's queer rights (Harwood 2015: 125).

After the Labour Party ran their electoral campaign on LGBTQIA+ rights ahead of the 2013 general election, the Civil Union Act was signed into law in 2014 - the first step towards Malta's queer role model position. Emboldened by a younger generation with more progressive beliefs, the new PL government established a Consultative Council for LGBTIQ Rights, which was central for Malta's expanding LGBTQIA+ rights (Harwood 2023: 89). Most interestingly, there was no major public outcry or backlash to PL's queer agenda, instead they proceeded to win by an even bigger margin in 2017 with a pledge to legalise marriage equality which "became the first piece of legislation enacted by the new parliament" (Harwood 2023: 84).

Development of Women's Rights and SRHR in Malta

In comparison, women's rights, including abortion, have followed a slightly different path in Malta. In 1947, the "British colonial government granted universal adult suffrage to all citizens aged 21 and over, regardless of gender", this applied for Malta who only gained independence in 1964 (redyellowblue.org n.d., see also Harwood 2023: 90). Despite Maltese women's key role during the Second World War, the Catholic Church in Malta expressed "intense resentment against the notions of 'equal rights' for women and 'women's emancipation'" (Sammut 2022: 10). For many countries the awareness and advocacy for SRHRs greatly increased "during the Decade of Women between 1975 and 1985 when SRHRs approached the status of soft law in international law" (Sammut 2022: 10-11). Nevertheless, Malta did not endorse these rights, and before the legal change in 2023, Malta had "never updated its abortion laws since the mid-1850s" (Sammut 2022: 11).

Thus, Malta never followed the same traditional four-wave path of feminism as many other European countries (see Sammut 2022). For example, some of the typical "notions that are associated with the second-wave feminism, like abortion, are only emerging" now in the 2020s (Sammut 2022: 11).

Concerning the history of SRHR, "Maltese Catholic authorities in 1962 introduced free family planning clinics" which were "manned by volunteer doctors" and only promoted the "rhythm method[1]" as a form of contraception (Savona-Ventura 2010: 15). While the Roman Catholic Church opposed other "unnatural methods of contraception", the birth control pill hit Maltese health markets in the 1960s alongside other European countries, however, its usage remained controversial (Savona-Ventura 2010: 16). Thus, the first time the oral contraceptive was "advertised in the Maltese medical literature in 1967 [it] was primarily marketed for menstrual cycle control" and not as a contraceptive (Savona-Ventura 2010: 16). This was reflected in Maltese society, who "retained its conservative attitude towards contraceptive practices" in the 1960s and 1970s (Savona-Ventura 2010: 16). This changed significantly with "introduction of state-managed family planning clinics in 1982" (Savona-Ventura 2010: 16). In the state-run clinics, all methods of contraception were freely advertised and provided, outside of abortion as it remained illegal (Savona-Ventura 2010: 16-17). These family planning clinics "have not been operational since the late 1980s," and there are currently no such clinics available, although civil rights organisations have opened a family planning advisory service where people can reach out for help (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 287; FPAS.mt 2026). Some of the services are now integrated into general health centres; however, contraceptives are no longer provided free of charge by the state (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 287). Sex education and contraception continue to be a taboo subject (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 288). Some methods of contraception are more controversial than others, for example, the morning-after pill, which "has only been approved by the respective medical authorities and made available in Malta since late 2016, following a judicial protest filed by Malta's Women's Rights Foundation (WRF)" (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 288). Access to the morning-after pill remains limited, as it is not stocked by all pharmacies or hospitals, and some may present as conscientious objectors and decline to provide it (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel, 2019: 288). In 2019, Malta also saw "the expansion of [UK-based] Abortion Support Network's services […], and the launch of the volunteer-run family planning and pregnancy advisory service (FPAS)" which provides unbiased information on sexual and reproductive health and their providers in Malta (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3, see also Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025). The FPAS is a coalition of three NGOs: Doctors for Choice Malta, Women for Women

[1] "The rhythm method, also called the calendar method or the calendar rhythm method, is a form of natural family planning. To use the rhythm method, you track your menstrual history to predict when you'll ovulate. This helps you determine when you're most likely to conceive." (Mayo Clinic 2023)

Foundation, and Women's Rights Foundation (Harwood 2023: 91). "[A]nd the Abortion Doula Support Service followed in 2023" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 3).

Simultaneously, rogue crisis pregnancy agencies exist which spread misinformation and offer misleading advice or maybe even intimidate pregnant persons, to keep them from seeking factual medical advice and receiving abortion care (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 11). In Malta, the Life Network is the major group using similar tactics to prevent women* from gaining accurate reproductive health information (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 11). Moreover, the Church's Cana Movement are still teaching "natural" family standards and people who want to marry in the Church have to partake in their pre-marital course (Harwood 2023: 92). Through various media outlets, the Church has other ways to communicate with the wider population (Harwood 2023: 92). Other anti-abortion and pro-life groups in Malta include 'Gift of Life', 'Malta Unborn Child Movement', and the online group 'Abortion in Malta? Not in My Name' has a large following that exceeds the pro-choice group 'Doctors for Choice' following (Harwood 2023: 92-93).

"Whilst the provision of information is legal, there is confusion over the legality of providing information about abortion services" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 6). This may prevent health professionals from sharing sexual and reproductive health advice with their patients, as they fear being persecuted, considering there is no standard route (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 6-7). Doctors, who themselves participated in pro-choice activism, were much more knowledgeable about the legalities relating to abortion, and pre- and post-abortion care (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 7).

When Malta became a member of the EU, it requested a specific protocol on abortion, meaning that the EU has no impact on Malta's national legislation on abortion (Protocol No. 7 on Abortion in Malta 2003, EUR-Lex 2003; see also Sammut 2022). International organisations have spoken out asking Malta to legalise abortion, as it is a human right, a right to health, and a right to equality (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 288). "In 2017, the CoE's Commissioner for Human Rights stated that Malta needed to reform its abortion laws" (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 288). Malta was asked to align its laws with international standards, regional best practices, and European human rights law (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019: 288).

Because of this, abortion became a prominent issue during the 2019 European Parliament elections (Harwood 2023: 90). Maltese MEPs often vote against any "EP resolutions promoting access to abortion" (Harwood 2023: 93). Even the election of the EP president, Roberta Metsola, in 2022 was muddied by the abortion debate (Harwood 2023: 93). This shows how deeply entrenched the anti-abortion belief is in Maltese society and the nation's identity. So deeply, that Malta's far-right party Alleanza Bidla has promoted efforts "to enshrine the ban on abortion into the constitution," which has been endorsed by the PN and the far-right. Neither the PL nor the Greens have endorsed this, with the Green Party recently also supporting the decriminalisation of abortion (Harwood 2023: 93).

In 2014, at the same time the Civil Union Act was signed into law, Malta's parliament was only 13% women, which was "the lowest share of women in a European national parliament" (The Borgen Project 2022; see also Cutajar 2014). In 2022, Malta introduced a "corrective mechanism to ensure greater female representation in parliament" because of this "an additional 12 seats were allocated for women in the 2022 general election with parliament now having 25% of the MPs being women" (Harwood 2023: 98). In Malta's most recent election, in 2026 Malta elected 27 women out of 79 members of parliament (Azzopardi 2026a). As of June 2026, Malta ranks 16th in EIGE's (2025) EU Gender Equality Index, with a score of 58.9 points out of 100 (EIGE 2025). While Malta has seen one of the most significant changes in the EU in this Index over the past ten years, it still performs below the EU average on gender equality, indicating that a patriarchal belief system prevails (EIGE 2025). Even in other gender equality indices, Malta continues to score poorly internationally (Harwood 2023: 90). Patriarchal beliefs and traditional gender roles are persistent, preventing women* from fully participating in public and private life (OHCHR 2023).

Abortion in Malta's unequal society remains taboo. In the media, abortion continues to be discussed from an ethical-moral perspective, mostly from the perspective of pro-life views promoting the opinion that "abortion is intrinsically wrong because it takes human life", equating abortion with murder in public discussion (Vella n.d.). However, the use of social media has furthered the discussion. It is now an ongoing debate, especially since a stronger pro-choice movement was established in 2019 (Sammut 2022: 11). As an example, for social media's wide reach is the now closed Facebook group "Women for Women (Malta)" which provided a safe space for many to discuss all women's issues (Sammut 2022: 11). The group

having over 45,000 members at the time of closing giving space for broad discussions (Sammut 2022: 11).

Recent Developments

In 2019, a pro-choice movement was founded in a more formalised manner in Malta, when the Voice for Choice coalition was created (Sammut 2022: 11; Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3). Voice for Choice coalition was originally made up of six organisations, such as Women's Rights Foundation, Doctors for Choice, and Allied Healthcare for Choice, although it now has 10 member organisations (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3; Harwood 2023: 93; Voice for Choice 2026). This brought the abortion debate into the public sphere. "Platforms such as Break the Taboo Malta provide a space for those who have had abortions to tell their stories" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3). This has allowed pro-choice activists to network and assemble themselves better, making the private public and political (Sammut 2022: 11). However, the pro-choice movement has no direct connection within the political parties, the same as the LGBTQIA+ issue network, instead the pro-life groups are more strongly intertwined in Maltese society and political life (Harwood 2023: 92). LGBTQIA+ issue networks were able to hook into the establishment, while pro-choice networks were not (Harwood 2023: 91-93).

Malta's biggest LGBTQIA+ rights groups are Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM) (2001), Aditus (2011) and Drachma (2004), all founded in different years respectively, while the major pro-choice coalition was only founded in 2019. MGRM was the first formal queer rights organisation to be established in Malta. But while the PN was still in power, LGBTQIA+ progress was limited. Only after the divorce referendum and the PL winning the 2013 election did Malta see major progress in LGBTQIA+ rights and the promotion of the collective LGBTQIA+ civil rights agenda (Harwood 2015: 127; Harwood 2023: 88). This was further reinforced during the 2017 elections (Harwood 2023: 89).

In 2014, Malta amended their Constitution "to protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity as well as banning conversion therapy and outlawing sterilisation and invasive surgery on intersex people" (Harwood 2018: 57). They further implemented the Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act of 2015 (Harwood 2018: 57). And the PL government published an LGBTQIA+ Action Plan (2015-2017) in 2015, outlining their national reforms, but also listing the priorities for international

relations and Malta's leading position in LGBTQIA+ civil rights (Harwood 2024: 8). In 2017 Malta introduced same-sex marriage and adoption (Gravino & Caruana-Finkel 2019; see also Harwood 2023: 89). The second LGBTQIA+ Action Plan (2018-2022) published in 2017 specified the country's work on LGBTQIA+ promotion abroad, further implementing Malta's position as queer civil rights role model (Harwood 2024: 8). By 2016 Malta was ranked first in ILGA Europe's LGBTQIA+ rights ranking (ILGA Europe 2026a). The public sentiment fully transformed alongside Malta's legislation. According to a Eurobarometer survey, quoted by Harwood (2023) in 2019, "73% (76%) of respondents agreed with LGB people having the same rights as heterosexual people and 67% (69%) agreed with same-sex marriage across Europe (the EU average is provided in brackets)" (Harwood 2023: 89-90). Framing has had a specific impact on this, as LGBTQIA+ rights are seen as human rights by the public, while abortion remains a moral issue; traditionally, it is often framed as taking the life of an 'unborn child', while pro-choice activists frame abortion as a matter of gender equality and reproductive rights (Harwood 2023: 90).

In its Council of the EU Presidency in 2017, Malta committed to leading "in the area of social inclusion" (Harwood 2018: 54). The government's three priorities were "improvement of female participation in the labour market, efforts to combat gender-based violence and, finally, LGBTIQ issues" (Harwood 2018: 54).

Today, anti-abortion sentiment is moving away from the religious arguments towards bioethics and medico-legal matters (Sammut 2022: 11). Nevertheless, the anti-abortion indoctrination runs deep, considering that for decades Maltese people were influenced by the teachings of the Church (Sammut 2022: 11). Even in schools, generations were taught improper sexual education and "subjected to antiabortionist perspectives via viewings of the controversial documentary 'The Silent Scream'" (Sammut 2022: 11). The film showing graphic images without proper sex education scaring many people for life (Sammut 2022: 11).

In line with the Church's influence having decreased, the "modern" Maltese society may believe that people deserve to live their lives as long as it does not harm others, which may explain the dichotomy between LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2). If by the Church's standards life begins at conception, having an abortion is intentionally harming a life, while queer people being themselves does not cause harm to others per the same logic (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2).

As is the case in all countries with restrictive abortion laws, they do not prevent people from having abortions, instead pregnant people might travel to other countries to receive abortion health care (Sammut 2022: 11). Historically women in Malta, who could afford it would travel abroad to have an abortion, the backstreet abortions have not been the norm, as it might be the case in other countries with restrictive abortion rights (Dibben et al. 2023: 2). Or they may order the abortion pill online through providers such as Women Help Women and Women on Web (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 5). It is estimated that approximately 500 people access abortion in Malta every year (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 3). Nevertheless, traveling only makes abortion accessible for some women*, not for all. Many women* cannot afford to travel, or they may be unable to do so because of logistical reasons, e.g., attending to care work makes it more challenging, especially if they have to keep the reason for their travels secret from their families (Dibben et al. 2023: 2).

During the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown, these challenges were exacerbated since borders closed and people were unable to travel. At that time, many women ordered abortion pills online, by doing so they opened themselves to potential criminal liability if they were found out to have taken the abortion pill in Malta (Dibben et al. 2023: 2). Many online providers saw an increase in abortion pill orders from Malta during the pandemic (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 12). The lockdown further drawing the public's attention to abortion. In 2019 a poll found "that it is merely 9.2% of the population that supports the decriminalisation of abortion" (Sammut 2022: 12). Although, "37.4% were inclined to support the legalisation of abortion in case the mother's life was in danger and 20.2% if the foetus shows signs that the child would suffer severe disabilities" (Sammut 2022: 12). And in 2021 an independent MP presented a bill to decriminalise abortion, the bill was, however, dismissed (Borg 2025: 21). George Vella, Malta's president at the time and a member of the Labour Party, went as far as saying that he would rather resign than sign an abortion bill into law (Arena 2021). Moreover, the most significant factor influencing Malta's abortion rights in the late 2010s and early 2020s, aside from what has been outlined thus far, is the Andrea Prudente case in June 2022.

Andrea Prudente was on holiday in Malta in June 2022, at 16 weeks pregnant, suffering from a miscarriage, and went to the hospital in Malta. The pregnancy needed to be terminated. However, because the baby's heart was still beating, the doctors were unable to help due to the complete abortion ban at the time. All they could do was wait for the baby's heart to stop

beating. Waiting for this to happen could have had serious medical consequences for Andrea Prudente, even leading to her death. One of the midwives at the hospital suggested that doctors might only be able to help her once she is on the brink of death because of Malta's abortion legislation. For an entire week, Andrea Prudente had to wait in Malta's hospital for either her body to naturally expel the foetus or for her condition to become life-threatening. This had severe impacts on the expecting couple's mental health. Eventually, they managed to secure a medical evacuation to Spain, where Andrea Prudente could be treated. Her pregnancy was terminated in Spain. This case led to some Maltese politicians speaking out against the complete abortion ban in Malta, eventually leading to the 2023 legal change. (Monetta 2022).

Andrea Prudente wanted this child and was heartbroken when she lost it. This case is a perfect example that the procedure known as an "abortion" is also necessary in other cases, such as miscarriages and therefore affects more people than just the ones who wish to seek out an abortion freely. Another legal case that caused public uproar was when a pregnant domestic violence survivor "was faced with a provisional injunction placed on her person, prohibiting her from traveling, following false allegations by her abusive ex-partner that she planned to travel abroad for an abortion" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 9). Even though the woman wanted to continue with the pregnancy and abortion being legal outside of Malta, the woman faced a warrant preventing her from travelling which was eventually revoked, but the police kept her passport for 8 days (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 9).

Additionally, a survey conducted by MaltaToday (2022), after the publicity of Andrea Prudente's case, found that most younger people between 16 and 35 years old in Malta support the legalisation of abortion, whether unconditional or depending on the case (Sansone 2022). The survey also found that Labour voters were more likely to be in favour of legalising abortion than PN voters (Sansone 2022).

Regardless, abortion remains a divisive topic that is highly stigmatised in Malta, which means that reproductive health information is often lacking and leaves the door wide open for misinformation to be spread (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 12). Activists, pro-choice doctors and pro-choice groups are threatened personally, legally, and professionally (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 12). They may even have to deal with the police for their pro-choice activism (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 12). Representatives from both major parties have made anti-abortion statements (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3-4). The government even

supports anti-abortion groups, for example the Life Network Foundation which received governmental funding for one of their shelters (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 12). Moreover, the lack of public health information is upheld leaving space for anti-abortion groups to spread misinformation which makes it more "difficult to challenge societal ignorance on abortion and reproductive health more broadly" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 13). Considering that pro-choice groups do not receive funding from the government, they often do not have the same reach as state-funded organisations (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 17). Even though the first sexual health policy was published in 2010, the updated version was only published in 2024 (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 14).

In 2021, "Volt Malta became the first pro-choice political party in Malta" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 3-4). By 2026, the AD+PD, also known as the Green Party, became the second party to support the decriminalisation of abortion (AD+PD 2026).

As of now Malta's abortion ban may have slightly softened in theory with the 2023 legislation change, in practice this is not an improvement from the status quo, which is why the legal change has been wildly criticised by national and international NGOs (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 2). Even before the legal change, Malta's doctors were mostly practising that if a pregnant person's life were at risk, they would terminate the pregnancy; however, now, due to the change in legislation, doctors would now have to find two other doctors first to co-sign their opinion, making it immensely more difficult for pregnant people to receive lifesaving healthcare (Pierson & Caruana Finkel 2025: 2-3).

As previously mentioned, since 2026, Malta no longer ranks first in ILGA Europe's LGBTQIA+ ranking; it is now second (ILGA Europe 2026a). This is due to Malta's queer rights stagnation in recent years, which might be due to Joseph Muscat (PL Prime Minister from 2013 to 2020) resigning in 2020, after months of political unrest, as he was then replaced by Robert Abela, who is less associated with queer rights (Harwood 2024: 10). Additionally, Helena Dalli, the Maltese Minister for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties from 2013-2017 was one of the strongest and strongest promoters of LGBTQIA+ rights moved from domestic to EU politics in 2019, meaning that Malta lost another significant figure in the LGBTQIA+ civil rights push (Harwood 2024: 10). Since then, Malta has focused more broadly on social inclusion, giving broader focus to gender equality rights, e.g., gender reforms in women*'s political participation and SRHRs (Harwood 2024: 10).

This completes the basis for Malta's current legal status regarding SRHRs and LGBTQIA+ laws and explains how the country has arrived at this point. This outlined dichotomy is precisely where the empirical research of this thesis begins, to answer the research questions on *which factors contribute towards there not being a correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta and how this divergence contributes to the construction of Maltese national identity.*

To answer this question, I have conducted expert interviews, in addition to media and electoral program analysis. Before presenting the results, the following chapter outlines the methodological approach.

Methodology

To begin, when I first learned about the dichotomy between SRHRs and LGBTQIA+, I found very little prior research on the topic, as discussed in the state-of-the-art chapter. This has led to greater interest and made me want to properly understand why this dichotomy may exist, especially since similar research papers have been published on Latin America, but very little on Malta. For my analysis, I have conducted expert interviews on various SRHR and LGBTQIA+ legislation. In addition, I have added the Maltese political parties' programs ahead of the 2026 election, along with a media analysis, to provide the current context of the legal and political situation in Malta through discourse analysis.

It is important to note that, as a researcher and someone interested in politics, I have my own biases and opinions on this topic. Throughout the research process, I made sure to remain aware of this and to question my own ideas and assumptions to ensure an accurate, integrity-driven process. Especially during the data-gathering period of this research, this was a high priority. I deliberately considered every possible viewpoint. I repeatedly asked myself what the interviewee was trying to say, what they meant, and what could be learned from this information.

Considering there has been almost no research on this topic and that the research is meant to shed light on a specific case rather than offer a broad generalisation, it became clear that this qualitative research paper uses an inductive approach. Qualitative research allows the researcher to see the research topic through the interviewee's perspective (El-Mafaalani et al.

