

“Everyone knows everyone here”: Coming out experiences and fluctuating resilience of LGBTQI+ youth in Gozo, Malta.

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A B S T R A C T

Previous research studies have emphasized the need for context-specific approaches to the study of LGBTQI+ issues that resist the assumption of the rural as inflexible to change and intolerant towards LGBTQI+ people. However, ethnographic research within this framework is limited, particularly regarding the insular rurality of small island societies. This study examines the experiences and aspirations of LGBTQI+ youth in Gozo, Malta and the support offered by youth-centred organisations, where certain characteristics of Gozitan society act as barriers to LGBTQI+ youth development here. Based on guided conversations, participant observation, and interviews over a one-month period in Gozo, and follow up interviews conducted virtually, this project explores the misalignment between progressive LGBTQI+ legislation and the grounded experiences of my Gozitan interlocutors. The ultimate goal of the project is to critically examine the presupposed binary divide between urban tolerance and rural intolerance, by offering a holistic investigation into Gozitan society including the strengths of rurality for the wellbeing of LGBTQI+ youth. Here, the rural character of Gozitan society is defined by the island’s remote insularity which shapes the style of life, social organisation and the challenges faced here which are intrinsic to rural locales. The outcome of the study emphasizes the complexity of rural LGBTQI+ youth experiences and how the presence of youth-centred organisations can offer considerable support to LGBTQI+ youth traversing this complicated period in their lives, as well as being fundamental to shifting public perception of the LGBTQI+ community.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

LGBTQI+ youth, rurality, visibility, Catholicism, coming out, community

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“Maybe one of the strengths we see in Gozo, which is the sense of community, is also a barrier to coming out [of the closet] here.”

LGBTI+Gozo speaker, IDAHOBIT Event, May 2021

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Mediterranean archipelago, Malta, has received global recognition for its inclusivity towards LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and plus¹) persons (ILGA Europe, 2022). Malta has made ground-breaking strides toward ensuring positive liberty for LGBTIQ+ people by passing several progressive LGBTIQ+ laws, thus leaving behind the historical affiliation between Maltese society and conservative political views (Lane, Naudi and Harwood, 2021: 33). These laws have included the Civil Unions Bill which allowed for adoption by same-sex couples in 2014, the banning of conversion therapy in 2016 and the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2017. For the past six years in a row prior to the writing of this article, Malta was ranked first as the leading country for progressive LGBTIQ+ laws and policies in Europe (ILGA Europe, 2022). From this legislative progress, Malta appears to be very tolerant towards LGBTIQ+ people, however, Maltese society is still influenced greatly by longstanding institutionalised values stemming from their legacy as a collectivist Catholic country (Bradford and Clark, 2011: 179). Within Malta, the disparity between progressive legislation and progressive on the ground differs vastly, particularly when discussing more rural and peripheral areas. This was reflected in the 2019 study by LGBTI+Gozo which found that “69.8% of participants found worse conditions in Gozo for being open about one’s identity [than Malta]” (2019: 2), where barriers in Gozo included closed and small communities, traditional upbringings, and Catholic beliefs and values (2019.: 4). Gozo is the second island in size and population within the Maltese Archipelago, with Malta being the largest island. Gozo can be described as the quieter sister island to Malta, with a more rural landscape and a slower pace of life. In recent decades, the meaning of rurality in the Gozitan context has shifted due to the rapid development of infrastructure for tourism and housing, leading to the

physical characteristics of the island becoming more built up. Here, however, the rural character of Gozitan society has remained strong in people’s way of life and the challenges they face (Refalo, 2016). Therefore, the meaning of rurality here is defined by the rural nature of Gozitan society including the island’s small size, the central role of village life here, the closely-knit characteristic of communities and the insularity of this peripheral island.

This article examines the experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth in the Gozitan context, and how they navigate their sense of self and the transition into adulthood here. Young people in their late adolescent years into early adulthood, occupy a unique place in society that is characterized by transition, the weighing up of expectations from family and the local community with one’s own aspirations, and figuring out who you are and who you want to be (Bradford and Clark, 2011). Within this context, certain influencing factors are pertinent to the socialisation of youth which shapes the way they look at themselves and the world around them (ibid.). In Gozo, the physical characteristics of the small island society within the larger Maltese Archipelago, combined with societal characteristics like the close-knit nature of Gozitan society and Catholic hegemony, are influential in young people’s transition into adulthood. The Catholic Church plays a significant role in structuring Gozitan life through the ritualistic and communal element of weekly mass services at one’s parish Church and annual Catholic days of celebration known as village festas or feast days. Here, the dual significance of Catholicism in Malta is reflective of Deguara’s claim that religion becomes “automatic ... within such contexts” (2020: 23), where in Malta, Catholicism “carries much more than a cultural, symbolic or national significance” (ibid.: 24). These elements of Gozitan society set the backdrop for the youth experience here, however, there must be caution towards equating these factors as being antithetical to the inclusion and

¹ The plus in LGBTIQ+ represents additional sexual and gender identities including pansexual, non-binary, gender fluid and so forth. Here ‘queer’ is applied as an inclusive term for all non-normative sexual and/or gender identifying individuals.

social cohesion of all groups. This sweeping generalisation positions the urban as the assumed desirable future destination for LGBTQI+ youth growing up in rural places where through anonymity, the urban must offer greater freedom. However, this binary divide between urban tolerance and rural intolerance fails to account for the complexity of rural places and does not consider the power of local resilience in enacting change, which shall be discussed in greater depth in this article.

My positionality was central to this research and contributed greatly to my ease of access in the field. As a young anthropologist, my position as a university undergraduate student and as breaking into the world of ethnographic research, mirrored the transition period of young adulthood which many of my interlocutors were also undergoing. Furthermore, my upbringing in rural Catholic Ireland, combined with my queer identity, was particularly advantageous for my foundational understanding of the research setting. My familiarity with Catholicism from my schooling and familial upbringing allowed for ease of access into the Church setting as I was accustomed to the Mass ceremony and could connect with members of the parish centre through our shared practice. Most significantly, my experience of navigating my sexuality in a similar environment to my interlocutors, of rurality and Catholic hegemony, was immeasurable for my understanding. Considering my relatively short time in the field, this allowed for greater closeness and trust with my interlocutors, strengthened through an exchange of information and reciprocal sharing of stories that would not have been possible without my similar background. This, in turn, shifted the estranged relationship between the researcher and the researched, where our distance was bridged, and my research participants and I became friends. This also helped me become more comfortable with my position as a researcher, a title I was still rather unfamiliar with.

This article proceeds with a theoretical framework which elaborates on the existing academic discourse surrounding LGBTQI+ experiences and support systems

in rural and peripheral localities. This is followed by a discussion on the methodological approach of this research, and the ethnographic analysis section divided into two parts, which respectively discuss the experiences of LGBTQI+ youth in Gozo and the work of local organisations in supporting Gozitan youth. This article concludes with a discussion of the research findings and an elaboration on the misconception of equating rurality with disharmonious LGBTQI+ existence.

Methodology

Before travelling to Gozo to conduct ethnographic research in the summer of 2021, I had heard about the international recognition Malta had received for passing multiple LGBTQI+ inclusive legislation, naming Malta a frontrunner in Europe for this. However, on arrival, I was informed of the existing disparity between progressive LGBTQI+ legislation and the reality in Gozo, where this progressive legislation had not translated to an automatic change in people's mindsets regarding LGBTQI+ acceptance. On my second day in Gozo, in inquiring about youth gathering spaces in Gozo, I attended Sunday morning Mass in Xaghra and was surprised by the packed church and the large participation in the service considering the size of the village and the ongoing coronavirus restrictions. Catholic faith and the coming together for Mass ceremonies appeared to be of great importance here, and it led me to question how both Catholic faith and LGBTQI+ inclusivity could co-exist in Gozo. The Maltese legislative disparity is also reflective of my own experience in rural Ireland, a similar situation where progressive LGBTQI+ legislation does not always correspond to a more inclusive and accepting environment for LGBTQI+ people. It was from my interest in this disparity that my research focus emerged, as youth attitudes and engagement in both communities represent the coming together of the two; the future with the past, the modern with the traditional, and the outward-looking with the more inward-looking societal perspective.