2016: 62). Because of the limited available data, an empirical research project made the most sense and due to the focus on legislation and the specific research interest, qualitative expert interviews would be the most efficient approach to answer the research questions. The interviews took place in 2023 and 2024. However, only a limited group of people were reached through the interviews; thus, I have also included an analysis of online newspaper articles and the 2026 party programmes as part of my research process.

Due to the limited frame of this thesis and the fact that I do not understand Maltese, I focused on the two biggest English newspapers in Malta, 'Times of Malta' and 'MaltaToday', and the time frame from January 2024 to May 2026, by searching for any mention of LGBTQIA+ or abortion rights, as well as related terminology[2]. The media research focused primarily on mentions of abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights, as well as most recently the 2026 general election. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, I have excluded some articles from the analysis if they referred only to one of the terms and the article's actual discussion focused on a different topic. Additionally, for the electoral programs, only the sections on women's rights, SRHRs, and LGBTQIA+ rights were coded, as the rest were not relevant to the analysis. For the analysis of the interviews, grounded theory was used, and media analysis and electoral programs were analysed using critical discourse analysis. This allows the theory produced through the grounded theory methodology to be embedded within Malta's current legal and political-historical context.

After the original background research and media review, I started reaching out[3] to experts in queer rights, reproductive rights and ideally both. This included mostly people in academia, human rights researchers, and media representatives. To broaden the analysis, I also reached out to influential individuals with their own agendas, including politicians, activists, and representatives from the Catholic Church. Initially, I reached out to almost fifty people and organisations via email. More people were reached through personal contacts with participants or other Maltese people I met while travelling in Malta. Unfortunately, I was only able to secure interviews with ten people. During the initial contact, I made sure to reach out to representatives from both ends of the spectrum, i.e., for and against queer rights, and for and against

[2] Media Analysis, Terms Searched in MaltaToday and Times of Malta Online Publications from 2024 to 2026: SRHR, abortion, termination, foetus, baby, gay (rights), queer (rights), trans (rights), intersex (rights), LGBT(QIA+), same-sex, gender, equality, diversity.
[3] See copy of information sheet and data security & consent form in the Appendix.

reproductive rights. Many people were hesitant to speak to me because of the stigma associated with abortion in Malta; with two people specifically, we exchanged many emails before the interview was set to take place. Unfortunately, only one of the two decided to participate.

Considering Malta's relatively small population, many people know each other or know of each other. This became abundantly clear throughout the interview process, when participants would guide me towards people to interview and sometimes even suggest people I had already spoken with. Therefore, to protect participants, I am sharing very little identifying information. It is important to note that some research participants may fall into more than one category, e.g., experts and activists or academics and doctors; however, I am only recording the identifying category that was the reason I reached out to them. As an arbitrary example, if I reached out to a doctor who also conducts academic research and is politically active, I would record them as a doctor because this is how I was introduced to them and how I prepared the interview. Aside from that, they might still have shared a perspective during the interview that they might only be aware of because of their work as an activist. The interviews have been pseudonymized and will be cited as Interviews 1, 2, 3, etc. As previously outlined, the interviewees' roles may be relevant for the analysis; hence, the following table shows their roles as follows:

Interview 1	Political representative (left) - male
Interview 2	Expert (Academia) - male
Interview 3	Expert (Academia and LGBTQIA+ Activism) - male
Interview 4	Expert (Academia and Catholic Church representative) - male
Interview 5	Political representative (centre) - male
Interview 6	Has not been considered, due to missing written consent
Interview 7	Activist (Women's Rights) - female
Interview 8	Expert (Policy and Human Rights Work) - male
Interview 9	Expert (Academia and Human Rights Researcher) - female
Interview 10	Activist (Gender based Violence Prevention and Abortion Rights) - male

Table 1: Description of Interview Partners and their Roles

Unfortunately, upon my initial contact asking people to talk about abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights in Malta, I received almost no responses. If people did respond, it was to decline my

interview request. Upon further review, I decided not to lead with the term “abortion” in the heading and asked people to discuss reproductive rights and LGBTQIA+ rights in Malta, although I made sure they knew abortion was part of my research. Thankfully, this seemed to do the trick as the first interviewee partners were found. Fortunately, I was able to travel to Malta for a week in July 2023 to conduct this research, although, due to time constraints from interview partners and my short time there, most of the interviews still took place online via Zoom. Two of the interviews were conducted in person. All interviews were recorded either directly via Zoom or by phone, to be transcribed by me later. The recordings happened with the informed consent of the participants. Overall, I conducted 10 interviews over 13 months using an iterative approach, continuously alternating between data collection and analysis. The interviews lasted anywhere from 40 to 90 minutes. As more interviews were conducted, I adjusted my interview questionnaire to ensure all research gaps were filled. This eventually led to theoretical saturation, as the interviews did not provide any new information. The interview process was completed.

Since the interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024, I decided it would be best to contextualise the findings in the current political climate in Malta by supplementing my empirical data with a discourse analysis of newspaper articles and electoral programs. This triangulation strengthens the empirical research and ensures that the findings are situated within the most current political and legal context in Malta.

The newspaper articles were selected based on the language and temporal criteria outlined above. Considering that Malta held elections on 30 May 2026, it made sense to look at the electoral programs as well to see how parties’ opinions have developed over the past years. For this, I read 217 articles and five of the seven[4] electoral programmes of parties running in the 2026 election. Unfortunately, the webpage for Imperium Europa has not been available, and I could not find any trustworthy secondary literature that shared the party’s electoral campaign; hence, they have not been included in the analysis. I have also not analysed the electoral programs of the independent candidates, as this was not possible within the frame of the thesis.

[4] Seven political parties ran in Malta’s 2026 general elections. In the election, 312,129 votes were cast, out of those 306,036 were valid, and 6,093 were invalid. These are the parties who ran for election and the votes they received in parentheses: AD+PD (3,996 / 1.31%), Aħwa Maltin (1,845 / 0.60%), Imperium Europa (167 / 0.05%), Momentum (4,700 / 1.54%), Partit Laburista (158,444 / 51.77%), Partit Nazzjonalista (136,723 / 44.68%), Independent Candidates (161 / 0.05%). Thus, the Labour Party won the election for the fourth time in a row since 2013. (Electoral Commission Malta 2026).

As these are the two groups with the fewest votes, it has been deemed acceptable to exclude them from this. Notably, Volt Malta, the party that first advocated for the decriminalisation of abortion, did not run in the 2026 elections. Some of the parties shared their electoral program only in Maltese; as I do not speak the language, I used Google Translate to translate them from Maltese to English. Unfortunately, this could mean that some of the more subtle meanings may have been lost. The party programs that have been computer-translated include those from the following political parties: AD+PD, Aħwa Malti, Partit Laburista, Partit Nazzjonalista. Having outlined the collected data and before continuing with the methodology, the following chapters reflect on research limitations and possible ethical concerns.

Research Limitations

Before completing the project methodology and research process chapter, this section addresses the thesis's limitations. Ideally, I would have preferred to get a more diverse group of people for the interviews. For example, I reached out to various representatives from centre-right Maltese groups, but none agreed to be interviewed. I had a strong sense that even people I interviewed who opposed queer rights or SRHRs were hesitant to say so, which may have prevented them from sharing things that could be relevant to the analysis, particularly the political and societal context that led to the current legal situation in Malta. However, I have managed to reach several experts in this area, who have either worked on SRHRs, LGBTQIA+ rights, or both in Malta for decades. Additionally, especially intersectional experiences of queer and pregnant people were rarely discussed in the interviews; I have tried to supplement this with the limited existing literature.

I have added the analysis of newspaper articles and electoral programs to broaden, update, and contextualise my analysis. However, because months had passed in between, the initial interview analysis was already almost complete by the time the analysis of newspaper articles and electoral programmes began. As the research process continued, it was crucial for me to continually question my preconceived notions.

On another note, the qualitative researcher’s own experiences, values, and perspectives are brought to the research process and it is essential to remember this critically (Charmaz 2006: 67; El-Mafaalani et al. 2016: 65). This shapes the entire research process, including how data is collected, interpreted, and analysed (Charmaz 2006: 67; El-Mafaalani et al. 2016: 65). Given that this topic is often seen as highly controversial and polarising, it was even more

important for me to stay as close as possible to the collected data. Moreover, I consistently engaged in reflexive practices, questioning my own assumptions and critically examined my interpretations at each stage of the analysis.

Research Ethics

From the beginning, I was very aware of ongoing political debates regarding this topic and how people affected by LGBTQIA+ and SRHR rights were often part of vulnerable communities. Especially considering the legal situation in Malta and the potential fear of facing criminal charges for people who have had abortions, I decided early on not to include queer people and people who have had an abortion, due to the ethical background of not wanting to "use" people's experiences when it is not necessary. Since my research focuses on the legal context in Malta, including people's personal experiences was not essential anyway.

Considering the Maltese context, the country's size, and the fact that everyone knows each other, it has also been crucial to ensure the safety of participants' data and identities. For example, if I wrote in my analysis that a politician from the Nationalist Party spoke to me about their work on LGBTQIA+ rights, people in Malta would be very likely to identify this person. This concern was raised in more than one interview. Thus, my research goal has been to ensure that people's identities remain safe while providing sufficient context for each participant to contextualise the interview results.

Additionally, during the initial contact, one of the participants - with whom I exchanged several messages ahead of the interview - expressed concerns about how their words would be interpreted and whether I would misconstrue what they said, as it had happened to them in the past. Through several conversations, I reassured them that I had no political agenda and was looking to understand the legal situation by analysing it with the highest ethical standards. I also made it clear to all participants that if, at any point before, during, or after the interview, they changed their minds about their participation, or wanted to change, add to, or delete something from the interview record, it would be completely up to them. Informed consent has been key throughout the research process.

Coding and Analysis

Interviews

Ahead of the interviews, all participants received an information and data security sheet that provided basic research background and details on how their data would be recorded, stored, and used throughout the research process. All participants were asked to sign their consent before the interview started. One of the participants forgot and, at the beginning of the interview, reassured me that they agreed to be recorded and to have their data used for this research; however, they never provided me with their written consent, even after multiple follow-ups. So, while I was given verbal consent during the interview, I have not used the data gathered from this interview for this thesis, as I lack written consent and the person may have changed their mind given their unresponsiveness. Thus, nine out of the ten interviews have been analysed alongside media outputs and electoral programmes. All three sources were coded and compared using the grounded theory methodology and interpreted through the lens of the Discourse Historical Approach.

The interviews were semi-structured, as I had prepared questionnaires in advance. Considering the specificity of the topic, it was important that the interviews would cover certain topics while leaving enough freedom for interviewees to share as broadly as possible about what they considered relevant, allowing topics to arise that I may not have considered previously. Considering that the goal was to reach experts, as well as actors from politics, human rights organisations, and representatives of the Catholic Church, I had a generalised questionnaire[5] that included all general questions, as well as specific questions for the individual representatives. Ahead of each interview, I compiled a new questionnaire made up of questions from the original generalised questionnaire. As interviews progressed and my analysis revealed new findings and gaps, did I incorporate additional questions to reach theoretical saturation. The questionnaire was primarily used as a guide to ensure that specific topics were covered. This meant that if interviewees discussed a topic that would have been considered later in the interview, I followed the chronological structure of the individual interview rather than jumping back and forth between topics. Sometimes questions were answered without me asking, and when necessary, I asked follow-up questions not included in the questionnaire. Unfortunately, because over a year had passed since the last interview, it was necessary to

[5] See copy of generalised questionnaire and coding sample in the Appendix.

embed the interview analysis within Malta's current political context, leading to the decision to include additional data from the media and electoral programs.

The interviews were analysed with the help of the grounded theory methodological approach, first conducting initial coding to then follow the second phase of more focused coding (Charmaz 2006: 42). Grounded theory was chosen as one of the analysis methods considering its inductive and theory discovery approach, since it allows the researcher to develop a theoretical framework that is embedded in empirical data (Martin & Turner 1986; Urquhart et al. 2010: 357). Grounded theory was first published by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, who defined it as "the discovery of theory from data – systemically obtained and analysed in social research" (Glaser & Strauss 2017: 1). Grounded theory should lead to theory building, that is not influenced by any preconceived notions and ideas by the researcher, as this could hinder any new ideas resulting from the empirical data (Urquhart et al. 2010: 359). During the research process, the researcher consistently compares data "with all existing concepts and constructs to see if it enriches an existing category […], forms a new one or points to a new relation" (Urquhart et al. 2010: 359). It was important to remember throughout the research process that not only do I, as the researcher, live in my reality, constructed by my experiences and knowledge, but so do the research participants, who have been influenced by their own lives (Khan 2014: 225). As a researcher, I am part of the process that constructs the research results, which are the result of continuous discussion, elaboration, and examination of the collected data (Friese et al. 2021: 159).

The data collection, coding, and analysis process takes place simultaneously, as a derived idea in the coding process may influence the collection of new data or lead to new questions that require additional data; thus, all three processes occur interchangeably (Urquhart et al. 2010: 360). Once the first interview was conducted, the coding process began right away. These codes led to more open questions, which were then integrated into the questionnaire, resulting in further analysis and constant comparison of the codes, passages, and interviews with one another (Urquhart et al. 2010: 362). "Constant comparison with previous data, categories, concepts and constructs is the key" (Urquhart et al. 2010: 362).

Setting the stage, I transcribed the recorded interviews in as much detail as possible, and the lines on each page were numbered. Then the initial coding process began. For this, the transcript was studied line by line and codes were chosen, remaining very close to the original

text, describing actions whenever appropriate to ensure not straining too far from the text and to not make conceptual leaps (Charmaz 2006: 48). In this initial coding, I consistently concentrated on what the interviewee said. I questioned my own assumptions and biases to ensure the text was analysed in line with qualitative research principles. During the second phase, I conducted focused coding, testing my initial codes by comparing them to other codes, the previous research and other extensive data (Charmaz 2006: 42). Charmaz (2006: 43) describes coding as "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorises, summarises, and accounts for each piece of data". Through qualitative analysis and the coding process, the goal is to understand what the data is about (Charmaz 2006: 43). The research process was iterative, as after each interview and initial coding, the data collection was continuously adapted, seeking new interview partners that may have been missed initially and asking questions previously overlooked. Considering that the "[i]nitial codes are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data", I continued to follow up by gathering new data "to explore and fill out these [initial] codes" (Charmaz 2006: 48).

After the initial coding, the focused coding process was followed in accordance with the grounded theory methodology. This phase "uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize integrate, and organize large amounts of data" (Charmaz 2006: 46). Therefore, during the focused coding process, I began to develop categories by comparing the initial codes with one another and with existing data. "Focused coding requires decisions about which initial code make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (Charmaz 2006: 57). The goal is to synthesize and explain larger data segments (Charmaz 2006: 57). Any themes that arise repeatedly are a clear indication that they have great relevance in this research topic (El-Mafaalani et al. 2016: 85). The consistent comparing of codes is meant as a dynamic process, through the comparison codes continue to evolve (Corbin & Strauss 2015: 58).

In this process, the research aims "to understand our participants' standpoints and situations, as well as their actions within the setting" (Charmaz 2006: 46). Continuously, I asked myself various questions, including what the interviewee wants to say with this, what does it mean, in what context has it been said, what is the meaning behind, what does the data suggest, from what perspective is the participant speaking, what theoretical category may this data indicate (Charmaz 2006: 47). This ensures that the data is analysed as closely to the participants words as possible, while remaining aware of my own biases. Focused coding helps you reflect upon

your own preconceived notions (Charmaz 2006: 59). Because of the consistent comparison of data, the researcher learns what "participants view as problematic and begin to treat it analytically" (Charmaz 2006: 47). The constant comparison allows one "to establish analytic distinctions" which are crucial to develop a theory (Charmaz 2006: 54).

The constructed codes and categories, from constant comparison and evaluation of participants' views, are interpreted and analysed within their specific context, building visible "relationships between implicit processes and structures" (Charmaz 2006: 54). The goal is to find implicit meanings and to consider how these meanings may have been constructed to arrive at research categories (Charmaz 2006: 55, 57). The categories were linked and compared using a mind map to further examine, reflect on, and assess their meanings, ultimately reducing them to core categories that allow the researcher to answer the research questions. Throughout the process, the collected data is consistently analysed and interpreted; these thoughts are recorded in written memos and research notes to inform the analysis (Willig 2013: 137). In the grounded theory process, the initially broken-down data in the first coding stage is now brought together into a coherent whole by linking categories with subcategories and understanding how they relate (Charmaz 2006: 60-61). The found individual concepts are "linked back together to tell the original main story of the research or observation but in conceptual terms" (Corbin & Strauss 2015: 157). It is essential to interpret the provided data without imposing one's own preconceived notions on the analysis (Charmaz 2006: 67). The goal is to eventually construct a theory grounded in the empirically collected data through an inductive approach (Khan 2014: 226-227). There, it is crucial to reflect upon one's own research by comparing and contextualising it to previous research (Friese et al. 2021: 162).

These data collection, coding, and analysis processes continue until theoretical saturation is reached, meaning that "no more new conceptual categories or relations emerge" (Urquhart et al. 2010: 362). Participants tend to repeat the same thing at this stage, and a researcher can almost predict what they will say (Friese et al. 2021: 160). Having started with a large number of basic first codes, they were narrowed to a smaller set of focused codes, eventually grouped into specific themes from which the theory is constructed (Prainsack & Pot 2021: 152). The aim is to find greater and greater depth of analysis (Urquhart et al. 2010: 366). Once the saturated concepts are reduced to the most important core categories, a grounded theory emerges (Urquhart et al. 2010: 362). The produced theory "is thus firmly anchored in the data that led to its formulation" (Urquhart et al. 2010: 362). Within grounded theory, constructs and

relationships are strongly emphasised (Urquhart et al. 2010: 365). The various stages of coding allow one to arrive at categories and concepts, which are interpreted and compared until their relationship can be explained and a theory is formulated (Urquhart et al. 2010: 366).

Media and Electoral Programs Analysis

To contextualise the theoretical framework in the current Maltese political and legal environment, I have added an analysis of Malta's political parties' election programs ahead of the 2026 elections and a media analysis of articles from January 2024 to May 2026, referencing SRHRs or LGBTQIA+ rights, alongside other terms[6] in MaltaToday and Times of Malta, the two biggest English-speaking Maltese newspapers. The terms have been specified based on the terminology most used in the interviews. A lot of attention has also been paid to making them as broad as possible, which is why many articles could be eliminated after a first read-through, since they may mention a term but discuss a completely different topic irrelevant to this thesis.

Adding analysis of the media and electoral programs has allowed me to broaden my empirical research and reflect on recent developments in Malta. This allows for a contextual approach and provides an opportunity to embed the results of the interview analysis into current political and legal discussions in Malta. Additionally, it provides further, more updated indications of which factors have contributed to the current legal dichotomy in Malta.

Similarly to the interview analysis, the newspaper articles and electoral programs were coded with the same approach as the interview transcripts. The codes and categories from newspaper articles and electoral programs were also compared to the interview codes and categories.

To analyse these data and situate them within their relevant political contexts, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the discourse historical approach (DHA) have been utilised. The CDA attempts to analyse "the relationship between language and power (Wodak 2002: 6), but also power hierarchies and how they may influence society in unequal measures (van Dijk 1993: 252). Discourse can be seen as "communication" or an "exchange of information", both spoken and in writing, as this is analysed the information is consistently and continuously put into the context it was produced in (Brezovec 2019: 5). Discourse produces power relations as they are institutionalised and are set within certain contexts and have an impact on power relations in

[6] Media Analysis, Terms Searched in MaltaToday and Times of Malta Online Publications from 2024 to 2026: SRHR, abortion, termination, foetus, baby, gay (rights), queer (rights), trans (rights), intersex (rights), LGBT(QIA+), same-sex, gender, equality, diversity.

society (Jäger & Jäger 2007: 19-20). The CDA examines the relationships among language, power, and ideology and shows how discourse is embedded in and upholds social structures and power hierarchies (see Wodak 2002; van Dijk 1993). In political science, discourse is understood as a social practice encompassing not only written and spoken words but also societal structures (Prainsack et al. 2021: 192). Prainsack et al. (2021: 192) essentially describe it as the sum of everything that can be said, thought and done within a specific topic. Discourse analysis allows us to analyse power relations, as power, according to Foucault, is expressed through discourse (Prainsack et al. 2021: 194).