This article draws upon research from two phases. Primarily it is based on three weeks of ethnographic field research based in Xlendi, Gozo. There, I conducted participant observation and interviews following a two-part method of study through attending mass in Xlendi and Victoria regularly, alongside meeting with Gozitan youth and members of LGBTI+Gozo. My second phase of the research involved online interviews with three members of staff at Gozo Youth Services. Research participants were recruited through email correspondence and mingling at events like the LGBTI+Gozo Non-Binary Day photo exhibition opening ceremony. All names are anonymised. Manual coding of my fieldnotes and interview notetaking led to the emergence of three themes: the relationship between rural and LGBTQI+ identities, the significance of coming out experiences, and the presence of supporting organisations.

Theoretical Framework

Since the 1990s, the expansion of queer studies within the anthropological discipline has brought about a problematisation of the Western and the urban as the presumed focal points from which queer theory disseminates (Boellstorff, 2007). This westernisation and urbanisation of the LGBTQI+ experience assume that coming out of the closet by declaring one's queer identity is a fundamental rite of passage for transitioning into queerhood (Boellstorff, 2007). Furthermore, it positions coming out as a homogenous and universal experience, which in turn fails to account for the variances across different local and cultural contexts, particularly outside of the Western urban centre (Butterfield, 2018; Pacey 2020).

Many scholars researching LGBTQI+ rural life have drawn on Halberstam's concept of metronormativity or the 'metronormative' matrix (Ammaturo, 2018; Butterfield 2018; Jubany, Adiego and Grau, 2021; Pacey 2020) which privileges the urban setting as its locum for the analysis of LGBTQI+ life (Ammaturo, 2018: 80). Metronormativity declares the city as a place where

LGBTQI+ people can come out more easily and be their authentic selves, by juxtaposing this with the rural as a backward and inherently undesirable place from which LGBTQI+ people wish to migrate (Ammaturo, 2018; Butterfield 2018; Pacey 2020). However, this concept has been the subject of some criticism as discussed by Jubany, Adiego and Grau (2021) for reducing the LGBTQI+ experience to an urban versus rural binary logic and a failure to account for the complexity and particularities of rural contexts (Jubany, Adiego and Grau, 2021; Pacey 2020). These criticisms were discussed at length by Pacey (2020) in her literature study on LGBTQI+ youth in rural communities, highlighting the predominant focus on the risk paradigm in research within this field of study. Like metronormativity, the risk paradigm positions "rural communities as inherently risky and hostile toward LGBTQI+ youth" (Pacey, 2020: 282), facilitating the pathologisation and victimisation of rural LGBTQI+ youth by neglecting to discuss community strengths and the resilience of LGBTQI+ youth (ibid.). Pacey calls for a transition away from scholars' tendency to exclusively focus on the risk paradigm and towards a holistic examination of rural communities to include the positive sides of rurality, like support networks in close-knit communities. Here, community climate rather than community size can be used to gauge the level of support or hostility towards LGBTQI+ people where community climate indicates how the community may act as enabling stigma and marginalization, or as promoting well-being and resilience (ibid.: 284).