Therefore, it is essential to question "who is using language and how in what situation it is used" (Brezovec 2019: 5). According to Wodak (2001: 1), language becomes a "social practice". Because of this, it is essential to analyse the covert, hidden meaning of the produced text and not solely focus on the overt meaning (Brezovec 2019: 5). This is done by taking a closer look and interpreting the material in its social context (Brezovec 2019: 5). Moreover, CDA contributes to outlining social inequalities and injustices (van Dijk 1993: 253). CDA uncovers power dynamics and power relations (van Dijk 1993: 253). According to Teun van Dijk (1993), "critical discourse analysts want to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in these models of reproduction" (van Dijk 1993: 250). This means being aware of ongoing power struggles and their impact on the text. The CDA helps deconstruct discourse structures to understand how they have been produced (van Dijk 1993: 259). As a next step, this does not only deconstruct the discourse, but also the socio-political environment it is set in (Wodak 2002: 12). Even more so, discourse is not only made up of its context, but it also shapes it, as Wodak (2002: 7-8) states that, "it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it" (Wodak 2002: 7-8).

The discourse historical approach (DHA) takes an extra step, as it considers the historical background and by using it as a methodological frame a "broader sociopolitical and historical context is integrated into the analysis" (Reisigl 2017: 53). This is essential to "properly understand complex phenomena" (van Dijk 2008: 5). Thus, if a text is analyzed with the DHA "the historical context is always analyzed and integrated into the interpretation of discourse and texts" (Wodak 2002: 14).

The DHA situates the data within its specific historical, political, and societal context. As a first step, the specific idea or theme behind a discourse is identified; secondly, discursive strategies are examined; and, thirdly, the stylistic and rhetorical devices in its dependent context are reflected upon (Reisigl & Wodak 2015: 93).

Using this methodology, I read 217 newspaper articles from MaltaToday and Times of Malta; not all were relevant to this thesis, as they discussed other countries or topics. Hence, in the end, only 170 articles were closely analysed per the discussed methodology. Interestingly, significantly more articles were published in the last two years relating to SRHRs (121 articles out of 170) than queer rights (49 articles out of 170). In addition to the newspaper articles, I read the electoral programs but analysed only the sections relevant to this thesis. The established categories and themes from all three data sources were compared and contextualised. The results of the interview, media, and electoral program analyses were compared, contextualised, and embedded within previous research to answer the research questions. The following chapter presents the results of this analysis before moving on to the discussion and interpretation, thereby building the thesis's theoretical framework.

Results of Analysis

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative analysis to answer the research questions: *Which factors contribute towards there not being a correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta? How does this divergence contribute to the construction of Maltese national identity?*

The chapter presents the results of the interview, electoral programme, and media analysis using the previously described grounded theory and DHA methodology. The following outlines the categories identified in the above-described qualitative coding process, which describe the factors contributing to the lack of correlation between LGBTIQA+ and reproductive rights levels in Malta. Through the DHA, these results have been contextualised and situated within the current framework to analyse power dynamics and answer the second research question on how the divergence between LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights contributes to the construction of Maltese national identity.

Ideal Circumstances

Right Time

As outlined in the Case Study Chapter, when Malta's LGBTQIA+ rights developed, it seemed like the perfect moment, with several factors converging to create an ideal situation. When the PN offered the Maltese population a divorce referendum, they did not expect the Maltese to vote in favour. As a direct result of the legalisation of divorce, both the PN and the Catholic Church in Malta struggled to keep pace with this new development, leaving them politically vulnerable and unorganised, and opening the door for the PL to move in and prepare for the 2013 election. Simultaneously, within its own party, the PN was fragmented, as party members held differing opinions on divorce. This left both the PN and the Catholic Church weakened.

Around the same time, polls showed that young people were more likely to support LGBTQIA+ rights, indicating that the PL should adopt a progressive queer agenda to secure the vote of the younger generation. An expert and researcher on queer rights in Malta stated that the "Labour Party [was] looking at civil rights, you had the statistics showing that could be quite appealing for younger voters" (Interview 2). This gave the PL a clear indication that there would be significant support from the younger generation, which would help them secure the election in 2013. Joseph Muscat, the leader of the PL at the time, "saw this as an opportunity to rebrand the party," preparing it for the 2013 election (Interview 2).

At the time, the Maltese public discourse largely centred on the debate over civil unions for same-sex couples; the PN was not ready to offer this, instead proposing a cohabitation bill that would have included any persons living together, including roommates or siblings. The PL made it their election promise to offer queer couples civil unions. Members of the party were significant players in pushing this progressive agenda from the top down (Interview 2, "the party which was made up of some pretty decent people […] and they were all pushing Joseph Muscat to have a more progressive agenda"; Interview 9, "It was the pulling from the top, dragging people behind them"). They put the LGBTQIA+ community on their agenda. They willingly pushed these rights from the top down with little opposition, due to the weakened state of conservative actors, and the public following the political leadership.

Most importantly, the PL was united in their push for queer rights, with leading figures in the party, such as Joseph Muscat (Prime Minister from 2013 to 2020) and Helena Dalli (Minister

for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties from 2013 to 2017, and European Commissioner for Equality from 2019 to 2024), heading the charge pushing for queer civil liberties. The PL government at the time cooperated with LGBTQIA+ issue networks through the LGBTIQ Consultative Council. Interview 8 found the council to be "one important tool […] because the Consultative Council had within it the different parties represented through their respective LGBTIQ or diversity committees" (Interview 8). This provided the queer political movement with direct access to the ruling Labour Party. The party saw its goal as making Malta the leading role model in the EU for queer rights, which helped its re-election campaign in 2017, when the PL won with an even bigger majority. This shows that Malta's queer rights progress was largely pushed by the Labour Party from the top down; however, no political group is currently willing to push for abortion the same way.

In comparison, Malta's SRHR movements were almost non-existent until 2019, when the coalition Voice for Choice was launched, becoming the first group, now comprising 10 NGOs, to come together as Malta's voice for abortion decriminalisation. As the Covid-19 pandemic happened and pregnant people were unable to travel abroad, the media also increased its attention on the issue of abortion (Interview 2). Only a few years later, the case of Andrea Prudente hit Malta. This case caused a massive outcry, putting the topic on the government's agenda and eventually leading to a slight legal reform in 2023. According to Interview 2, the case "focused people's energy on, okay, something needs to be done". Activists saw it as a chance, since there was "now a platform and a coalition in favour" of abortion rights (Interview 2). Further public outcry was caused by two women having received a suspended sentence[7] for having an abortion in Malta (see Azzopardi 2026b; Cilia 2025). Once again, these cases drew public attention, raising the issue of decriminalisation in the current government. Malta's current president, Myriam Spiteri Debono, stated that she would put the decriminalisation of abortion to a public referendum (Zammit 2024), while the prime minister believes it is important to first engage in an open dialogue about the ongoing situation (Magri 2024). However, as a consideration, it has led the prime minister to reconsider the law on confidentiality, meaning that doctors would not be able to report a crime (i.e., an abortion) without the patient's consent (Bonanno 2025).

[7] "[S]uspended sentence may be awarded by a court when it finds a person guilty with a sentence of imprisonment not exceeding 2 years. This punishment is still a sentence of conviction. […], the court chooses to delay the execution of the sentence under certain conditions. […] If the offender commits another crime during the suspension period, they are treated as a recidivist, and the original sentence is combined with the new punishment." (gtg 2024).

These public uproars are an instance of ideal circumstances, as the outrage over the court cases has the potential to lead to legal developments. In the 2026 election campaigns, the AD+PD party, as the only one, explicitly spoke out in favour of the decriminalisation of abortion in their electoral program. The party considered immediate change as essential because, for fear of being reported by doctors, pregnant persons may hold off on seeking out medical care if they need it after taking abortion pills. This would be unacceptable to them, stating that "[a] woman in these circumstances needs help and not to be persecuted. The solution is therefore not a Presidential pardon but decriminalisation" (AD+PD 2026: 44, translated from Maltese to English). All other Maltese political parties have either stayed clear of mentioning abortion explicitly in their electoral programmes (PL, PN, Momentum Malta) or reinforced their pro-life position (Aħwa Maltin).

The media analysis has shown that the public discourse on LGBTQIA+ rights has decreased significantly, as both Malta Today and the Times of Malta have published significantly fewer articles on queer rights than on SRHRs. Currently, the pro-choice movement in Malta is receiving significant media attention, including coverage of activist initiatives (Zammit 2026a), open letters to the government (Zammit 2026b), and official protests (Carabott 2024); however, public discourse has yet to lead to institutional change. Unlike the LGBTQIA+ network in the 2010s, the pro-choice movement has almost no real public allies in political power positions, which is a relevant factor in why SRHRs remain further behind. This is underscored by Malta's first-time second-place ranking in ILGA's index, indicating that its approach to LGBTQIA+ rights has stagnated. Even though the urgency of the push for queer rights is not as strong, a government spokesperson at Times of Malta confirmed that the government continues to push for civil human rights and is currently working on new measures that they expect will lead to Malta reaching first place again (Ellul 2026). Moreover, the increased coverage of abortion and SRHRs indicates that this is an excellent time for issue networks to develop and grow.

Issue Networks

Issue networks fighting for either queer rights or SRHRs are another factor shaping the dichotomy, as they determine when a moment is considered ideal. A key factor driving change is political movements and/or activist groups, who are driven by a cause or an issue, hence an issue network. This means a significantly powerful force that is solely focused on this one

issue. This can only be done by people who either already have political power, i.e., elected officials, or are connected to power. This was very much the case for the LGBTQIA+ issue network; not only did the PL make it their personal commitment to advance queer rights, but queer NGOs had been established for over a decade by 2013 and were well-connected to Malta's PL government, providing them with easy access to lawmakers. This provided the ideal circumstance to push for a change in LGBTQIA+ rights. Similarly, another NGO, Drachma, served as a bridge between the LGBTQIA+ community and the Catholic Church. Drachma is an NGO founded to provide a space for queer Catholics, as they may not have fit into either the LGBTQIA+ movement or the Catholic Church (Interview 3).

Putting queer rights on the political agenda in Malta was significantly easier for the queer community, as activist groups had already been established for years, and with the creation of LGBT Labour, they had easy access to push their civil rights agenda. Interview 10, an activist with years of experience in pro-choice activism, explained that the queer rights movement "started really small, you know, and over a decade they grew in a very, very good, uh, active organisation" (Interview 10). Indicating that at the time of the PL's election win in 2013, Malta's LGBTQIA+ movement had already had years of experience getting organised, building momentum and finding community.

Only in recent years did the queer rights movement, or at least Malta's biggest LGBTQIA+ NGO, MGRM, join the fight for abortion rights, coming out in favour (Interview 2). Comparatively, feminist movements in Malta were rather slim historically, the existing women's rights organisations focusing on other gender equality issues, many of them also believing in the pro-life sentiment.

Around the same time as the establishment of the Voice for Choice coalition, Doctors for Choice was also founded. According to Interview 7, "they have been instrumental" in providing "medical information" to the Maltese public, which the participant thinks carries significantly more weight "coming from a doctor more than coming from an activist". Before this, there was no significant pro-choice movement. Indeed, it was quite the opposite: "Within the women's rights groups, there was a very strong conservative element that was often not pushing for sexual reproductive health-related discussions" (Interview 2).

Over the decades, Malta's women's rights groups have consistently fought for gender equality. Still, none ever took a public stand for abortion, meaning women's rights activists aligned themselves with Malta's pro-life stance. Explaining this, Interview 9 mentioned the "National Council of Women", a "conservative […] women's group" who "fought for equal pay for women; they fought for women's rights in the place of employment. They, they did all of that, but I mean, they are not pro-choice absolutely" (Interview 9). This has led to the fact that, to this day, the SRHRs issue network has very limited access to political power players, as very few politicians have indicated their support for the decriminalisation of abortion. In comparison, no party has ever put abortion on their agenda in the same way: "if anything, the indication seems to be that women's groups within the parties are actually more conservative than men" (Interview 2). This is confirmed by Interview 7, who thinks the empowerment of women in the political sphere is crucial to promoting SRHRs, for her, women in Malta need to find their "voice and realising that [they] have rights and [they] can talk about them" (Interview 7). The lack of women in political and public power positions further evidences this.

Because of this, there have only been small instances of progressing SRHRs, shares Interview 9, Malta's women's rights activists in the 1980s and 90s "talked about divorce", there were also "family planning clinics all over Malta with, um, free contraception" before they were closed by the PN once back in power (Interview 9), as well as the legalisation of the morning after pill in 2016. In the 2026 election the PL stated that they will once again establish a family planning clinic, to provide sexual health and pregnancy services for people of all gender, excluding abortion, of course (Partit Laburista 2026: 78). Often it even seemed there were no real feminist spaces in Malta, Interview 7, a women's rights activist describes her own feminist journey, how she almost slipped into feminism, after having a miscarriage, she looked to find community. There, she found older feminists from the 70s who let her know that until the late 2010s, there was no real feminist space, until a Facebook group became "the first feminist space" for many Maltese women (Interview 7).

Hence, one factor contributing to the lack of correlation is timing and issue networks, which together create the ideal circumstances for implementing legal change.

Personal Connection

Another factor influencing this issue is shown through personal connection. Maltese people are more likely to approve of certain rights if they have a personal connection to them, meaning

they know someone who is personally affected by them. This is underscored by Interview 5, which describes people speaking negatively about a vulnerable community, but once they know a person from that community, they generally assume that person is different. “So, once it gets personal, the whole thing changes” (Interview 5). People connect personally, and this may lead them to develop a different opinion on the issue. For example, given Malta’s small size, most people know each other; therefore, the likelihood that a Maltese citizen knows someone from the LGBTQIA+ community is extremely high. However, with the heightened stigma and illegality of abortion, most people would not share that they have had an abortion publicly. The topic of abortion for many is “too personal”. Interview 5 describes how people may be opposed until it affects “my daughter or if there is a situation with my daughter or there is a situation with my wife, then the whole concept of everything will change drastically” (Interview 5). Because of the stigma surrounding abortion and barely anyone sharing whether they have had one, most Maltese people believe they do not know anyone who has had an abortion. Still, with an estimated 500-600 abortions happening in Malta every year, this is an extremely unlikely scenario (Calleja 2025). The stigma is so strong that Interview 7 stated hyperbolically that any woman who publicly declared having an abortion would “be stoned to death, you know, stoned, ostracised”, indicating that the public may not be ready for the decriminalisation of abortion (Interview 7).

Nevertheless, this means that abortion remains a very abstract concept for most. It is something the Maltese population has a negative association with, most likely spread by misinformation and a lack of education, and there is no personal story they can connect with. This is probably one reason why publicly discussed court cases, such as the recently suspended sentences and the Prudente case, are particularly eye-opening for many people, as they may not have considered the circumstances beforehand. Public examples provide one with a face to depict the abstract. The story allows one to connect with it. Disagreeing with certain rights is much easier when you do not know anyone affected by a lack of access to them. In addition, there is importance in learning from each other. Open discussions are what helped Interview 7 herself “change from pro-life to pro-choice through hearing other women’s opinions, through reading, through hearing other women’s experiences of abortions and why they had abortions, you know, and learning that it’s not a bay” (Interview 7). Hearing personal stories allows people to connect and empathise; they realise that there is an actual person behind the polarising topic, and it may change their opinion on the legal status of abortion. To support this development, the website “Break the Taboo” has been created, which shares “women’s experiences having

abortions" (Interview 7). According to Interview 1, this also helps "decision makers open their mind and their heart to people" (Interview 1). The internet and social media are the ideal places for people to share their personal experiences (Interview 1).

Similarly, many people's opinions on queer rights may have changed because someone close to them came out and they realised that the person had not changed, yet they deserve equal access to civil rights. Knowing people close to them allows them to consider the issue and shows them how they may be affected by access to, or lack thereof, human rights. For queer rights especially, the personal connection may show Maltese people that queer individuals are very similar to cis-straight folks; they also want to live their lives, love whomever they want, get married, and have a family. Knowing someone personally makes abstract legislation feel more personal. And people will be more likely to be supportive. Thus, having a personal connection influences citizens' votes, potential activism, and their likelihood of opposing something, indicating another factor contributing to the dichotomy between queer and reproductive rights.

Political Power

Given that issue networks and their access to political power have already been outlined, this section focuses on the influence that Maltese party allegations, power and leadership figures, as well as the (non-) existence of opposition, may have on the legal context.

With the 2026 election just having passed, only the AD+PD party discussed the decriminalisation of abortion in their electoral program. While the two largest parties, PL and PN, as well as Aħwa Maltin, discussed SRHRs generally, none of them specifically mentioned abortion. Aħwa Maltin stated their belief that life began at conception. Momentum Malta did not mention abortion or SRHRs in any way in their electoral program. The Labour Party refers to "the decriminalisation of certain crimes"; however, it does not specify which crimes it means. Additionally, since the PL program had to be translated, this may also be due to a translation error. It could be, though, that they may have been referring to abortion, considering that the decriminalisation has been actively part of the political discourse before the 2026 election. Similarly, Momentum Malta is the only party that does not mention LGBTQIA+ rights at all in their program. AD+PD, PL, and PN all state their full support in the continuous fight for true equality. Aħwa Maltin does not explicitly mention the queer community. However, they do say that they "support traditional families and accept others", as traditional

families are seen as heteronormative families; others would be the opposite, i.e., queer families. This clearly indicates that almost all Maltese political parties have accepted queer rights, while the exact opposite is true for abortion. (AD+PD 2026; Partit Aħwa Maltin 2026; Momentum Malta 2026; Partit Laburista 2026; Partit Nazzjonalista 2026). The media analysis supported this assessment, with neither of the two major parties publicly ever stating their full support for the decriminalisation of abortion, although both have indicated their willingness to an open and respectful dialogue on the issue (see Zammit 2024; Magri 2024). This shows that abortion is on the current political agenda.

Party Allegiance

Maltese people have strong party allegiance. Given that the major political parties are the PN and the PL, Malta essentially has a two-party system. Historically, party allegiance within this two-party system remains strong, with most people voting along party lines regardless of the issues presented in elections. Interview 10 expressed that "around 80% of the people always vote the same, you know, for their political party, you know, political party of her, of their parents or of their grandparents" (Interview 10), showing party affiliation ingrained in their personal identity, which is difficult to break. Interview 2 goes even further to state that people who "don't identify [with a political party] like myself, you're actually considered dangerous as a person"; the party "becomes like your identity and the other party is literally referred to as the other" (Interview 2). Calling the opposing party "the other" constructs an us-versus-them mentality; it deepens the belief of the party being one's own identity, an identity that you have to align yourself with. This has led to elections being decided by a couple of hundred or a couple of thousand votes. Moreover, at times this goes as far as citizens mindlessly following their political leaders, meaning that at the time the PL pushed for LGBTQIA+ rights, voters accepted it unquestioningly and followed along (Interview 7) ("[LGBTQIA+ agenda] was pushed by two politicians in particular. The guy who became Prime Minister in 2013, Joseph Muscat, and Helena Dalli who was his minister for equality" Interview 2). Further, this blind political allegiance in Malta may be an indication of colonial mentality, according to Interview 2, meaning "that for 200 years everything the British told us to do, we would do. And now we have replaced it with the political parties. Every time a political party tells you jump there, people jump". This has led to "public opinion in Malta [being] transformed"; people in Malta are significantly more likely to support gay people, but also intersex, trans and non-binary people than the European average (Interview 2). If the PL government might see that the majority of Maltese citizens are no longer opposed to abortion, they may make a move towards

decriminalisation ("Labour Party, […] if they believed that their followers would follow them into this abortion thing" they would make a move towards decriminalising abortion (Interview 7)).

Power and Leadership

Considering Maltese political allegiance, Interview 1 emphasises the need for a top-down approach in Maltese politics, meaning that politicians "should spearhead that change" rather than waiting for society to change (Interview 1). Interview 2 agrees that in Malta, "it's generally this tendency for politicians to lead. People of vast bulk to follow" (Interview 2). Interview 7 agrees, she thinks without "it com[ing] from the top down, like it did with the LGBT rights it will, it will never change, you know, it will take much longer because the government has to be the one to say like no, this is a woman's right and it's going to be a new law" (Interview 7). Political leadership continues to be a significant factor in driving change. Many voters believe they have been aligned with their party for so long that, if the party is pushing a certain agenda, they now follow along because, surely, they agree with it as well. "Also, because the Maltese give so much value to the leaders of their parties, some people change their position almost overnight. They would have been against something, but because the party leader believes in it […], they say, I have typically been in favour of what the policies of this person have been, so I must be in favour of this too (Interview 8). This led to a rapid change in public perception of LGBTQIA+ rights throughout the by now 13-year-long PL government. Nevertheless, it is crucial to know that the opposition towards LGBTQIA+ rights was not quite as strong, and the younger generation was mostly in support of queer rights; the same cannot be said for abortion. This is probably the reason why neither the PN nor the PL have publicly spoken out in favour of decriminalising abortion, as the risk of losing voters is too high.

Because of Malta's political allegiance, only the PN and PL ever really have a chance of being in government, since the other parties are too small. This leads to one party ruling alone, with the ultimate power to do whatever it wants for the electoral period.

The Catholic Church is another actor that has had a significant impact on Malta's political landscape, historically aligning with the PN, as the Church excommunicated PL supporters in the 1980s (Interview 9). However, it also went the other way, as the PN adopted many of the Catholic values and social teachings (Interview 4). In comparison, the PL wanted to ensure they were seen as separate from the Catholic Church ("And I think the Socialists also thought

this would be a chance to finally show the church that it had lost its power in Malta" Interview 2).

Another important aspect to consider is that Malta has a historically low participation and representation of women in parliament. Only in recent years were they able to slightly rectify this through gender mechanisms, as the now current parliament seats 27 women, out of the 79 parliamentarian members, which at 34% is "the highest level of female representation since Malta gained independence" and that is after "12 women entered parliament through the gender corrective mechanism, which is triggered when the underrepresented sex accounts for less than 40% of elected MPs" (Azzopardi 2026a). Seeing as there were very little women in power positions, many women's rights issues, including abortion, were never directly addressed by parliament, leaving Malta to regularly score poorly on Gender Equality Indices (Interview 2). Interview 9 discusses Malta's lack of commitment to women's rights by giving an example of how the government told activists, "for eight years we were told we were gonna get action on domestic violence before we actually got action" (Interview 9). Gender equality issues were too often set aside as unimportant. Moreover, even though the number of women in parliament is ever increasing, Interview 7 does not see "that strong feminist advocate in parliament […], but none of [the female MPs] are strong enough or brave enough to break the mould and move, move, move forward, you know". Experts find it necessary for a strong feminist political leadership to drive the progress in SRHRs.

Opposition

Not only must a powerful political actor be pushing an agenda, but the opposition also cannot be too strong. In Malta, essentially, if a party is unified on an issue and does not face any opposition, it becomes comparatively easy to push its agenda, and if the opposite is true, a party falters,

> ("If the party is unified and it doesn't face any opposition, it will just carry on with its agenda. But if that same actor, which is central to change, is finding that it itself is not unified and it's meeting opposition and it feels like the general public is not overwhelmingly in favour, it starts faltering" Interview 2).

For example, when the PL pushed for LGBTQIA+ rights, they faced little to no opposition. Nevertheless, for abortion, the Maltese opposition remains strong, and the pro-choice issue network only has little support from powerful actors. Especially the Catholic Church and religious communities, which represent the essentially biggest moral opposition to abortion, did not resist too strongly against the LGBTQIA+ rights push. However, the Catholic Church

considers human life to begin at conception, and the termination of that life is murder to them, making their opposition a lot louder.

This climate is reflected across Malta, where the Catholic Church largely influences Maltese political discourse. For example, Interview 10 shares that "advocating for abortion was suicidal politically, and no political party there is tackling this issue" (Interview 10), meaning that for any Maltese party the risk of losing their voters was too great to even consider addressing abortion, even if they were in favour. Politicians also made it easier for themselves by not discussing it; everyone knew Maltese people were having abortions, and they were travelling abroad to England or Italy for them. Once the Covid-19 pandemic hit and the borders closed, the public's awareness increased on the issue ("the whole debate, which was that it's not really an issue because if you want, you can get on a plane and have an abortion in England or you have one in Italy", Interview 2).

Activists themselves were not safe from the strong opposition movement, as Interview 10 describes the time when the pro-choice issue network first went public with Voice for Choice Coalition and Doctors for Choice, "When we started, we received death threats, and we- that, it was shocking, the, the amount of hate that we got" (Interview 10). When the pro-choice movement started in Malta, they were a relatively small group, making them an easy target. They have since grown over the past 7+ years, although resistance remains strong, as many Maltese continue to believe that abortion is the murder of a child.

In comparison around 2010 when the public's cry for LGBTQIA+ rights became louder and the PN was in power, they tried to stay clear of the issue, not wanting to rock the boat too much, because of their connection to the Church, but also because within their own party they were fragmented on queer rights, "[the PN have] now made the LGBTIQ rights a bit taboo. They don't want to talk about it because they worried it fragments them as a party" (Interview 2). This was around the same time as the divorce referendum and just before the 2013 election, which the PN lost. Both the PN and the Catholic Church were fragmented from Maltese voting for divorce in the 2011 referendum; they did not dare oppose the LGBTQIA+ push because of it.

> ("And when it came to LGBTIQ, the Church was fragmented in the in the 2010s because of its divorce referendum where they lost a lot of their, they thought the divorce would be rejected in 2011. And it wasn't. The Maltese voted in favour and the Church was like shocked and it didn't know what was happening" Interview 2).

Since 2013, the Nationalist Party, as previously mentioned, has adjusted and come out in favour of queer rights, even advocating for queer homeless youth, queer seniors, and trans health care in their 2026 electoral programme (Partit Nazzjonalista 2026). Notably, for Maltese politics is a two-party system. A party knows that when they have won an election, they essentially have free ruling power for the following electoral period, they can essentially do as they please ("meaning that every time you get somebody gets elected, they know that for five years they can do what they want […]. Your party will always have complete control of parliamentary business and also control of all the committees that scrutinise what you're doing" Interview 2).

One may think that the Catholic Church continued to disapprove of queer rights, but Interview 4 states that "the church tries to see that there is a legal framework that is fair and just" and "[u]ltimately, they did not really mind it, I would say in Malta. Um, and they said, well, if the government wants to do that, let them do it. But then, when it comes to this thing about when innocent life was being touched, and then something is happening" (Interview 4). The something that is happening would be a huge uproar and pushback by a strong opposition movement. One of the main Maltese LGBTQIA+ organisations, Drachma, was particularly essential since the start of the 21st century to bridge the gap between the queer community and the Catholic church in Malta, by working "with society to change these deep-rooted perceptions, these deep-rooted attitudes that are now politically incorrect" (Interview 3). Discussing the goal of changing people's opinions, or at the very least making them realise that expressing public queerphobic sentiment is wrong.

While one may think, after over ten years of progressing in LGBTQIA+ rights, it may now be easier to adapt the last remaining steps towards reaching equal rights, interviewees reflect on the fact that "[t]here's always debate" (Interview 8), there is also increased opposition by right wing, anti-gender groups and increasing evangelical groups, often funded from foreign groups, according to interviewees ("So if you look at some organisations in the US or elsewhere, they're declared, uh, to be looking at the promotion of the traditional family model, meaning man, woman, children, um anti-perversion, meaning anything LGBTIQ" Interview 8; "besides we know that there was Russian interference" Interview 8; "but also the push against now is happening in Malta also through foreign interference" Interview 8). This newfound opposition group, focusing on anti-gender dynamics across all of Europe, not just Malta, not only speak out against queer rights, but also SRHRs, once again linking the two legal issues ("So, some

organisations do this systematically. Um the in the case of Malta, they link abortion also to it" Interview 8). While opposition to both issues has taken different paths, the actors discussing them framed them in certain ways. This introduces framing, another significant factor contributing to the lack of correlation between LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights in Malta and shows how Maltese national identity is constructed.

Discursive Framing

Language has often been used as a tool to convey power, whether by politicians, activists or other interest groups. The framing of LGBTQIA+ and abortion discourse has significantly influenced Malta's legal rights. However, both started from the same point in the 20th century up until the early 2000s, when LGBTQIA+ and SRH issues were discussed as issues of morality, instead of issues of equality. Interview 3 describes the divergence of rights as "[t]hey are all moral, but they are in different shades of of moral". Abortion historically has been seen as child murder, and "being LGBTIQ was being perverse" (Interview 8).

And these shades have grown further apart over time, Interview 2 thinks this is in part to the LGBTQIA+ movement in Malta not accepting the morality discussion in public anymore ("When they started to discuss gay rights in the 2000s, they would often have on the panel of discussions a member from the Church and it often ended up being an issue of morality, is immoral to be gay. It's immoral to have same-sex relations" Interview 2). The European leading queer rights organisation, ILGA, then suggested that Malta's queer rights activists not accept invitations to speak in rooms where the Church would also be present to show that LGBTQIA+ is not an issue of morality, but a civil rights issue. Interview 2 continues to say, "[a]nd that's basically what happened. And I think from 2008 to 2013, it got rebranded as this is actually an issue of civil rights. It's about equality" (Interview 2). LGBTQIA+ went from being seen as something perverse to being "framed as love, as liberty", thus "people are looking at it from a completely different angle", and the legal push was able to easily progress (Interview 8). This has not happened for SRHRs; instead, "if you have panel discussions, it's almost accepted that there should still be a member of the Church, that it's an issue of morality" (Interview 2). Even within political discussions, SRH is referred to as a moral issue (Interview 2).

Historically speaking, having an abortion, using contraceptives and being queer were seen as morally wrong in Malta. "The, the Catholic Church does not, um, approve of any barrier

methods […], whether a chemical barrier, or, or a physical barrier method", thus, before the 1980s, many people with uteri took their temperature to determine their window of fertilisation and to prevent pregnancy (Interview 9). This was rooted in Catholicism. Interview 4 describes the "theological interpretation of gay marriage or of gay relationships is to base it not on complementary of sexual organs", meaning that queer relationships are not compatible with the Catholic faith (Interview 4). Even more so, Interview 3 describes the Church's initial opposition to marriage equality on moral grounds, but it has since come to accept it.

In the early 2000s, this changed for LGBTQIA+ rights, partly influenced by Malta's accession to the EU and partly by the growing issue networks that worked to reframe the discourse surrounding queer rights. Queer rights started to be discussed as a matter of civil rights and human rights; the moral debate was essentially erased publicly. While at first Maltese public opinion surveys conducted by MGRM showed in 2008 and 2009 that "the vast majority of people didn't want to be living next to gay people", but through reframing queer rights as a matter of "equality" and sharing "a lot of LGBTI positive images and people", Maltese public opinion adapted (Interview 2). Even the church grew to accept this, as they learned to see queer people as expressing love, "A love that is just" (Interview 4). The Church has also learned that "[t]here is a humane reality. There are people, flesh and blood, people with real life stories" (Interview 3), which has significantly reduced the Maltese Catholic Church's resistance to queer rights. Many seem to have agreed that the government should not have the right to intrude on queer people living their lives safely but face a stronger moral dilemma for abortion ("[T]he LGBTIQ issue is so straightforward. […] why should you intrude between two people who want to spend their life together, who want to love one another? […] the point on whether one can take a decision to terminate a pregnancy, it's more of a moral dilemma" Interview 1).

SRHR have yet to go through that same rebranding, while access to contraception and sexual education has slowly changed; stigma often prevails in Malta. Issue networks have had a much more difficult time reframing abortion discourse in Malta. Interview 2 confirmed, "The abortion thing is much, much more complicated" (Interview 2). Today, for abortion and some contraceptive measures, such as the morning-after pill, the discourse primarily concentrates on the "human dignity of the embryo" (Interview 4), with many referring to abortion as the murder of a child, even when considering the embryo, the first weeks of the fertilised egg. Regarding IVF and embryo freezing, Interview 4 explains why people may be supportive of IVF, but not of abortion: for IVF he does not believe "that the dignity of the embryo is being violated. […],

because after all the couple wants life" (Interview 4). But "abortion is the direct killing of the embryo in the womb of the mother" (Interview 4). This remains true for many Maltese citizens, regardless of their political allegiance ("Whatever their political leanings, where people say, no, it is not right to kill an innocent human being" Interview 4).

Similar discourse is also reflected in the media and in politics. There is no distinction for people opposing abortion between an embryo and a baby. Interview 7 describes this as "women who are pro-life are seeing a nine-month-old baby. They're not seeing an embryo" (Interview 7). The "unborn child" and women have to be protected from the "harm of abortion", which is seen as child murder, by some pro-rights groups (Mifsud 2024). Pro-choice activists in Malta have found that if they plan activities under the title of sexual health and sexual rights, they are more likely to receive support from representative of foreign embassies in Malta, than if they hold an activity under the abortion title ("[E]mbassies telling us, 'Look, we would like to come to the march, and to the rally, but we can't. If you're calling in abortion, if you have the word abortion, we can't'" Interview 9). The negative connotation of abortion is too strong.

The discourse of abortion being seen as murder in Malta relates to the Catholic Church's influence. Also, generations of people in Malta grew up with restrictive sex education in school, where they saw a film known for its violent depiction of an abortion procedure, making abortion seem like it was murder ("when I was 12 […] it was normal to be shown this very famous anti-abortion video […] [it] shows a video of a foetus being aborted but from inside with like a sonic. That was normal to be shown at school" Interview 2). Some people in the LGBTQIA+ community who are closely linked to the Catholic Church, like Drachma, agree with the Church's point of view on abortion, as Interview 3 discusses Drachma's position of being "in favour of life", which to them "life is from conception" (Interview 3).

When abortion is framed as and believed to be child murder in a society, no one can argue for its decriminalisation and legalisation ("You know, you're killing a baby. That was it. And they would shut me up" Interview 7). Pro-life groups almost see the life of the embryo as more valuable than the pregnant person's life, they expect them to sacrifice themselves ("abortion is wrong and that it's a woman's duty, not just job, but it's woman's duty to sacrifice herself, uh, regardless of the se-, of circumstances for a child is a very, very, very deeply held belief by big, big majority in the country" Interview 10). Interview 3 confirms that "once there's a baby, okay, the mother loses all rights to have even an opinion about what is happening. Her health

not just becomes secondary, tertiary, you know" (Interview 3). Similarly, Prime Minister Robert Abela told MaltaToday that "[n]o woman will go to prison for abortion under [his] watch", also referring to a different level of punishment for what Maltese society often describes as murder (Meilak 2026). In comparison, the previous Maltese President Vella stated in 2022 that he would rather resign than approve a law legalising the "killing of babies", at the time "nobody [even] question[ed] his use of the word baby. The you know killing of babies" (Interview 2). The now-president, as mentioned above, has indicated her willingness to leave the issue to a referendum. This clearly displays that the reframing of abortion, away from "child murder", is changing in Malta.

Simultaneously, Interview 10 reflects on how even though Maltese see abortion as murder and women have been criminally charged in recent years for having had an abortion, they do not convict abortion in the same way, indicating that perhaps there is a discrepancy and they do not truthfully consider it to be equivalent to murder. Interview 10 discusses a case in recent years, where a woman received a conditional discharge that does not give her a criminal record: "So, you see this, this parallel thing like if it's a murder, if it's killing a baby, why are you, like, it comes to court, and you're treating it as a contravention. You know, like double - You park in the wrong place. You know, they, they need, she didn't even uh pay the fine" (Interview 10).

Issue networks are slowly trying to reframe abortion as a matter of healthcare and as a human rights issue, which should apply to all people in the EU as "the European Parliament and its Committee on Women's Rights have advanced measures calling for improved and more equitable access to abortion services across the EU, including the recognition of reproductive healthcare as a fundamental right" (Calleja 2026). When the morning-after pill became available in Malta, there was public uproar because it was seen as an abortive measure by many. Still, it also incited public discourse on reproductive rights ("June of 2016, um, with this move, uh, that's how basically the, the discussion on reproductive rights in Malta started. Obviously, because there was argument the abortion, the, the morning-after pill or the emergency contraceptive is abortive" Interview 10). This is underlined by the fact that "[t]here are still pharmacies, which are still resisting the sale of emergency contraceptives" (AD+PD 2026: 44, translated from Maltese to English). Nowadays, activists and politicians reflect on the necessity of an open dialogue that has improved a lot as pro-choice and pro-life groups "are so much more civil to each other", which has led to some progress and has taken some steps away from calling activists "murderers" and "killers" (Interview 7).

Interestingly, both these discourses, i.e., framing Malta as the progressive queer rights country and protecting the "life of the unborn child", have been ingrained in people's national identity; they have become "issues of identity as a country" (Interview 2). Hence, the final category of relevant factors considers Maltese values and traditions and how these have contributed to the construction of Maltese national identity.

Maltese: Values and Traditions

In the media, Malta is often described in comparison to the EU, especially focusing on their divergent positions on LGBTQIA+ rights and abortion rights in comparison to other EU member states (Times of Malta 2025; Debono 2025a). The constructed Maltese identity largely shapes this, the final factor driving the current legal divergence.

For many Maltese people being against abortion is part of their national identity, it is what makes them who they are, they have almost been indoctrinated with this since a young age ("but I was not born in Malta, so I did not have indoctrination, um, um from young age" Interview 10 talking about his pro-choice conviction; "to break years and years of indoctrination" Interview 7 talking about her move from being pro-life to becoming pro-choice). Simultaneously, the Maltese have grown proud of being the most progressive EU nation in terms of LGBTQIA+ rights.

Gender Equality and Patriarchal Thinking

Maltese identity, and therefore the discursive framing, has been strongly influenced by patriarchal thinking. Patriarchal structures have persisted for a long time in Maltese society and culture. Society is informed by traditional gender norms and patriarchal beliefs, meaning that there have not been significant feminist movements, as many other European countries have seen. This has also led to Malta generally "scoring really badly in international indices about women's rights for decades" (Interview 2). And the underrepresentation of women in politics.

Only recently have these beliefs started to fall apart among the younger generation, influenced by having grown up in a globalised world, including easy access to the internet and EU membership. This history of gender inequality is underlined by many Maltese women's rights groups supporting conservative ideals ("[It] seems to be that women's groups within the parties are actually more conservative than men" Interview 2; "groups like the Women's Rights Organisation, […], the National Council of women, I mean if you go and speak to those people,

they will be the people in the frontline opposing abortion because many of their members are very conservative" Interview 2).

As part of these traditional gender norms, for a long time, the most important role women in Malta played was to be a mother and housewife ("how strong the stigma, the stigma there is, especially in Malta. […] the mother-in-law is all the time telling them […] when are you going to make me a grandmother?" Interview 4; "the last ten years that women in Malta have really started to work, you know, because before it was very it was like almost shunned upon, that women worked, you know. It's they were expected to stay at home as mothers" Interview 7). Interviewees describe very rigid gender roles, that have since changed with now more and more young women* pursuing higher education and a career ("And I think even the women my age are encouraging their children more to have careers and have a lot of their own interests outside of getting married because it was like the main focus was you have to get married, have children you know" Interview 7). These traditional beliefs on gender lead to many Maltese women not accepting bodily autonomy ("body autonomy, really trying to, um, show them that, show them as in discuss more, you know, the importance of bodily autonomy and having our own rights and being because I think women are still very unempowered in Malta, you know, and still very controlled, very controlled by, by men" Interview 7). Thus, there have not been many significant actors fighting for SRHRs, which are often seen as a women*'s rights issue.

Religion and the Catholic Church

As much of the discourse in Malta has been impacted by religion, it is not hard to see that religion and the Catholic Church play a significant role for the Maltese ("Catholic Maltese identity" Interview 3). Religion is deeply ingrained in society; many cultural traditions and norms cannot be separated from the Church, as that is where they originate: "Christian Catholic culture and tradition, which sometimes is very hard to distinguish from what is really the church and its teaching and what is simply tradition" (Interview 4). This has been built on decades and centuries of history, interlinking the Catholic Church and Maltese nationality ("And considering that for decades, for, not decades, from, since always, Church had a very, very major part, uh, uh, in every aspect of, um, of social life in Malta" Interview 10). A lot of public life, including education, is influenced by the Catholic Church, as the "Church runs one third of education" (Interview 10). As interview 9 put it, "Malta is more Catholic than the Pope" (Interview 9).