Research on LGBTQI+ rural life in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean has reflected Pacey's critique of the risk paradigm. In a study on LGBTQI+ experiences in rural, southern Italy, Ammaturo emphasised the need for 'critical regionality' whereby importance is placed on context-specific approaches to studying sexuality and gender diversity. Within this framework, he argues that LGBTQI+ experiences can be better understood by looking at the negotiation of identity in face-to-face communities where everybody knows everyone. In this

case, LGBTQI+ activism relied on visibility, interconnected collaboration with the broader non-queer community, and tactics like outing oneself to shift assumptions and stereotypes about LGBTQI+ individuals. Further studies on LGBTQI+ experiences in rural, southern Europe have argued that personal familiarity encourages small communities to be more accepting of their own (Butterfield, 2018), and that LGBTQI+ experiences outside of the big city do not necessarily equal a life of ostracism and isolation (Jubany, Adiego and Grau, 2021).

Limited empirical research exists on LGBTQI+ youth experiences or LGBTQI+ advocacy in the rural Maltese context, with only a handful of studies in these fields of research. However, Bradford and Clark's 2011 study on Maltese LGBTQI+ youth and their experience of stigma offers some important insights. This study discusses the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ youth while negotiating the transition into adulthood, and how the interplay between traditionalism and modernity in Maltese society plays a significant role in determining young people's lives. The factors discussed include Malta's small size which facilitates face-to-face relations and strong gossip networks and the importance placed on social institutions like family and the Catholic Church (Bradford and Clark: 2011). Here they show that stigma works especially effectively in Malta's cultural climate, while also emphasising the strength of LGBTQI+ youth who had resisted and secured authenticity despite the hostility of their environment. This study was conducted a decade ago before any significant LGBTQI+ legislative changes were made in Malta and thus may be considered outdated. It does, however, offer a backdrop from which the present context has emerged and is of particular relevance in peripheral areas of Malta, where changes in mindset appear to be more gradual despite legislative improvements. Consequently, more studies on LGBTQI+ youth experiences and advocacy in the Gozitan context are of importance as they shed light on this underdeveloped area of academic study and respond to calls for future empirical research on LGBTQI+ youth in

rural communities across the Mediterranean (Ammaturo, 2018) and beyond (Paceley, 2021).

Being young and LGBTQI+ in Gozo

In the Gozitan context, certain aforementioned influencing factors, including Gozo's rurality, Catholic hegemony, and close-knit society, shape young people's understanding of themselves and their outlook on the world. These factors can negatively impact those who do not fit into societally assumed heteronormativity and must navigate their queer identity in a space where they may fear the implications of being their authentic selves. One of my research participants, Maria, discussed this in relation to her own coming out experience in Gozo, where she said, "I know plenty of people [Gozitans] who only came out when they went to Malta, and people who moved to Malta at sixteen just so that they can be openly out because they didn't feel safe in Gozo ...". This can be a distressing experience for young people who may have to contest with homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia, which is heightened by Gozo's rurality, the predominance of the Catholic faith, the close-knit nature of Gozitan society, and so forth, as well as the fear of what 'coming out' might entail for their life on the island.

The disparity between legislation and reality

In Malta, the passing of progressive LGBTQI+ legislation has led to greater liberty for LGBTQI+ citizens before the law, however, as I discussed earlier, the everyday reality for LGBTQI+ people here has been quite different, particularly in more rural places. This disparity was voiced by one of my LGBTQI+ research participants, Maria, who when I asked her about the disparity between LGBTQI+ legislation and the reality, told me that "yes on paper ... but it's laughable [to think] that they actually lead to more understanding and acceptance, especially in Gozo". I was introduced to Maria at the Non-Binary Day photo exhibition opening ceremony event organised by LGBTQI+Gozo. She is a 19-year-old Gozitan who is attending university in Malta and is an active member of