Given Malta's insular position as an island, they have often been separated from continental Europe, especially before the internet and therefore, for a long time, "the control of information, control of knowledge, control of ideas and thinking and what you was in the hands of, in the hands of the Church" (Interview 10). The Catholic Church is interlinked with politics, as they have been closely aligned with the PN historically and have excommunicated PL voters in the past. Every time "the socialists have been in power, the Church's influence has declined. And then when the Christian Democrats come back into power, you see a slight increase, but it's more because the Christian Democrats are more conservative" (Interview 2). Today, significantly fewer people attend church regularly ("the Maltese don't go to Church as much; it's still about 38% every week" Interview 2). Only slowly is the Church's political influence decreasing. Nevertheless, Catholicism remains a large part of Maltese identity, which means that even though queer rights have been accepted as part of a modern European identity, the anti-abortion sentiment is held strongly as part of Catholic Maltese identity, separating Malta from Europe.

This has meant that "sexual reproductive health issues have also been conflated with the traditional idea of Malta and Maltese as a society", meaning Malta's Catholic identity (Interview 2). Therefore, Malta's anti-abortion identity has derived from its Catholic identity ("Malta is very, very pro-life. We are most of us women, especially my generation were brought up very Catholic" Interview 7). The Catholic Church is almost a part of their DNA: "I feel that many people in Malta still have the DNA of the church, for better or for worse, and the church in their DNA integrated with their DNA" (Interview 4). For queer rights, the Church initially also saw some hesitation ("the parliament was actually debating the Equality of Marriage Act, you know, so the Church was not entirely comfortable" Interview 3); but by now, most have come to accept queer people ("I think today they have accepted that it is a social reality" Interview 3); although it always depends on the individuals, as "[t]he Church is not a monolith" (Interview 3). Despite past differences, many queer individuals continue to live their Catholic faith ("We love the Church. We are, you know, convinced Catholic people, you know, we live our faith." Interview 3).

National Identity: Being Maltese in Europe

Considering these patriarchal and religious values, how has Maltese national identity been constructed, and how does it compare to Europe? The media discourse perfectly outlines the

tension between European belonging based on Malta's progressive queer agenda and its exceptionalism as the country with the most restrictive abortion rights in the EU.

Abortion is so significant for Maltese identity, that when they joined the EU, they did so under the condition written into the accession treaty, that whatever happens in the future, Malta can make their own path concerning abortion ("and there is a clause which basically says, um, that regardless in the future of what abortion is considered to be in the European Union, […], those laws will not apply to Malta." Interview 10). For many Maltese, this is also an aspect of their own national pride not to have abortion ("It's our part of our national pride that, you know, we don't have abortion. We are not, we don't kill our babies like Europeans do, you know?" Interview 10: "refer to traditional values that it's a Maltese thing to be opposed to abortion" Interview 2). Holding onto traditions, as Maltese "[w]e have always been anti-abortion, and to be to allow abortion is to actually undermine what we are as Maltese people, as Catholic Maltese" (Interview 2). Being against abortion is part of people's personal identity, maybe even "one of their most important life missions in a way. It's like, who are you? I am who I am, and I'm against abortion" (Interview 8). Pro-life attitudes run deep.

Outside of religious groups opposing abortion, far-right groups have publicly spoken out against abortion, stating that "it is to be Maltese is to be moral and to oppose abortion" (Interview 2). They connect it to anti-immigrant sentiment, as abortion prevents Maltese children from being born ("if you give a woman the right to abortion, you lower the number of your population. So, Africans coming into the country become more numerous and true Maltese become less because the true Maltese are being aborted" Interview 2), when there are already not enough Maltese children being born ("We have the lowest birth rate in the whole European Union, about 1.1%, which is the lowest" Interview 5).

Nevertheless, also, anti-gender mainstreaming rhetoric is being seen in Malta as in many other European countries, saying things like "how good Malta was before all of this change", throwing out the idea that queer people have now gone too far and are "imposing their ideology on" the Maltese community, showing that there is also pushback coming from inside this very queer rights progressive country (Interview 3).

That remains true, even though many see the progressive role model position as part of Maltese national identity, in fact when Malta had the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2017,

Malta raised their profile in Brussels by pushing "that it was the first country ever to include LGBTIQ rights as one of its priorities", they were labelled as the "Rainbow Presidency" (Interview 2).

Part of Malta's reality is that it is a small insular island in the Mediterranean, which, for Interview 4, is an indication that "Malta, being a small country, despite having traditional roots, was very susceptible to very quick changes. And simply because it is an island" (Interview 4), in line with EU membership and the PL's push for LGBTQIA+ rights Malta changed rapidly (Interview 4). The younger generation, particularly, has been influenced by the EU, as it has allowed them to "study abroad" and "come back with new ideas", which is some indication of why younger generations are more progressive (Interview 4).

Malta continues to show this divergence in their national identity. It has almost become their new identity to be the nation that is progressive in queer rights, while being restrictive in SRHRs. This is underlined by the media, discussing the Maltese voting record on abortion in the European Parliament, and their queer rights ranking. "Maltese society needs to be understood in its contradictions" (Interview 8), indicating that having these seemingly opposing views is part of what it means to be Maltese.

Therefore, the above-outlined factors have contributed to the lack of correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta. Moreover, this divergence has constructed Maltese national identity by differentiating themselves from the rest of Europe.

Theoretical Contextualisation and Discussion

The analysis has provided insight into the factors which have led to Malta's current legal divergence in LGBTQIA+ Rights and Reproductive Rights, as well as indicating how Maltese national identity is constructed. This chapter contextualises these findings in previous research and discusses the theoretical framework it constructs.

The factors, ideal circumstances, personal connection, political power, and framing, all have impacted the current legal situation on different levels. A personal connection begins at a micro level, with at least two individuals sharing a relationship that can influence a person's point of view. Framing is largely constructed by Maltese communities as a whole; ergo, at the meso

level, although governments may contribute to it at the macro level as well. The other factors, ideal circumstances and political power, are issued on different levels too, considering that it describes the perfect time of change for the nation, while also being indicative of political parties and issue networks standing in unity. The same is true for political power, referring to power at the party and governmental levels. The discursive framing connects all levels, as discourse between two or more people, two or more groups, or an entire nation constructs power relations that impact the Maltese legal situation.

Setting these factors in their historical context, per the CDA, contextualises how modern Maltese national identity has been constructed amid its contradictions. A perfect example of this political paradox, as Bloom (2025: 3) describes it, is queer rights advocates who support the Church's stance on pro-life discourse.

Explaining Malta's Divergence – LGBTQIA+ Rights and SRHR

Mark Harwood (2023) also reflected on the dichotomy between LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights, although he analysed the topic from the perspective of political movements. As the above analysis has shown, activist groups have been a major factor in shaping the current legal landscape. In line with what has been learned from the interviews, what really matters is whether these issue networks have access to people in political power positions (Harwood 2023: 85). This, in line with the other factors of finding the right moment, building a personal connection as well as certain influence from political powers with a lack of opposition, explains Malta's current legal divergence. Corrales (2017: 70) particularly reflects on how the expansion of human rights is considerably more favourable in the absence of significant opposition. Seeing as only the LGBTQIA+ rights movement has had this opportunity so far, it is a significant factor in why only queer rights have seen such progressive development. Notably, the establishment of LGBT Labour in 2009 is the best example of how close activists were able to get to the political elite (Harwood 2023: 92). There is no such thing as a Pro-Choice sub-section in any of the Maltese parties. Although both Volt and the Green Party (AD+PD) in Malta have voiced their support for the decriminalisation of abortion, neither party is even close to gaining enough votes at the national level to arrive at a political level where they may have any impact on Malta's legislation.

Even more so, once the PL was in power, queer groups could participate in the government's Consultative Council and their Secretariat of the Minister for Equality, leaving them in the

ideal position to influence legal developments and engage in political discourse (Harwood 2023: 92). This push was so notable, that even the groups who previously opposed LGBTQIA+ rights, such as the PN and the Catholic Church grew to accept the legislative changes and the PN has since adopted their own LGBTQIA+ agenda. This underlines how much progressive queer rights have become part of Maltese identity. Although Harwood (2023) underscores that the PN and the Catholic Church do follow a "diversity not uniformity" approach, meaning that they have aligned themselves with traditional values, while respecting queer rights (Harwood 2023: 94). This is true even inside the Maltese Catholic Church, as there is no homogenous opinion shared by all, some Church representatives may be more accepting, while others are less so, of either LGBTQIA+ or reproductive rights (de los Ángeles Roberto 2024: 104-105). Today, this is represented by far-right groups in Malta and the Catholic Church, which have welcomed queer people in the Church but will not allow same-sex couples to wed within the Church. Furthermore, of course, holding onto traditional values also means Malta's position on abortion.

This anti-abortion sentiment has largely been driven by discussions on morality about the killing of babies, years of indoctrination through education, and considering it to be Maltese to be opposed to abortion. However, the Catholic Church has not always opposed abortion. MacNamara & Bloomer (2024: 145) found that the belief in the "protection of life" shifted in the 1960s. Since then, the Catholic Church has called for the protection of all life, including the prohibition of contraception (de los Ángeles Roberto 2024: 104), which meant that for decades, many Maltese women* did not have access to birth control and that sex education in school was largely informed by abstinence teaching. With the increasing push by issue networks on SRHR, Malta has since made the Morning After Pill available and improved its sexual education curricula. Furthermore, the criminalisation of abortion has historically affected people differently in Malta, considering that pregnant people, who could afford it, were able to travel abroad to have an abortion, which meant that for a long time, the debate in Maltese society did not receive significant attention, as it primarily affected more vulnerable communities, too often overlooked in society. And then, once the Covid-19 pandemic hit and people were unable to travel, public discourse increased, highlighting the intersecting inequalities in SRH (Luna 2018: 29). This shows how SRHR is also a multi-layered human rights issue, then before the pandemic, poor women were already unable to travel abroad to access abortion care, but it did not reach public discourse until it affected all women (Encarnación 2022: 99).

For pro-choice groups, it is difficult to argue against the murder of children, because, of course, who would be in favour of murder, hence they have been working on the rebranding of abortion as a health care and a human rights issue, similarly to what happened with LGBTQIA+ rights in the 2000s (see Harwood 2023: 94). The anti-abortion discourse has been deeply embedded in Maltese identity, meaning that this reframing process has only worked slowly. However, both evidence from the expert interviews and the media analysis show that increasingly, both sides are looking for open, respectful dialogue, which is an essential first step in the decriminalisation of abortion. It also shows how far political opinion has swayed in recent years, as until recently, pro-choice advocates would be harassed as child murderers. Many people believe they have never met anyone who has had an abortion; this is unlikely, considering that around 500-600 people in Malta have an abortion yearly. If abortion is destigmatised and more people speak up about having had one, it will show people that SRHR is an issue that more broadly affects people across all communities. The personal connection allows people to sympathise with others, as was the case with LGBTQIA+ rights.

Similarly, Harwood (2023) found that timing and framing were additional determining factors for a civil rights group to find success (Harwood 2023: 85). As the framing for queer rights changed, there was no driving factor attempting to change how abortion was framed, as pro-choice issue networks only established themselves almost two decades after the LGBTQIA+ rights groups, like MGRM. Therefore, the discourse on abortion in the media has only recently moved towards a more inclusive SRHR perspective. Queer rights groups were able to successfully use the political disarray of the Nationalist Party and the Catholic Church after the divorce referendum and change the discourse on queer rights to realise the current legal situation. Pro-Choice movements' circumstances have been different: "by the time abortion began to be discussed more widely, especially in 2016 within the context of the Morning-After Pill and the Embryo Protection Bill (2018), the situation had changed" (Harwood 2023: 95). Additionally, the LGBTQIA+ rights movement had "benefited from a larger, more professional network with a clear framing of the issue as one of civil rights and equality, a frame which was adopted (eventually) by the main parties, some more quickly than others" (Harwood 2023: 97). Queer rights groups started organising themselves in the early 2000s in Malta, eventually receiving access to political institutions, all while Maltese pro-choice issue networks only became publicly organised in the late 2010s, therefore, the two have had significantly different amount of times to advocate for their rights issues. Additionally, the opposition towards

abortion was secure in their belief, strong and politically connected. These beliefs remain entrenched in Maltese society (Harwood 2023: 97). This has meant that pro-choice groups faced stronger opposition than queer rights activists did in the early 2010s. However, the years that followed, with public court cases garnering public sympathy, have been instrumental in the limited change observed over the past five years.

From the analysis, it is indicative that both pro-choice and pro-life movements want people to have fewer abortions; however, they have two differing approaches on how to achieve this. Pro-choice issue networks concentrate their work not only on abortion, but also on SRHR generally, meaning the fight for improved sex education in schools, easier access to contraceptive measures, and access to health care for pregnant persons. Pro-life networks believe the only way abortions will not happen is if they are illegal; however, as the case of Malta clearly depicts, abortions happen regardless of legality. Indeed, "[w]hether abortion is legally restricted or not, the likelihood that a woman will have an abortion is about the same" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 5). This is true for Malta, as well as any other country where abortion is illegal.

Because of the stigma associated with abortion, having been framed as "child murder" for a long time, it prevents women from seeking out help in case of any complications from an abortion for fear of being prosecuted (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021: 6). The two recent cases in Malta of two different women receiving a suspended sentence after seeking medical help are the perfect indication that Malta has not arrived at a place where they would legalise abortion; however, the public outcry as a result has strengthened the voice of Maltese pro-choice issue networks. And it has allowed people to see that abortion is not a black-and-white issue. Finding personal connection and hearing other people's stories, even if it is through public media discourse helps people empathise, "the more contact individuals have" with LGBTQIA+ or people who have had abortions, "the more likely they are to develop a more favorable disposition" (Dillon 2014: 12). Personal contact shows people that much of the stereotypical and prejudicial ideas they have held, do not necessarily have to be true. Even though politicians do not yet seem ready to decriminalise abortion, the ruling PL has indicated that they would ensure no pregnant person would serve a prison sentence for seeking health care. Additionally, it is not only the fear of criminal charges preventing people from seeking medical help, but also the spread of misinformation on abortion (Harwood 2023: 94-95). Pro-Choice issue networks

launched the Family Planning Advisory Service in 2020 to counter misinformation and provide accurate medical advice to people seeking help.

Another aspect explaining the divergence is the Maltese Catholic identity. Kowalik et al. (2025) confirmed this, stating that "the Catholic Church, as an institution possessing both spiritual and social authority, plays a significant role in shaping the axiology of legal systems in countries with a Catholic heritage" (Kowalik et al. 2025: 17). This is because religious morality is the basis of Maltese legal references. "[M]edia coverage of Church-related issues or news declined heavily after the divorce referendum in May 2011" meaning the Church's influence visibly decreased, yet when the issue of the Embryo Protection bill arose in 2018, the Church once again became more vocal about their pro-life views which many Maltese people aligned with, considering how ingrained Catholicism is in Maltese identity, despite lower Church attendance in recent years (Harwood 2023: 95). Hayes and McKinnon (2018) found that people's religious devotion may be an indicator of whether they are opposed to gay marriage (Hayes & McKinnon 2018: 362). However, the Maltese Catholic Church only pushed for public visibility in the past decade regarding reproductive rights, having not dared publicly speaking out against LGBTQIA+ rights considering the wider acceptance in Maltese society (Harwood 2023: 95). Hence, religious opposition towards abortion is stronger than it was for LGBTQIA+ rights in the 2010s. The empirical analysis showed the Church could empathise with severe cases, like the one of Andrea Prudente, whose life was at risk because she could not access abortion health care; they are nowhere near condoning the decriminalisation of abortion in general. Especially if the older generation continues to be strongly influenced by their Catholic Maltese identity and the anti-abortion indoctrination they went through in school. Similarly, to LGBTQIA+ rights, the younger generation may be actors of change.

The media analysis clearly showed that over the past two years, Malta's public debate has focused more on SRHR than on LGBTQIA+ rights, which have slowly stagnated in Malta. The analysis has shown a change in political discourse, with abortion receiving more objective coverage in the media (instead of the previous pro-life discourse). The sympathy incited by suspended sentences indicates that Malta has already moved closer towards the decriminalisation of abortion. This is no more perfectly explained than through the government's openness to discussing the removal of criminal charges for abortion. As mentioned by one of the interview participants, it is a sign towards decriminalisation of

abortion when the government does not wish to punish abortion as if it were truly murder, indicating that it does not actually subscribe to the idea of abortion being child murder.

Maltese European identity has further impacted their path to this current divergence, as "Malta adopted its priority in terms of social inclusion and the LGBTIQ community" against the European backdrop, having been encouraged to become the EU's role model position in queer rights and finding pride in that position (Harwood 2018: 56). Simultaneously, being anti-abortion has become part of Maltese national identity for many too, especially comparing themselves to the rest of Europe, Maltese find similar pride in being different to the rest of the EU, feeling that they are the only nation doing the right thing to protect the "unborn child". The protection of children is often at the front and centre of this dialogue, as it was when public criticism was raised in 2023 over children dancing at a EuroPride opening event in Malta (Times of Malta 2023). With the rise of anti-gender mainstream groups across Europe, both abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights, particularly trans* rights, are under fire: "[t]ransgender persons form an easy target for anti-gender discourses. They are presented as the embodiment of ideology because of [sic!] they supposedly target adolescents and their goal to deconstruct gender altogether", once again complying with the idea that children need to be protected from gender ideology, ascribed to both the queer rights and reproductive rights movements (Verlooy 2024: 360). This push is further supported by well-funded evangelical groups, often coming from the US, with polarising opinions (Interview 4), with even more conservative ideas than the Maltese Catholic Church, and therefore do not support SRHR or LGBTQIA+ rights (Interview 3). As these Evangelical religious groups gain power, stronger opposition movements grow. Guedira & Penfold (2025: 131) have "found a significant commitment gap between Catholics and Evangelicals, with Evangelicals more easily aligning their religious views with their political ones. In contrast, Catholics increasingly adopt a freer relationship to their faith". This coincides with the fact that, while most Maltese are still Catholic on paper and the Church remains a significant part of their identity, they no longer practice the religion as much, as evidenced by lower attendance at Sunday church services (Guedira & Penfold 2025: 132). Religion has been shown to be a crucial factor when it comes to opposing LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights; Bohigues et al. (2022) found that "the more MPs attend religious services and the more rightist they are, the less prone to support same-sex marriage, [and] abortion" they are (Bohigues et al. 2022: 17). Although the Catholic Church's influence decreases on opinions of same-sex marriage (Bohigues et al. 2022: 17). As the Catholic Church remains embedded in Malta's DNA, it is a crucial factor that has led to the current divergence.

Discursive Framing within Malta's Divergence

Discursive framing has had a significant impact on the current legal dichotomy, as both issues started out as matters of morality. Through rebranding and reframing, queer rights became a civil rights issue, and now SRHR are slowly moving towards an issue of equality and health care as well, rather than a moral dilemma. For SRHR, "[t]he clash is between commitment to the value of protecting fetal life versus also recognizing and supporting women's reproductive freedom" (Dillon 2014: 12). This framing clash is significantly less complicated for LGBTQIA+ rights (Dillon 2014: 12). To understand the current legal situation in Malta, one has to "examine the contexts and practices that explain why something is not known" (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025). This allows the contextualisation of Maltese human rights discourse.

At a time when both were considered issues of morality in Malta, meaning in the early 2000s, Malta's queer rights were considerably more regressive than they are now. At the time, queer rights were discussed from a moral standpoint, whether belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community could be seen as right or wrong; however, the issue network reframed it and used "the power or rhetoric in advancing social change" (Encarnación 2025: 97). As a direct result, queer rights became a civil rights matter in the fight for equality which the Labour Party turned into their progressive agenda in 2013 to construct Malta as the progressive front runner in LGBTQIA+ rights, by 2016 that is exactly who Malta became in Europe. Nowadays, this constructed progressive identity is a point of pride for the Maltese community. This has also happened in Spain, where people saw the push for queer rights as a way "to break away from the past and embrace the future" (Encarnación 2025: 98). Spain also saw this agenda pushed by a political leader, similarly to Malta where Joseph Muscat, the prime minister at the time and Helena Dalli were a driving force in making LGBTQIA+ rights part of the PL's political agenda (Encarnación 2025: 98).

Since the framing has helped depict queer rights as an issue of equality that people have grown to accept in Malta, pro-choice issue networks are trying to rebrand their movement towards a human rights perspective. Unfortunately, abortion has historically and continues to cause more moral outrage. Harwood (2023) describes this problem as a "clash of absolutes" (Harwood 2023: 84-85). Considering that abortion is often seen as such a black-and-white issue, there really is no halfway point in terminating a pregnancy; it remains incredibly polarising (Harwood 2023: 84-85). Everything that is considered as right or wrong has been "created in a social context", therefore, the progressive dichotomy, the acceptance of one being right and the

other being wrong has been constructed within Malta's social context (Håkansson & Håkansson 2025: 7). Pierson and Caruana-Finkel (2025) also discuss the context of the abortion debate, which too often is seen as morally "bad" and is depicted as something only "young, single, promiscuous and not using contraception" women would do, when quite the opposite is true (Pierson & Caruana Finkel 2025: 4). Further, pregnant people seeking an abortion are "often stigmatized as irresponsible […] individuals who expect others to pay for their own misdeeds", such constructed framing makes it difficult for people to empathise with people seeking an abortion, making it easier for them to be against the legalisation of abortion (Beckman 2017: 109). There is no one category of person who requires sexual and reproductive health care, and many people will seek an abortion for various reasons, but when one constructs abortion seekers in such a way, and people think they do not know anyone who has had an abortion, it becomes infinitely more difficult to empathise with the issue.

This is why advocates discuss abortion as a matter of gender equality and reproductive rights (Harwood 2023: 90), to get away from the preconceived ideas of what it means to have an abortion. Issue networks may use framing to "guide action", but to do so, it has to evoke Maltese culture (Encarnación 2018: 198). For Malta specifically, decades of pro-life influenced sex education have meant that an entire generation has seen a film that showed abortion as a brutal act. This is even indicative of indoctrination (see Harwood 2023; Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021). These are images that stay with people for life. The analysis has also shown that when referring to abortion, the Maltese discourse refers to the killing of children; there is no differentiation between an embryo and a foetus. Misinformation is being spread, preventing people from seeking healthcare (see Harwood 2023; Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2021). Nowadays, when Maltese people discuss abortion, they put the foetus' life above the pregnant persons, as it is their duty and part of their identity to protect the "vulnerable unborn life". The unborn baby becomes more important than the parent carrying it (Harwood 2023: 94). However, it is not just the "unborn child" they are trying to protect, instead pro-life groups have framed it in such a manner that it is also the pregnant person's life they are looking to protect, specifically their physical and mental health as they have constructed abortion as something traumatising (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 4). Marginalised communities are disproportionately affected by limited SRHR, as they often do not have the possibility to travel abroad and may be affected by intersecting inequalities (Pierson & Caruana-Finkel 2025: 5).

Recent reframing by advocacy groups has led to the Maltese being more open to dialogue, in addition to the impact of legal cases where women were brought up on criminal charges for having an abortion. While the Maltese public seems polarised over the legalisation of abortion, from the analysis it seems indicative that it is easier for people to agree on the fact that people should not be criminally punished for having an abortion. Although further analysis would be needed to confirm this. Additionally, the analysis indicated that both pro-life and pro-choice groups would like to reduce abortions; however, they approach and frame this in different ways, meaning that "measures to prevent abortion are directed primarily towards already pregnant women, not towards promoting contraception and sex education" (Stella & Nartova 2015: 24).

The issue of queer rights may be split into smaller individual rights; for example, while many agree that no one should be discriminated against or experience hate solely based on who they are, others might struggle with the legalisation of marriage equality or transgender health care, especially for young people. The empirical analysis has shown that even though the Catholic Church has accepted the status quo of queer legislation, they would still not bless or allow a same-sex couple to get married in the Church. Yet, when pressed, framing-constructed dialogue has allowed Church representatives to see it as an issue of love, whereas abortion is still viewed as murder. Hence, when you place love against murder, and consider which should be legalised, everyone would be in favour of love. This is crucial to understand, because as long as abortion is being framed as murder in Malta, opposition will remain strong and any progress towards increasing SRHR will stay relatively small.

Harwood (2023) reflects on the political conundrum by raising the issue of pinkwashing in Latin America, meaning that politicians progress LGBTQIA+ rights to seem progressive and let people focus on their progressive policies, while remaining regressive on issues such as abortion (Harwood 2023: 85-86). This is a discussion that was also raised in two of the interviews, where participants suggested that the Labour Party government used LGBTQIA+ rights to construct Malta as this progressive role model, while remaining regressive in SRHR. Considering Malta has stalled on LGBTQIA+ equality in recent years, this may indicate that they have reached the point of a progressive role-model position and may now move on to other topics. Meanwhile, countries like Spain have taken the lead in both queer rights and gender equality, now ranking number one on ILGA's rainbow map. Similarly, when the original decriminalisation of abortion bill was submitted in 2021, there was significant public

backlash, and the then President publicly stated that he would resign before signing this bill (Harwood 2023: 95). As a result, the law was significantly watered down before it passed as the current legal change that took place in 2023 (Harwood 2023: 95).

Moreover, discursive framing has created "stigma and poor sexual health education", which means that any abortion talk has essentially been silenced; this makes it easier for misinformation and harmful discourse to be spread and essentially makes access to abortion more difficult (Pierson & Caruana Finkel 2025: 7). "This is an epistemic injustice that results in poorer health outcomes" (Pierson & Caruana Finkel 2025: 7). This affects issue networks, who are trying to counteract this anti-abortion discourse by providing SRH education and health care advice. However, Encarnación (2022) found that Latin America's recent breakthrough in abortion rights was due to activist groups changing their discursive framing in how they discuss abortion; they have claimed abortion as "a basic human right—and, therefore, an extension of democratic citizenship and social justice" (Encarnación 2022: 98). If constructed as a human rights issue, it makes it more uncomfortable for opposition groups to speak out against it, as it would indicate them being opposed to basic human rights, instead of someone being opposed to child murder (Encarnación 2022: 98). There is a great difference between the two, the different framing constructs a completely different reality.

Construction of National Identity

Within these factors that have contributed to the current legal divergence and the framed discourse, the Maltese community finds its identity. Malta's identity is found in its contradictions. It is constructed within this progressive divergence, with Maltese citizens having learned to accept and celebrate their country's position on queer rights, while simultaneously holding on to their Catholic identity as Maltese, meaning that pro-life belief has become part of their national identity. Additionally, Malta is a patriarchal society that has been built on heteronormative and patriarchal norms, which is indicated by the lack of women in public political life and stereotypical gender roles and norms persisting (Harwood 2023: 97).

Even with the Church's influence decreasing and Malta becoming more secularised whenever it is under PL rule, Maltese national identity has been constructed alongside its Catholic identity. Håkansson and Håkansson (2025) discuss this as a matter of "religious nationalism," which they define as "a form of nationalism in which religion serves as a means to unite the nation" (Håkansson & Håkansson 2025: 2). In Malta, the Catholic Church is not only a

religious community, but instead it is embedded in national identity, Maltese traditions and values have been derived from religious practices. The Constitution, the country's legal framework, recognises Catholicism as part of Malta's identity. These religious beliefs and their opinion on human rights have constructed national identity. In the same way that it constructs what Maltese is, it also constructs the other of what cannot be Maltese, i.e., Malta's progressive queer rights position vs its restrictive SRHR.

Similarly, "[i]nstitutions derive from historical heritage and are encapsulated and coded information of past experiences", meaning that all political institutions in Malta today have been influenced by the country's Catholic history (Håkansson & Håkansson 2025: 6). Hence, political discourse, political identity, and society as a whole have been impacted by the Catholic Church, that even in a time of greater secularisation during the rule of the PL, modern Malta finds its identity constructed within Catholic frameworks.

Malta's divergent position fuels right-wing discourse, as right-wing groups may interpret the current progressive queer rights climate as an indication that the country has reached gender equality, which is only threatened by immigrants, thereby finding reason in their anti-immigrant sentiment (Verlooy 2024: 358-359). Moreover, Malta's progressive position as queer rights leader in Europe for ten years may now be "formulated as a trait of Western superiority" over immigrants coming into the country and threatening this status quo (Verlooy 2024: 358-359). Similarly with abortion, the analysis has shown that right-wing discourse has supported Maltese identity as the anti-abortion country, to ensure the birth of "true Maltese babies", instead of "being overrun by immigrants". Further, "legalized abortions and same-sex sexual activity both jeopardize maximizing human reproduction" providing reason for right-wing anti-gender mainstream groups to oppose both LGBTQIA+ and abortion rights (Henry et al. 2022: 264). In right-wing, ethnonationalist communities, "women are charged as agents for the biological renewal of the nation, their access to abortion is often framed as analogous to treason and 'race suicide'" (Hayes & Nagle 2019: 457). This puts the responsibility of the survival of the Maltese national identity on women and provides a seemingly legitimate reason to oppose abortion.

What is more, there are right-wing groups in Malta today that are getting louder based on the opinion that the LGBTQIA+ community has gone "too far" and the rights have been taken "too far". Hayes & Nagle (2019: 456) discuss this as a society's ethnonationalist identity, which

constructs national identity through "a heteronormative and patriarchal family unit," as underlined in Aħwa Maltin's (2026) electoral program, which supports the traditional family by holding on to Maltese Catholic identity. Queer individuals may be seen as a threat to the ethnonationalist structure of the traditional, heteronormative family (Hayes & Nagle 2019: 457), although this discourse is less relevant in Malta, as even Aħwa Maltin explicitly states that they respect families besides the traditional one. The fact remains that most Maltese people are currently in favour of LGBTQIA+ rights, so political opposition is significantly smaller.

Finally, Malta has constructed its national identity in relation to the rest of Europe. On the one hand, it identifies as the progressive leader pushing for LGBTQIA+ equality, while on the other hand, it holds on to its religious values by opposing abortion, standing in opposition to secular Europe, and instead being proud of holding onto its Catholic values. This produces a political standpoint of selective liberalism, displaying the contradiction of a progressive and a restrictive position simultaneously. In this, Malta finds its identity, building this position on diverse narratives and addressing different groups, allowing for both progressive and conservative points of view simultaneously. This is how Malta separates itself from other European countries, which are significantly more congruent in their liberalism. This has been particularly helpful for the Labour Party, which has been able to portray itself as the liberal, progressive party bringing about equality, and not losing the conservative vote from Catholic voters who would oppose the legalisation of abortion.

Building a Theoretical Framework

Finding the common thread in this analysis, the outlined research proposes a theoretical framework to understand Malta's divergent identity. This includes social and cultural norms, established through religious and patriarchal traditions that have created a society built on heteronormative gender norms where women are only now starting to participate in the public sphere. Stigma and cultural dynamics have persisted, showcasing a huge obstacle towards progressive reproductive justice. Another aspect is centralised political power and its political and institutional frameworks, defined by issue networks with varying levels of access and differing strengths in opposition. This has a significant impact on whether a rights campaign will succeed. The LGBTQIA+ issue network gained access to political power at the right moment and had political leadership as support; the SRHR movement has not. Some of the success has depended on discursive framing, how the differing rights have been framed and how framing changed over time with different levels of success. Political rhetoric and discourse

shape which groups can support an issue, which groups are mobilised because of it, and how the issue is embedded in broader narratives of national identity and belonging. Based on this divergence, identity is built. It constructs how Malta sees itself and how it compares to other European countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis set out to answer two research questions: *Which factors contribute towards there not being a correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta? How does this divergence contribute to the construction of Maltese national identity?* The research questions were answered through qualitative analysis of expert interviews, media, and electoral programs of Maltese political parties, using the grounded theory methodology and interpreting them through the lens of the Discourse Historical Approach. This has allowed for an answer grounded in empirical data.

Firstly, the analysis identified five interrelated categories describing the relevant factors: ideal circumstances, personal connection, political power, framing, and Maltese values and traditions. The ideal circumstance specifically benefited queer rights, with the political disarray following the 2011 divorce referendum and the Labour Party's push for LGBTQIA+ rights. This includes issue networks that are willing to fight for legal change. Pro-choice issue networks have only developed in recent years. With more and more people living out and proud as their queer selves, Maltese people have been able to build personal connections with members of the queer community; this has allowed them to empathise, and they are more likely to support the community, while abortion remains stigmatised and an abstract issue, instead of a personal one. Political power considers the connection to legal changemakers that has helped the LGBTQIA+ issue network lobby the Labour government to advance queer rights. For abortion, the opposition remains too strong for the movement to have garnered any political power. Both queer and reproductive rights used to be framed as an issue of morality; although LGBTQIA+ rights have gone through a rebranding and are now framed as a matter of civil rights, the pro-choice movement is still working on SRHR being reframed as matters of health care and basic human rights. Finally, Malta's identity is constructed through traditional values embedded in religion, gender discourse and the comparison to the rest of Europe.

As for the second research question, the analysis has shown that the divergence of queer and reproductive rights has become embedded in Maltese national identity, priding itself on being

a progressive queer rights leader and protecting the lives of the unborn children, as the Maltese see it. This divergence has, over time, contributed to Maltese national identity, based on contradictions: a nation that is simultaneously progressive and conservative, modern and traditional, European and distinctively Catholic. Malta has found its identity in this progressive divergence, although for most Maltese people, these two opinions are not contradictory; instead, they reflect what it means to be Maltese: progressive in civil matters (LGBTQIA+) and traditional in 'moral' ones (SRHR). Embedded in a broader international context, this discourse illustrates the possibilities and limitations of a model of social progress and conservative traditions, and how they impact the framing of queer and reproductive rights. Even though Malta has been slow to change when it comes to abortion, examples from Latin America and Ireland suggest that reframing of abortion discourse is possible, even though it seemingly has to happen within structural conditions. In Malta, these conditions have not yet converged for reproductive rights. Whether Malta as a nation will continue in this political dichotomy, progress in reproductive rights similarly to LGBTQIA+ rights or regress in queer rights through anti-gender discourse remains to be seen.

Some research limitations of this thesis include the interview sample, which consists primarily of pro-LGBTQIA+ voices and no right-wing voices, due to the difficulty of recruiting interview participants from these groups. If this had been possible, the analysis would have been enriched by a more diverse set of data from actors opposed to reproductive and queer rights. Moreover, the analysis of the media and electoral programs is limited due to language restrictions, as most of the electoral programs had to be translated.

For future research, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to see how Maltese public opinion on abortion evolves over time. The discourse on reproductive rights could be additionally supplemented by analysing speeches in the Maltese parliament to see the impact issue networks have had on reframing abortion. And one could conduct a deeper analysis of gender equality and feminist movements in Malta, as there is limited research on this topic, and it would provide significant insight into whether Malta's patriarchal system has contributed to restrictive SRHR.

References

Ahluwalia, Sanjam (2015). *Abortion and Gay Marriage: Sexual Modernity and Its Dissonance in Contemporary World*. http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-112hr3541ih/pdf/BILLS-112hr3541ih.pdf

Arena, Jessica (2021). President Vella: I would rather resign than sign abortion bill. Times Malta, https://timesofmalta.com/article/president-vella-i-would-rather-resign-than-sign-abortion-bill.872527 (last accessed: 13.06.2026).

BBC (2018). Irish abortion referendum: Ireland overturns abortion ban, BBC.com, 26 May 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44256152 (last accessed: 26.06.2026)

Beckman, Linda J. (2017). Abortion in the United States: The continuing controversy. *Feminism & Psychology*, *27*(1), 101-113.

Biroli, Flávia; Rousseau, Stéphanie (2025). The effects of anti-gender activism on Latin American democracies: a comparison of Brazil and Peru. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *34*(5), 669–683. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2452257

Blokker, Paul (2024). Using liberal-legal tools for illiberal gains: the European Court of Human Rights and legal mobilisation by conservative right-wing actors. *International Journal of Law in Context*, *20*(3), 401–418. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552324000272

Bloom, Isobel (2025). "a Position Which My Gayness Itself Leads Me to Take": Sexual-Minority Antiabortion Activists. *Journal of American Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875824000677

Bohigues, Asbel; Guedes-Neto, João V.; Santos, Manoel L. (2022). Latin American political elites' positions on same-sex marriage, abortion, and drug legalization. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, (114), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/48712106

Borg, Maria C. (2025). Mapping the ecosystem: Relational dynamics of Malta's women's organisations. In SociologyMT: Issue 1, https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/133313/1/Mapping_the_ecosystem.pdf. (Last accessed: 13.06.2026)

Brezovec, Branimira. (2019). "Critical Discourse Analysis of Protest Signs at the Women's March on Washington". Dissertation at the University of Zagreb.

Cachia, Jean Claude (2023). *The Europeanisation of Party Politics in Malta: Values, Legitimation, and Polarisation*. Springer.

Caollaí, Éanna Ó; Hilliard, Mark (2015): Ireland becomes first country to approve same-sex marriage by popular vote. The Irish Times, 24 May, 2015, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/ireland-becomes-first-country-to-approve-same-sex-marriage-by-popular-vote-1.2223646 (last accessed: 25.06.2026).

Center for Reproductive Rights (2023). Malta's Amended ABortion Law Will Not Protect Women's Health and Lives, Press Release, 28 June 2023, https://reproductiverights.org/news/maltas-amended-abortion-law-will-not-protect-womens-health-and-lives/ (last accessed: 26.06.2026).

Center for Reproductive Rights (2025). Europe Abortion Laws 2025, https://reproductiverights.org/europe-abortion-laws-2025/ (last accessed: 26.06.2026).

Center for Reproductive Rights (2026). World's Abortion Laws, https://reproductiverights.org/maps/world-abortion-laws/ (last accessed: 26.06.2026).

Charmaz, Kathy (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. sage.

Corbin, Juliet; Strauss, Anselm (2015). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Sage publications, 4th edition.

Corrales, Javier (2017). UNDERSTANDING THE UNEVEN SPREAD OF LGBT RIGHTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, 1999-2013 1. In *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* (Vol. 7, Issue 1).

Council of the European Union (2003). Protocol No. 7 on abortion in Malta (Document 12003T/PRO/07). Official Journal of the European Union, L 236, 0947–0947. EUR-Lex. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:12003T/PRO/07

Cutajar, JosAnn (2014). Women and political participation in Malta, commissioned by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/7/d/126803.pdf (last accessed: 26.06.2026).

de los Ángeles Roberto, Maria (2024). Abortion and faith in Latin America: an interfaith perspective. In *Reimagining Faith and Abortion* (pp. 97–110). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447370178.007

Debono, James (2025b): Malta's abortion laws second most restrictive in Europe, MaltaToday, 29 September 2025, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/137283/maltas_abortion_laws_second_most_restrictive_in_europe (last accessed: 26.06.2026)

Deguara, A. (2020). Secularisation and intimate relationships in a Catholic community: Is Malta a resistant niche?. *Social compass*, *67*(3), 372-388.

Dibben, Andreana; Stabile, Isabel; Gomperts, Rebecca; Kohout, James (2023). Accessing abortion in a highly restrictive legal regime: characteristics of women and pregnant people in Malta self-managing their abortion through online telemedicine. *BMJ sexual & reproductive health*, *49*(3), 176-182.

Dillon, Michele (2014). Asynchrony in attitudes toward abortion and gay rights: The challenge to values alignment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *53*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12096

Durham, Martin (2005). Abortion, gay rights and politics in Britain and America: A comparison. In *Parliamentary Affairs* (Vol. 58, Issue 1, pp. 89-103+2). https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsi008

Eaves, Lindon J.; Hatemi, Peter K. (2008). Transmission of attitudes toward abortion and gay rights: Effects of genes, social learning and mate selection. *Behavior Genetics*, *38*(3), 247–256. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10519-008-9205-4

Edwards, Linda H. (2015). Hearing Voices: Non-Party Stories in Abortion and Gay Rights Hearing Voices: Non-Party Stories in Abortion and Gay Rights Advocacy Advocacy. *Scholarly Works*, 1327–1357. https://scholars.law.unlv.edu/facpub/973

EIGE (2022). Gender Statistics Database. National parliaments: presidents and members, https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/wmidm_pol_parl__wmid_natparl/datatable?orderby=2025-Q1&orderdir=asc (last accessed: 29.06.2026).

EIGE (2025). Gender Equality Index 2025. Sharper data for a changing word, Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2025-sharper-data-changing-world

El-Mafaalani, Aladin; Waleciak, Julian; Weitzel, Gerrit (2016). Methodische Grundlagen und Positionen der qualitativen Migrationsforschung. In: Maehler, Débora B./Brinkmann, Heinz Ulrich (Eds): Methoden der Migrationsforschung: ein interdisziplinärer Forschungsleitfaden. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 61-95.