LGBTI+Gozo. Maria explained how Malta is more open and better for LGBTQI+ people than Gozo is, because “the main thing about Gozo is how judgemental and conservative people’s views are”. She told me that this was why it was so important that there is an LGBTQI+ organisation specific to Gozo, and that “in Malta, many people disagreed that Gozo needed its own organisation, but in Malta people can’t understand how different Gozo is.” She continued this by saying “Gozo is so much smaller, religious, insular etc. ... so it’s almost an entirely different place with different issues and especially different circumstances”. Maria’s discussion on the differences between LGBTQI+ issues in Malta and Gozo mirrors the criticisms raised by Jubany, Adiego and Grau (2021) regarding the metronormative matrix. Here, LGBTQI+ activism in the urban setting fails to account for the differences and specific complexity of rural contexts. In line with the forms of rural LGBTQI+ advocacy mentioned earlier, LGBTQI+ activism and resilience in Malta and Gozo are incomparable and attempts to do so reduce the LGBTQI+ experience to the urban versus rural as two opposing sides, thus furthering metronormative divisions. In Gozo, the importance of education and raising awareness alongside the implementation of progressive legislation is necessary, which was stressed by Maria who said “laws and rights are just the tip of the iceberg, there is so much more to be done ... I think something that is really important is raising awareness and education along with a new law ... especially from kids at a young age ... if you tell them a woman can get married to a woman, they won’t care ... they’ll understand that it’s a part of society and grow up thinking that it’s okay ... It’s as you get older that society forms these really warped ideas of what the ‘normal’ is ...”.

‘Coming out’ in Gozo

The experience of ‘coming out of the closet’ is an important milestone in the transitional period of many LGBTQI+ people’s lives who, either by personal choice or by force, self-disclose their sexual orientation and/or

gender identity which is then acknowledged by others (Butterfield, 2018). This process can be overwhelming in places where the privileging of heteronormativity is dominant, or where homosexuality is perceived by society as something undesirable. Bradford and Clark discuss this transitional process within the Maltese context stating that “acknowledging one’s sexuality and coming out manifests itself in both physiological and psychological difficulties. The negative and embodied effects of stress on the general functioning of the human person have been long acknowledged” (2011: 190). My research participants discussed how the fears of coming out had led to many people remaining silent about their LGBTQI+ identities as adolescents, and not coming out of the closet until significantly later. Maria mentioned that while she was in secondary school, there were only two people who openly identified as LGBTQI+ in her school year. She followed this by saying “how could this be, this was not possible”, referring to the probable situation that more were closeted. This issue was also raised by David, Founder of LGBTI+ Gozo, who said that after graduating over five years ago, “12 people in my graduating secondary school year have come out since then”. He elaborated on this saying how different his secondary school experience could have been, and how much easier it would have been to have known that he was not doing this alone. Here, it is evident that the close-knit nature of Gozitan society heightens individuals’ fears surrounding coming out and being treated differently, where many LGBTQI+ youth choose to wait until they have completed secondary school or until they can move away to be more open. In Gozo, like other peripheral parts of Malta, “strong gossip networks and the presence of multiple role relationships make the management of one’s reputation a pre-eminent concern, as anonymity is hard to come by.” (Bradford and Clark, 2011: 197). It is evident that many barriers are preventing young people in Gozo from being open about their sexuality, but the intimacy of life in Gozo, where everyone knows everyone, is of specific relevancy to the rural locale.

Bradford and Clark further discuss the effect of this intimacy in creating stigmatised identities, where “stigma is constituted in social reactions that “spoil” normal identity” (2012: 184). Here, they state that “LGBT young people are often defined in terms of character blemishes” (ibid.). Furthermore, their discussion of courtesy stigma as “posing a challenge to family honour” (ibid.: 187), is of relevance in my interlocutors’ discussion of familial relations and living in one’s parent’s household was a significant barrier for some LGBTQI+ youth to be open about their sexuality. Maria emphasized how family reputation is very important in Gozo and that after she came out, she was told “fine be gay, but don’t be loud about it”. She revealed to me that in Gozo, her parents were well regarded and that they cared a lot about how her coming out would affect their image as they were afraid of tainting their revered position in the community. She shared that at first, her parents had many reactions to her coming out like trying to fix her and crying. She explained, however, that over time the fights turned into arguments which eventually turned into calmer conversations about her sexual orientation. Maria also shared the story of her first time attending the LGBTQI+ Pride parade in Malta, where she had told her parents that she was spending the weekend in Malta but hadn’t told them that she was going to the Pride events. During our conversation, she recalled that at the parade she was so afraid of accidentally being photographed and was anxious that news of her attendance would come back to her parents somehow.

Friendship relations can also pose a challenge when coming out (Paceley, 2020), where fears of being treated differently or not being fully understood can stop a person from disclosing their sexual orientation. Here, positive experiences of sharing this with friends can make the process of coming out easier where friends can provide support, however, negative experiences may disrupt peer relations or even sever friendship ties (Bradford and Clark, 2011). This was discussed by one of my research participants, Stephanie, who revealed to me that she had realised her bisexuality while abroad and

had shared her first kiss with a girl there. When I asked her if she thought that she would have realized her bisexuality if she had stayed in Gozo, she said “I don’t think so because there was no one to experience this with or talk about it to ... All of my friends here are ultra-straight”. She followed this by saying “but my friends aren’t homophobic and would never say gay as an insult, it’s just different”. Maria also discussed friendship and the experience of being open about her sexuality while she was in secondary school, during the IDAHOBIT event hosted by LGBTI+Gozo in May 2021. Here, she revealed that her classmates were surprised when she came out because “there tends to be the stigma that anyone who is queer is like ‘the weirdo’ ... I think I see it as more tolerance rather than respect when they’re saying you’re not like the other gays”.

The close relationship between the Catholic Church and Gozitan society can also significantly impact the coming out experiences of young people who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity here. When I asked David about his upbringing in Gozo, he told me that he grew up very religious with an altar and religious statues in his house. He told me that he had been very involved with the Church and Catholic youth groups and had considered becoming a priest himself. He explained that in Gozo “all of the Church, the local radio, etc are all connected ... Everyone knows each other here”. When I asked about his experience of coming out of the closet within this context, he revealed to me that after coming out “[the Church] was a space that let me down ... It took me a long time to find myself because everything from the first 18 years of my life was all gone ... the social networks, friends, etc. ... No one gave the answers, that was just life in Gozo”. He told me that it was like he was “two different people before and after coming out”. David further discussed the importance placed on the Catholic Church in Gozo, and that there are “a lot of [Catholic] values and beliefs that are strong here”. When I asked him about his relationship with his faith now, he said that “I am a spiritual person now, but not Catholic ... the

dynamic of both [gay and having Catholic faith] is difficult for people to understand”.

Here, the experiences of my research participants reflect a sense of non-belonging, where factors like the lack of LGBTQI+ representation, the insularity and intimacy of Gozo, heterosexuality as the default and the predominance of the Catholic faith can act as barriers to LGBTQI+ youth existing as the truest version of themselves while in Gozo. This contributes to the 'othering' of queer people, where their deviation from the norm is a constant reminder that they do not fully belong here. Gozo poses many challenges to young people who are navigating their sense of self within this context, however, the strength of coming through these very difficult and isolating experiences attests to the resilience and bravery of Gozitan LGBTQI+ youth. In a conversation with Maria about the journey of coming out, she discussed how she overcame this process by building up her inner strength and sense of self, independent of the stigma narratives of her surroundings. We talked about the importance of coming out to ourselves, and that when you build up that inner strength in who you are, it is much easier to be stronger in the face of homophobia. She felt strongly about this and said that “coming out to ourselves is the main thing ... because that builds you up and makes you strong enough so that anyone else’s opinion doesn’t matter”. Here, the individual strength of young LGBTQI+ people in Gozo is important to emphasize, although acknowledging the extreme chasm between the heteronormative experience of growing up in Gozo and the LGBTIQ+ experience shows how overwhelming this can be, and thus organisations like LGBTI+Gozo, are especially vital in offering support and solidarity during these challenging periods. This was reflected by my research participants, who expressed their appreciation for LGBTI+Gozo in creating a sense of community for those who have experienced this shared journey of navigating their sexuality and gender identity in Gozo. This was reflected by Maria during the IDAHOBIT event where, as a speaker at the event, she said “I’m really happy and really proud to be so surrounded by amazing