Electoral Commission Malta (2026). General Elections, https://electoral.gov.mt/ElectionResults/General?year=271&v=null. (Last accessed: 20.06.2026)

Encarnación, Omar G. (2018). A Latin American puzzle: Gay rights landscapes in Argentina and Brazil. *Human Rights Quarterly*, *40*(1), 194–218. https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2018.0007

Encarnación, Omar G. (2022). LATIN AMERICA'S ABORTION RIGHTS BREAKTHROUGH. In *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 33, Issue 4, pp. 89–103). Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0049

Encarnación, Omar G. (2025). How Spain Became a Global LGBTQ Rights Leader. In *Current History* (pp. 95–100). http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/article-pdf/124/860/95/858451/curh.2025.124.860.95.pdf

EPF, European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights (2025). European Abortion Policy Atlas 2025, https://www.epfweb.org/node/1156 (last accessed: 25.06.2026)

FPAS.mt (2026). FPAS.mt - Family Planning Advisory Service Malta, https://www.fpas.mt/ (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Friese, Carrie; Clarke, Adele; Washburn, Rachel (2021). Von der Constructivist Grounded Theory zur Situationsanalyse. In Prainsack, Barbara, & Pot, Mirjam (Eds): Qualitative und interpretative Methoden in der Politikwissenschaft, p. 157- 174, UTB.

Glaser, Barney & Strauss, Anselm (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.

Government of Malta (1964). Constitution of Malta, https://legislation.mt/eli/const/eng (last accessed 26.06.2026).

Government of Malta. (2023). Criminal Code (Amendment No. 3) Act, 2023 (Act No. XXII of 2023). https://legislation.mt/eli/act/2023/22/eng

Graff, Agnieszka; Kapur, Ratna; Walters, Suzanna Danuta (2019). Introduction: Gender and the rise of the global right. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 44(3), 541-560.

Gravino, Gilbert; Caruana-Finkel, Liza (2019). Abortion and methods of reproductive planning: the views of Malta's medical doctor cohort. In: Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters, December 2019, Vol. 27, No. 1, p. 287-303, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/48617575.pdf. (Last accessed: 13.06.2026)

gtg (2024): Punishments under Maltese Criminal Law, 29 October 2024, https://gtg.com.mt/punishments-maltese-criminal-law-criminal-lawyers-malta/ (last accessed: 27.06.2026)

Guasti, Petra; Bustikova, Lenka (2023). Varieties of Illiberal Backlash in Central Europe. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *70*(2), 130–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2022.2156889

Guedira, Alia, & Penfold, Isa-Lys (2025). Abortion Laws Across Latin America: How Evangelicals Shape Reproductive Freedom. *Michigan Journal of Political Science*, 130–143.

Håkansson, Peter G., & Håkansson, Dubravka G. (2025). The change in values on homosexuality and abortion in Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia 1995–2020. *Sexuality and Culture*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-025-10420-6, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12119-025-10420-6.pdf

Harwood, Mark (2015). Adopting same-sex unions in catholic Malta: Pointing the finger at 'Europe'. *South European Society and Politics*, *20*(1), 113-131.

Harwood, Mark (2018). The Maltese presidency and social inclusion: Malta's push for LGBTIQ rights. In Malta's EU presidency (Chapter 5), p. 54-61, University of Malta. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/96533/1/Maltas_EU_presidency_ch5.pdf

Harwood, Mark (2023). Malta's Political Conundrum: Europe's Leading Country for LGBTIQ Rights and the Ban on Abortion. *International Journal of Sociology*, *53*(1), 83–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2022.2139936

Harwood, Mark (2024). *Small States and EU-Level Priorities: The Continuing Relevance of LGBTIQ Rights for Malta as an EU Priority*.

Hayes, Bernadette C.; McKinnon, Andrew (2018). Belonging without believing: religion and attitudes towards gay marriage and abortion rights in Northern Ireland. *Religion, State and Society*, *46*(4), 351–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1467190

Hayes, Bernadette C.; Nagle, John (2019). Ethnonationalism and attitudes towards same-sex marriage and abortion in Northern Ireland. *International Political Science Review*, *40*(4), 455–469. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118775832

Henry, Pamela J.; Steiger, Russel L.; Bellovary, Andrea (2022). The Contribution of Gender Equality to the Coexistence of Progressive Abortion and Sexual Orientation Laws. *Sex Roles*, *86*(3–4), 263–281. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01263-0

HowTheyVote.eu (2025): European Citizens' Initiative 'My voice, my choice: for safe and accessible abortion', https://howtheyvote.eu/votes/182767 (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Htun, Mala (2003). Sex and the state: Abortion, divorce, and the family under Latin American dictatorships and democracies. Cambridge University Press.

humanrights.gov.mt (2026). Legal Provisions, https://humanrights.gov.mt/units/gender-equality/gender-equality-legal-provisions/, (last accessed 26.06.2026).

ILGA Europe (2026a). 2026 Rainbow Map, https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/, (last accessed: 29.06.2026).

ILGA Europe (2026b). Press Release: Spain breaks Malta's decade long hold on Europe's LGBTI rights top spot, 12.05.2026, https://www.ilga-europe.org/press-release/spain-breaks-maltas-decade-long-hold-on-europes-lgbti-rights-top-spot/ (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

ILGA World (2026a). ILGA World Database, https://database.ilga.org/en (last accessed: 25.06.2026).

ILGA World (2026b). ILGA World maps: our latest selection, https://ilga.org/ilga-world-maps/ (last accessed: 26.06.2026).

INFOVATICANA (2026). Andorra sets a deadline for the decriminalization of abortion: the reform must be resolved in this legislative term, https://infovaticana.com/en/2026/06/01/andorra-sets-a-deadline-for-the-decriminalization-of-abortion-the-reform-must-be-resolved-this-legislative-term/ (last accessed: 13.06.2026)

Jäger, Margarete; Jäger, Siegfried (2007). Deutungskämpfe: Theorie und Praxis kritischer Diskursanalyse. Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Khan, Shahid N. (2014). Qualitative research method: Grounded theory. *International journal of business and management*, *9*(11), 224-233.

Kowalik, Katarzyna, Bach, Kewin K., Żylińska, Agnieszka & Kowalik, Dagmara (2025). The Church and the Law: Catholic Ecclesiology and Its Influence on Bioethical Legislation in Contemporary Europe. *Religions*, *16*(9), 1106. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16091106

Kuhar, Roman & Paternotte, David (Eds.). (2017). Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Laenderdaten.info (2026). Malta, https://www.laenderdaten.info/Europa/Malta/index.php (last accessed 26.06.2026).

Latona, David 2025. Spain seeks to make abortion a constitutional right, 40 years after legalising it. In Reuters, published on October 3, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/spain-seeks-make-

abortion-constitutional-right-40-years-after-legalising-it-2025-10-03/ (Last accessed 13.06.2026)
Luna, Florencia (2018). From the middle ages to the 21st century. Abortion, assisted reproduction technologies and LGBT rights in Argentina. In *Canadian Journal of Bioethics* (Vol. 1, Issue 2, pp. 26–36). University of Montreal. https://doi.org/10.7202/1058266ar
MacNamara, Nóirín; Bloomer, Fiona (2024). Marking the absence of an embodied theology: an analysis of how people of faith talk about abortion in Northern Ireland. In *Reimagining Faith and Abortion* (pp. 144–159). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447370178.010
Martin, Patricia Y., & Turner, Barry A. (1986). Grounded theory and organizational research. *The journal of applied behavioral science*, *22*(2), 141-157.
Mayo Clinic (2023): Rhythm method for natural family planning, https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/rhythm-method/about/pac-20390918. (Last accessed: 13.06.2026)
McDonagh, Patrick (2020). Abortion, gay rights, and the National gay Federation in Ireland, 1982–1983. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, *29*(1), 1-27.
Molina, Victor (2022). Abortion, same-sex marriage, and gender identity during the Pink Tide: Venezuela compared to Latin American trends. *International Journal of Human Rights*, *26*(7), 1293–1312. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2088521
Monetta, Sara (2022). US woman denied termination in Malta: 'I was terrified'. In BBC, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-61959825. (Last accessed: 13:06.2026)
My Voice, My Choice (2026). Our Demands, https://www.myvoice-mychoice.org/our-demands (last-accessed: 27.06.2026).
OHCHR (2023). Malta: Strong progress but patriarchal culture still holding women back, UN experts say, press release, 07 July 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/07/malta-strong-progress-patriarchal-culture-still-holding-women-back-un. (Last accessed 13.06.2026)
OII (2026). About OII Europe, https://www.oiieurope.org/about/ (last accessed: 28.06.2027)
Paternotte, David, & Kuhar, Roman (2018). Disentangling and locating the "global right": Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, *6*(3), 6–19. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1557
Pierson, Claire; Caruana-Finkel, Liza (2021). Abortion care in highly restrictive legal regimes: the experiences of health and social care professionals in Malta.
Pierson, Claire; Caruana-Finkel, Liza (2025). Not Knowing or Not Wanting to Know? Abortion, Ignorance, and Resistance by Health and Social Care Professionals and Activists in Malta. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaf009
Prainsack, Barbara & Pot, Mirjam (2021). *Qualitative und interpretative Methoden in der Politikwissenschaft: mit Gastbeiträgen von Hendrik Wagenaar; Wanda Spahl; Meropi Tzanetakis; Carrie Friese, Adele Clarke und Rachel Washburn; Karin Liebhart und Petra Bernhardt*. UTB.
Prainsack, Barbara & Pot, Mirjam (2021): Interpretative Datenanalyse: Einführung in das Kodieren. In Prainsack, Barbara, & Pot, Mirjam (Eds): Qualitative und interpretative Methoden in der Politikwissenschaft, p. 143- 156, UTB.
Prainsack, Barbara; Pot, Mirjam; Wagenaar, Hendrik (2021): Diskurse analysieren. In Prainsack, Barbara, & Pot, Mirjam (Eds): Qualitative und interpretative Methoden in der Politikwissenschaft, p. 192-203, UTB.
redyellowblue.org (n.d.): Women's Right to Vote in Malta, https://redyellowblue.org/data/mt/wdmt/ (last accessed: 26.06.2026).

Reis Brandão, Elaine; Cabral, Cristiane da S. (2019). Sexual and reproductive rights under attack: the advance of political and moral conservatism in Brazil. In *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* (Vol. 27, Issue 2). Taylor and Francis Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1669338

Reisigl, Martin; Wodak, Ruth (2015): The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). The Routledge Handboock of Critical Discourse Studies, S. 87-121.

Reisigl, Martin. (2017). "The discourse-historical approach". In Flowerdew, John; Richardson, John E. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 44-59.

Sammut, Carmen (2022). On Reading Beauvoir: Reproductive Rights as Citizen Rights and the Case of Malta. Link https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/103215/3/On_reading_De_Beauvoir_reproductiverights_as_citizen_rights_and_the_case_of_Malta_2022.pdf (last accessed: 22.06.2026).

Sansone, Kurt (2022). MaltaToday Survey | Anti-abortion nation but opinion is shifting, in Malta Today, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data_and_surveys/118089/maltatoday_survey_malta_anti_abortion_nation_but_opinion_is_shifting. (last accessed: 13.06.2026)

Savona-Ventura, Charles (2010). History of Gynaecology in Malta. Published by Department of Obstetrics-Gyneacology, Faculty of Medicine & Surgery, University of Malta, https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/24254/1/gynae_A5book.pdf

Stella, Francesca; Nartova, Nadya (2015). Sexual Citizenship, Nationalism and Biopolitics in Putin's Russia. In *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging* (pp. 17–36). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315752563-3/sexual-citizenship-nationalism-biopolitics-putin-russia-francesca-stella-nadya-nartova

Tabbush, Constanza; Diaz, Maria Constantza; Trebisacce, Catalina; Keller Victoria (2019). LGBT Rights Yes, Abortion No: explaining uneven trajectories in Argentina under Kirchnerism (2013-2015). In: Friedman, E.

The Borgen Project (2022): Women's Rights in Malta: A Push for Political Power, https://borgenproject.org/womens-rights-in-malta/. (Last accessed: 13.06.2026)

Turiño González, Emma; Martínez Rosón, Mar (2025). Ideology on Trial. Attitudes toward Sexual Politics among Latin American Legislators. *Analecta Política*, *14*(27). https://doi.org/10.18566/apolit.v14n27.a08

Turtle, Kellie (2024a). Faith Voices for Reproductive Justice in Northern Ireland. In *Reimagining Faith and Abortion* (pp. 176–187). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447370178.012

Turtle, Kellie (2024b). Seeds of hope in progressive Christian discourse on abortion in Northern Ireland. In *Reimagining Faith and Abortion* (pp. 160–175). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447370178.011

Urquhart, Cathy; Lehmann, Hans; Myers, Michael D. (2010). Putting the "theory" back into grounded theory: Guidelines for grounded theory studies in information systems. *Information Systems Journal*, *20*(4), 357–381. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2575.2009.00328.x

Van Dijk, Teun A. (1993). "Principles of critical discourse analysis." *Discourse & society* 4(2), 249-283.

Van Dijk, Teun A. (2008). *Discourse and context: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vella, Mary Grave (n.d.): Abortion: Breaking the Barriers of Patriarchy https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/38617/1/Mary%20Grace%20Vella.pdf (last accessed: 25.06.2026).
Verlooy, Rylan (2024). Anti-Gender Mobilizations and Transgender Rights. *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies*, *27*(4), 351–374. https://doi.org/10.5117/tvgn2024.4.004.verl
Voice for Choice (2026): About us https://www.voiceforchoice.mt/about-us (last accessed: 26.06.2026)
WHO (2025a): Abortion, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion (last accessed: 27.06.2026).
WHO (2025b): Sexual and reproductive health and rights, https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights?utm_source=chatgpt.com#tab=tab_1 (last accessed: 28.06.2026).
Willig, Carla (2013). Interpretation and Analysis. In: Flick, Uwe (Ed.): The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis. London: SAGE Publications, 136-149.
Wodak, Ruth. (2001). "What CDA is about–a summary of its history, important concepts and its developments." In Wodak, Ruth; Meyer, Michael (eds.). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1-13.
Wodak, Ruth. (2002). "Aspects of critical discourse analysis." *Zeitschrift für angewandte Linguistik* 36(10), 5-31.
World Population Review (2026). Malta, https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/malta, (last accessed: 26.06.2026).
World Religion Database (2025). Religions by country in 2025, https://worldreligiondatabase.org/data/ (last accessed: 26.06.2026)
Wright, George (2024). France makes abortion a constitutional right, BBC, 4 March 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68471568 (last accessed 26.06.2026).

References Media Analysis

Azzopardi, Karl (2026a). This is how Malta's parliament looks like, MaltaToday, 16 June 2026, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/election-2026/142588/this_is_how_maltas_parliament_looks_like_ (last accessed: 24.06.2026).
Azzopardi, Karl (2026b). Woman handed suspended sentence for getting abortion in 2024, MaltaToday, 11 March 2026, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/140280/woman_gets_suspended_sentence_for_getting_abortion_in_2024_ (last accessed: 27.06.2026)
Bonanno, Matthew (2025). After first abortion conviction, Abela mulls law rethink on confidentiality, Times of Malta, 2 August 2025, https://timesofmalta.com/article/after-abortion-conviction-abela-mulls-law-rethink-confidentiality.1114052 (last accessed: 27.06.2026).
Calleja, Claudia (2025). Abortion pill shipments up 14% in 2024, totalling 590, Times of Malta, 27 March 2025, https://timesofmalta.com/article/abortion-pill-shipments-14-2024-totalling-590.1107181 (last accessed 27.06.2026).
Calleja, Laura (2026). Looking forward 2026 | Making sexual health a core part of healthcare, MaltaToday, 6 January 2026, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/138953/looking_forward_2026__making_sexual_health_a_core_part_of_healthcare (last accessed: 27.06.2026)
Carabott, Sarah (2024). Maltese activists protest Malta's abortion ban in Brussels, Times of Malta, 15 February 2024, https://timesofmalta.com/article/maltese-activists-protest-malta-abortion-ban-brussels.1084033 (last accessed: 25.06.2026)

Cilia, Thomas (2025). Women handed suspended sentence after pleading guilty to having abortion, MaltaToday, 30 July 2025, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/136251/woman_handed_suspended_sentence_after_pleading_guilty_to_having_abortion (last accessed 27.06.2026)

Debono, James (2025a). European Parliament's abortion vote lays bare Malta's political exceptionalism, MaltaToday, 22 December 2025, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/138836/european_parliaments_abortion_vote_lays_bare_maltas_political_exceptionalism_ (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Ellul, Daniel (2026). Malta drops to second place in LGBTIQ Europe index, Times of Malta, 12 May 2026, https://timesofmalta.com/article/malta-drops-second-place-lgbtiq-europe-index.1128320 (last accessed: 27.06.2026)

Magri, Giulia (2024). Abela on abortion referendum: let's not politicise this issue, Times of Malta, 8 April 2024, https://timesofmalta.com/article/abela-calls-mature-abortion-discussion-talk-referendum.1090655 (last accessed 27.06.2026)

Meilak, Nicole (2026). Robert Abela: No woman will go to prison for abortion on my watch, MaltaToday, 18 January 2026, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/139225/robert_abela_no_woman_will_go_to_prison_for_abortion_on_my_watch_ (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Mifsud, Tony (2024). Climate action for the unborn, Times of Malta, 10 January 2024, https://timesofmalta.com/article/climate-action-unborn.1077078 (last accessed: 28.06.2026).

Times of Malta (2023). Comments against children's Pride dance shows 'we're far from true equality', Times of Malta, 14 July 2023, https://timesofmalta.com/article/comments-children-pride-dance-shows-were-far-true-equality.1043573 (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Times of Malta (2025). Malta tops European gay rights index for tenth year in a row, Times of Malta, 14 May 2025, https://timesofmalta.com/article/malta-tops-european-gay-rights-index-tenth-consecutive-year.1109656 (last accessed: 27.06.2025).

Zammit, Juliana (2024). Bernard Grech urges respectful dialogue on abortion, MaltaToday, 28 September 2024, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/131435/bernard_grech_urges_respectful_dialogue_on_abortion (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Zammit, Juliana (2026a). NGO places abortion pills in locked safes across Malta and Gozo, MaltaToday, 15 April 2026, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/141019/abortion_pills_placed_secretly_in_key_safes_pop_up_across_malta_and_gozo (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Zammit, Juliana (2026b). Voice for Choice send open letter to PM demanding abortion decriminalisation, MaltaToday, 24 January 2026, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/139375/voice_for_choice_send_open_letter_to_pm_demanding_abortion_decriminalisation (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

References Electoral Programs

AD+PD (2026): Manifest Elletorali 2026, translated from Maltese to English by researcher, https://adpd.mt/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/ADPD_Manifest-Elettorali_2026.pdf, (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Momentum Malta (2026): Momentum Bidla Ta' Vera. Manifesto For a Just & Beautiful Malta. General Election 2026, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ExWyrQNwsNkpQZuG3tojigLC-5D_qxdK/view?pli=1 (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

Partit Aħwa Maltin (2026): IL-PILASTRI POLITIĊI TAGĦNA, translated from Maltese to English by researcher, https://ahwamaltin.com/elementor-172/ (last accessed: 27.06.2026).
Partit Laburista (2026): Manifest Elettorali 2026, translated from Maltese to English by researcher, https://intmalta.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/MANIFESTO-INT-MALTA.pdf (last accessed: 27.06.2026).
Partit Nazzjonalista (2026): Electoral Programme, translated from Maltese to English by researcher, https://pn.org.mt/en/nifsgdid/tnaqqis-fit-taxxi/ (last accessed: 27.06.2026).

List of Interviews

- Interview 1, conducted on 14 July 2023
- Interview 2, conducted on 17 July 2023
- Interview 3, conducted on 17 July 2023
- Interview 4, conducted on 19 July 2023
- Interview 5, conducted on 20 July 2023
- Interview 6, conducted on 11 August 2023
- Interview 7, conducted on 16 August 2023
- Interview 8, conducted on 6 October 2023
- Interview 9, conducted on 6 August 2024
- Interview 10, conducted on 20 August 2024

List of Tables

Table 1: Description of Interview Partners and their Roles

Appendix

Information Sheet for Participants (sent ahead of Interview)

universität wien

LGBTQIA+ and Reproductive Rights in Malta

My name is I , and I am conducting qualitative research on LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights in Malta. For my research project I am looking for potential interview partners to better understand the case study of Malta.

Research Goal:

Malta has been declared a leading role model in LGBTQIA+ rights for the past years, while simultaneously being the only EU country with an abortion ban. This prevalent dichotomy is at the center of my research. Through the contact with the Maltese community, I aim to analyze the status quo of queer and reproductive rights in Malta to better understand how Malta has become one of the leading countries in regards to LGBTQIA+ rights.

Methodology:

- Qualitative: I will be conducting qualitative (narrative) interviews.
- The interviews will be conducted with experts in the field, e.g., activists, political representatives, doctors, and more.
- The data will then be analyzed and interpreted to understand the current situation in Malta.

Recording:

- With your permission, I would greatly appreciate it, if I could record the interview as this will help me be more present during the interview.
- The recording will then be transcribed by me.
- The recording will be secured safely, pseudonymized, and will not be seen or heard by anyone else.

Concerning the Use of Data:

- The data will be analyzed with the help of the qualitative method by me and will be included in my thesis. Some direct quotes from the interview might be included.
- All the data published in my thesis paper will be pseudonymized.

Data Security and Consent Form (sent ahead of Interview)

Information for participants and declaration of consent to participate in the study:

LGBTQIA+ and Reproductive Rights in Malta

Dear participant,

I would like to invite you to participate in the study mentioned above.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate at any time, without having to give a reason, or also withdraw your agreement to participate once the study has already started. There will be no negative consequences for you if you refuse to participate or if you withdraw from this study early.

This kind of study is necessary to gain new, reliable academic research results. However, your written consent to participate in the study is an indispensable prerequisite for me to conduct this study. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and do not hesitate to ask questions.

Please only sign the declaration of consent

- if you have fully understood the type and procedure of the study,
- if you are willing to give your consent to participate, and
- if you are aware of your rights as a participant in this study.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**

   The aim of the study is to depict Malta's political, social, and legal climate, particularly on LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights. These two areas have been chosen because Malta has been named as a frontrunner on queer equality in Europe, while simultaneously being one of the only European countries with quite restrictive reproductive rights. This dichotomy is the main objective of the study to fulfil the aim of finding the relevant socio-political factors influence queer and reproductive rights in Malta.

2. **What is the procedure of the study?**

   The research conducted consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews and expert interviews. Each of the interviews should last about 30-45 minutes on average which requires the participants time either online or in person. The interviews will be recorded and stored securely. The recordings will only be heard by me, the researcher, and after the interviews are transcribed the recordings will be delted. All transcripts are stored pseudonymized. The transcribed interviews will be analysed according to the Grounded Theory. During the entire process ethical research standards and EU data protection standards are followed.

3. **What are the benefits of participating in the study?**

   Although it is unlikely that you gain any direct personal benefits from participating in this study, the results and knowledge gained from this study are supposed to provide important insight into Malta's queer and reproductive rights movement. In addition, this study should provide potential knowledge for future academic research.

4. **What are the possible risks of taking part in this study? Could participants experience any discomfort or other side effects?**

   There should be no potential risks of taking part in this study. However, discussing LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights can sometimes bring up emotions and memories which might negatively impact participants. Should this be the case, participants should reach out for help and support from someone they trust, personal or professional. At this point, it is worth noting that all interviews can be interrupted or stopped at any time.

   Furthermore, the primary target group for this study includes experts, activists, and professionals.

5. **Does participating in the study have any other effects on participants' lifestyle? What are the obligations resulting from participating?**

   The biggest effect on a participant's lifestyle is the time infringement and time spent in order to participate in the interview. This includes arrival and departure time, if applicable.

6. **What should participants do if they experience symptoms of complaints, unwanted side effects and/or injuries?**

   Participants should not experience any symptoms of complaints, unwanted side effects

and/or injuries. However, if the discussed objectives have an influence on an individual's mental health, participants should not hesitate to reach out for help.

7. In what cases is it necessary that participants withdraw from the study early?

As previously mentioned, participants can withdraw from the study at any point, before, during or even after the interview process without having to give a reason. The participant's informed consent throughout the entirety of the research project is essential and will be followed in line with ethical research practice.

Simultaneously the researcher may decide to terminate a person's participation, if the person:

a) cannot meet the requirements of the study,
b) or the researcher has the impression that further participation in the study is not in the participant's best interest.

8. How will the data collected in this study be used?

All collected data will be used according to the EU General Data Protection Regulation. All collected data will be stored, utilized, and published pseudonymised.

For me to be able to be fully present during the interview, the interview will be recorded with the consent of the participant. The recording is then stored where it can solely be accessed by the researcher. As the researcher is the only person to listen to the recording, a pseudonymised transcript of it will be created and the recording will be deleted. The collected data in the form of the transcript will then be coded and analysed.

The data will only be published as part of the researcher's thesis. None of the participants will ever be mentioned by name, instead ID numbers will be allocated to the individual's recordings.

Right from the beginning the recording and the collected data will be stored pseudonymised (e.g., through the allocation of an ID number, under which the data will be saved). This way those who do not have the "key" will not be able to deduce any information about your person. All data stored, processed, and published will only be referred by the given ID number.

If at any point participants wish their data to be deleted, please contact me at any point.

9. **Will there be any costs for the participants? Will they receive reimbursement or remuneration?**

   There will not be any additional costs for participants. The only costs participants might have by participating in the study is the travel to and from the interview location. In any case, the interviews may also be conducted online.

   At the same time there will be no reimbursement or remuneration for participating in this study as participants should be participating in the study completely voluntarily. Furthermore, the researcher will not incur any costs from participating in this study.

10. **Possibility to discuss further questions.**

    Any questions which might arise before, during or after the research process I will answer to the best of my ability. I will be happy to answer all possible further questions about the study in general but also the rights of participants in the study. Please use the following contact details to ask your questions.

11. Declaration of consent

Name of the participant in block letters: .....

Date of birth: .....

I agree to participate in the study ***LGBTQIA+ and Reproductive Rights in Malta***.

provided me with clear and detailed information about the objectives, significance, and scope of the study, as well as about the requirements resulting from my participation in the study. In addition, I have read this information text for participants and the declaration of consent, especially section 4 (regarding risks, discomforts or side effects). The study coordinator answered all my questions sufficiently and in a comprehensible manner. I had enough time to decide whether I would like to participate in this study. At the moment, I have no further questions.

I will follow the instructions that are necessary for conducting this study. However, I reserve the right to end my voluntary participation at any time, without this being to my disadvantage. If I want to withdraw from the study, I can do so at any time by contacting Patricia Bliem, either in writing or verbally.

At the same time, I agree that my data collected in this study are recorded and analysed. I agree that my data are permanently saved electronically in pseudonymised form. Data that have not yet been anonymised or pseudonymised data are stored in a form that is only accessible to the project management and are secured in accordance with current standards.

If I want my data to be deleted at a later time, I can arrange for it by contacting either in writing or via telephone and without having to give a reason.

I have read and understood the information for participants. In the explanatory meeting, I had the opportunity to ask all the questions I was interested in. My questions were answered fully and in a comprehensible manner.

I have received a copy of this information for participants and declaration of consent. The original remains with the study coordinator.

……...

Date and signature of the participant

……...

Date, name and signature of the researcher

Standardised Interview Questionnaire (adjusted before each interview)

Research Questionnaire

Research Questions: Which factors contribute towards there not being a correlation between the levels of LGBTQIA+ rights and reproductive rights in Malta? How does this divergence contribute to the construction of Maltese national identity?

Important Topics

- Power Dynamics
- Human Rights
- Europeanization
- Social Movements
- Faith as a national identity

General Introductory Questions

- Could you tell me about the work that you do?
- In what way have you come in contact with queer rights/reproductive rights in Malta, e.g., through your work, personal motivation, academic background?

General Question of Interest

- What do you think makes Malta such a queer-friendly country?
- Why do you think abortion has yet to be completely legalised or at least decriminalised in Malta?
- What is the difference between queer and reproductive rights? Why is one very legally progressive while the other isn't?
- What influencing factors have made the discussions of abortion heat up? Has the pandemic had any influence on this?
- What influence do young people have on these issues?
- What influence does social media have on these issues?

Activists

- How long have you been working in the field of queer/reproductive rights?
- Could you tell me about how you ended up in this work?

- What has inspired you to become active in this field?
- What has been your experience doing this work so far?
- Could you briefly outline your work with organization?
- Could you outline the history of the queer social movement in Malta?
- Could you outline the history of the pro-choice movement?
- What are your organizations next big challenges which you are currently trying to tackle?
- What do you think are the biggest challenges the queer/reproductive rights movement in Malta faces today?
- How do you think these challenges differ in comparison to queer/reproductive rights?
- What do you wish to still accomplish in the area of queer/reproductive rights?
- Why do you think the state of queer vs. reproductive rights are significantly different?

Queer Activists

- If it has not been yet accomplished, what steps still need to be taken to achieve equality in Malta?
- How has Malta earned its frontrunner position in regard to queer rights?

Pro-Choice Activists

- Why do you think that Malta has such restrictive abortion laws in comparison to the rest of Europe?

Experts (Doctors, Scholars)

- How do you see the situation in Malta in regard to queer rights/reproductive rights?
- Why do you think have queer activist groups not fought for reproductive rights alongside LGBTQIA+ rights?
- Most countries which rank similarly high to Malta on LGBTQIA+ rights have decriminalised or even legalised abortion; what makes Malta different?
- Previous research has shown that the public discussion on abortion in Malta has shifted in recent years; are these changes also reflected in society and politics?
- What are the next steps Malta is pursuing in queer/reproductive rights?
- How does Malta differ from other EU countries? (leading role model in queer rights, outlier on abortion rights)

- In Malta, the Church continues to have a significant presence; how does this community differ from other European countries with strong Catholic communities?

- (specific person question): In your work, you write about how abortion and queer rights should be separated; could you elaborate on this?
    - Nowadays abortion has become a bit more present in Malta.; only recently there was a law change, What would you say is the reason for Malta discussing abortion more in politics today and laws changing?

Political Party Representatives

- Could you give me a brief overview of your path in Maltese politics? What is your current job position in the party? How did you come to this position?
- What have been your important foci in your political work?
- What actions led to your focus on queer/reproductive rights? What convinced you to push for queer progressive politics in Malta?
- What work has your party done on these particular issues?
- How does your party differ to its EU counterparts?
- During your work as a politician, why were queer rights particularly relevant for your party?
- Where do you stand on abortion rights today and where do you think Maltese politics on it are headed?

Church

- Could you describe your work in the Maltese Church community?
- Could you describe the role of the Catholic Church in Malta?
- How does the Church community in Malta differ to other countries in Europe with a strong Catholic Church community, such as Italy or Ireland?
- How has Malta's Church community changed over the past 15 years? (e.g., different demographics, church goers, people leaving the church etc.)
- Does the Church and politics ever intersect? If yes, in what ways?
- How does the Church feel about Malta's leading queer rights role model position?
- How has the Maltese Church created a space for the LGBTQIA+ community?
- What makes reproductive rights different to queer rights?

Final General Question

- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that is relevant to this topic?

Coding Sample

Speaker 2: There was a certain pride, nonetheless of many Maltese that Malta was a. Scoring on this front internationally. So in that sense, even if they weren't fully understanding what this really meant or why it was so important, they were still happy that. This meant progress. Um, so and, you know, I defend that because all countries have. Had their own reasons why they progressed something. Um, why is one. Way of progressing things better than another. I think the Maltese have been typecast a lot also and over the years … I'm really not nationalistic. All right, just to be clear. But I have no,,,, I feel European, so I'm not speaking about Malta, but. I was the Maltese person who was highly critical of my own country, which is why I had left it, amongst other reasons, and to work for NGO here in Brussels. And then when the opportunity came to change things, I felt that. I almost felt obliged to return to Malta. An opportunity was being given to me to go back and change things. […]

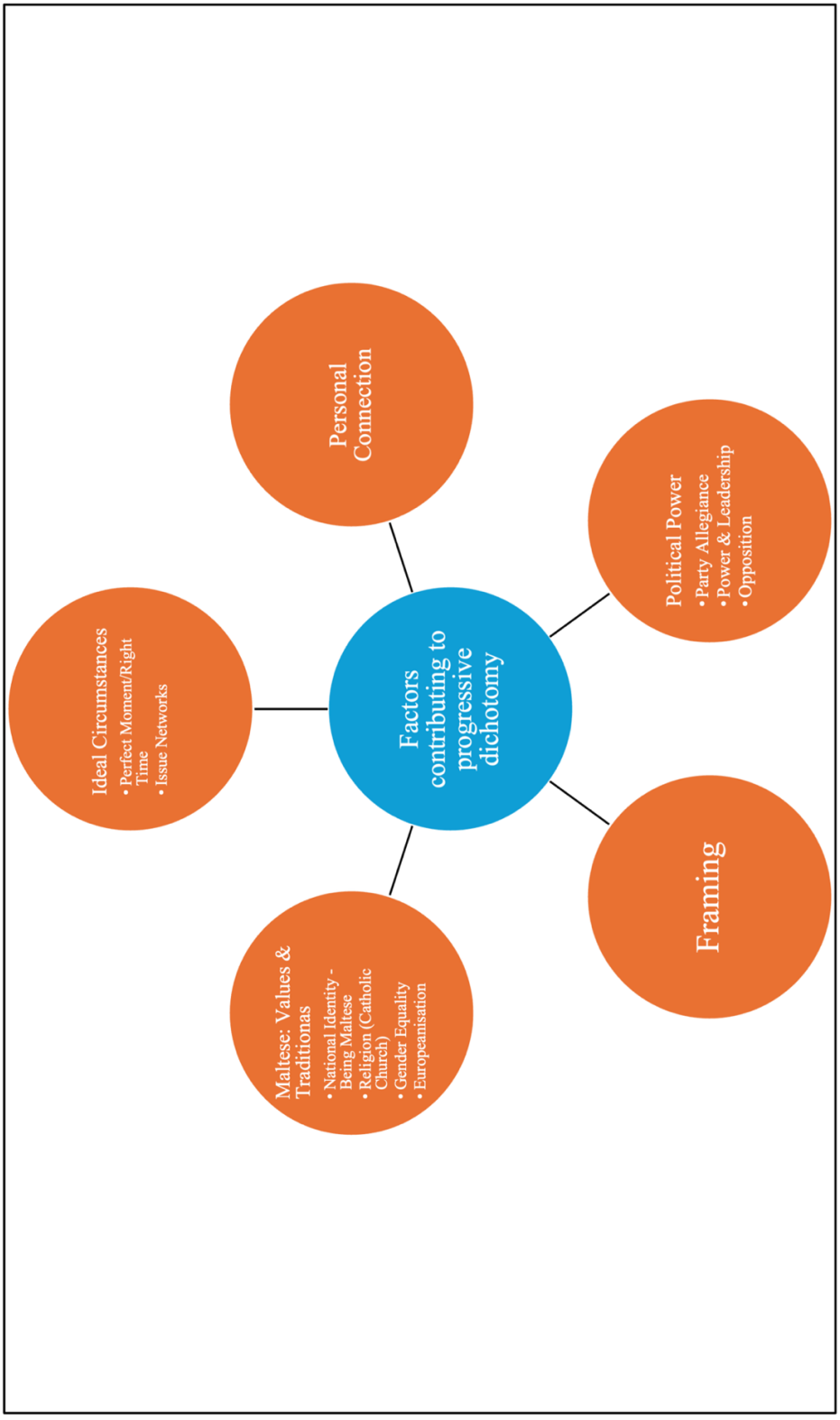
Does that sound like a conservative society to you? And yet all of a sudden, I was reading news articles about changes in Malta. I remember this one Danish article in particular. It started something like this: in the tiny Mediterranean country of Malta, highly conservative and Catholic. And then it said, whatever it said, like, darlings, you can't do this to us. We have just changed the law. Keep your stereotyping to yourselves. Just speak to the fact and then let the people decide how conservative and rural and backward and silly we are. But in actual fact, we have just done something good. And you have turned it into something that has become almost indicative of our backwardness, strangely enough.

Proud as role model
Scoring internationally
Understanding progress
Progress happening
Holding onto own reasons
Maltese identity
Personal experience
European identity
Criticising Malta
Leaving country
Personal experience
Making change happen
Have to be the change
Change happened

What it means to be conservative
News reports
Describing Malta's identity
Conservative and Catholic
Making changes
Stereotyping Malta
Maltese identity
Doing good
Progressive and conservative

Memo Writing: Who gets to decide a nation's dientity, is it only citizens, people living in the country, a community as a whole, what if there is no consensus. Is it something that others describe you as. This throws up so many questions, especially with the thesis' focus on national identity construction. Can Malta really just be one or the other, maybe it even is both progressive and conservative.

Mind Map - Research Categories (categories derived from qualitative coding analysis)



Abstract (English)

This thesis examines the divergence between LGBTQIA+ rights and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in Malta, since Malta was simultaneously ranked as the leading European nation in LGBTQIA+ rights for ten consecutive years while having the EU's most restrictive abortion legislation. The thesis draws on qualitative expert interviews, a media analysis of Malta's two largest English-language newspapers, and an analysis of Maltese political parties' electoral programs ahead of the 2026 general election. Using the grounded theory methodology alongside the Discourse Historical Approach, the thesis identifies five interconnected factors that explain this legal divergence. These factors are ideal circumstances (including ideal timing and issue networks), personal connection, political power (including party allegiance, leadership and opposition), framing, and Maltese values and traditions, based on Maltese identity in comparison to Europe, the Catholic Church, and gender equality. The findings suggest that these factors and the legal progressive divergence contribute to the construction of Maltese national identity, of a nation that identifies itself as progressive regarding queer rights, and traditionally conservative regarding abortion. Contextualising these findings, the thesis proposes a four-dimensional theoretical framework to explain the conditions for the convergence of LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights, including social and cultural structures, political and institutional frameworks, discursive framing, and identity-building. This contributes to the existing literature on progressive rights divergence and national identity construction.

Abstract (German)

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Divergenz zwischen LGBTQIA+-Rechten und sexuellen und reproduktiven Gesundheitsrechten (SRHR) in Malta, da Malta zehn Jahre lang als führende europäische Nation im Bereich der LGBTQIA+-Rechte galt und zugleich die restriktivsten Abtreibungsgesetze innerhalb der EU aufwies. Die Arbeit stützt sich auf qualitative Expert:inneninterviews, eine Medienanalyse der beiden größten englischsprachigen Tageszeitungen Maltas sowie eine Analyse der Wahlprogramme maltesischer politischer Parteien vor den Parlamentswahlen 2026. Unter Anwendung der Grounded-Theory-Methodik in Kombination mit dem diskurshistorischen Ansatz identifiziert die Arbeit fünf miteinander verbundene Faktoren, die diese rechtliche Divergenz erklären. Diese Faktoren sind günstige Umstände (einschließlich des richtigen Zeitpunkts und der Issue-Netzwerke), persönliche Verbundenheit, politische Macht (einschließlich Parteiloyalität, eine starke Führung und Opposition), diskursive Framings sowie maltesischer Werte und Traditionen, basierend auf der maltesischen Identität im Vergleich zu Europa, der katholischen Kirche und der Geschlechtergleichstellung. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass diese Faktoren und die rechtlich progressive Divergenz zur Konstruktion der maltesischen nationalen Identität beitragen. Dies ist eine Nation, die sich in Bezug auf queere Rechte als progressiv und in Bezug auf Abtreibung als traditionell konservativ versteht. Zur Kontextualisierung dieser Ergebnisse schlägt die Arbeit ein vierdimensionales theoretisches Rahmenwerk vor, das die Bedingungen für die Konvergenz von LGBTQIA+- und Reproduktionsrechten erklärt, einschließlich sozialer und kultureller Strukturen, politischer und institutioneller Rahmenbedingungen, diskursiven Framing und Identitätskonstruktion. Dies trägt zur bestehenden Literatur über progressive Rechtsdivergenz und die Konstruktion nationaler Identität bei.