people like you guys [LGBTI+Gozo members] because it makes all the difference ... For me, LGBTI+Gozo was like the bridge between me, Gozo, my sexuality, and activism ... The members of it are my family, I always see everyone as my siblings”.

Organisations supporting Gozitan youth

In Gozo, several governmental and non-governmental organisations offer support and a sense of community to Gozitan youth, including LGBTI+Gozo and Gozo Youth Services. Both organisations offer a space for young people to come together, seek support and develop their non scholastic interests through an array of different opportunities. For many young people, navigating questions on sexuality and gender identity can be a difficult process, which is heightened in rural places where access to LGBTQI+ information at the local level can be insufficient and representation is often limited. However, youth-focused organisations and services that offer support during this transitional period in young people’s lives can be efficacious in alleviating the burden of these challenges. LGBTI+Gozo, in particular, has been fundamental in bettering the community climate in Gozo by supporting LGBTQI+ young people here and promoting equality throughout the island. Since 2015, LGBTI+Gozo has focused on spreading awareness about the LGBTQI+ community in Gozo and the issues affecting it, by increasing LGBTQI+ visibility in Gozo and creating a strong community through which LGBTQI+ people and allies can come together. This has included regular social activities, awareness campaigns and informational events (LGBTI+Gozo, n.d.). As the first and only queer organisation on the island, LGBTI+Gozo has been an integral part of making Gozo a more LGBTQI+ accepting place.

LGBTI+Gozo

LGBTI+Gozo was initially formed in 2015 as a student social group for LGBTQI+ people from Gozo to meet and hang out together. This changed after the Civil Unions

Bill was passed in Malta this same year, allowing gay and lesbian couples to adopt, which was followed by celebrations across the island and Malta's main government building being lit up with rainbow colours and the words 'We Made History'. However, in Gozo, there were no celebrations, and the island lacked any form of symbolic recognition for the passing of this bill. When I spoke with David about the founding of LGBTI+Gozo, he discussed how the contrasting responses between islands became the catalyst that fuelled the formation of LGBTI+Gozo as a non-governmental advocacy organisation, because it demonstrated the need to create a platform to amplify LGBTQI+ voices in Gozo. In this interview, he said that "our first and main goal was wanting visibility but not knowing how". He discussed some of the creative ways that they brought attention to their organisation like painting a rainbow-coloured crosswalk in Victoria and going on national television to talk about LGBTI+Gozo to spread awareness about their work. When I commented on the bravery of speaking about this on national television, he told me "I didn't really think about it as brave, it was more about promoting the organisation but especially about visibility ... it gave the message that we are here which was more than numbers because we [the organisation] were still so small". Here, the methods used by LGBTI+Gozo to spread awareness about their organisation mirror those mentioned in other research on LGBTQI+ activism in rural places. Ammaturo's discussion on critical regionality and LGBTQI+ activism in face-to-face communities is of particular relevance as it emphasises the role of visibility, regional collaboration, and tactics like outing oneself to dismantle stereotypes and assumptions about the LGBTQI+ community. In the Gozitan case, although the establishment of LGBTI+Gozo was received in mixed ways, the organisation's use of these tactics of visibility ensured that it would receive widespread attention and acknowledgement as an LGBTQI+ advocacy organisation. This was also expressed by LGBTI+Gozo founder David, who emphasized the importance of displaying symbols and subtle messages to increase the visibility of LGBTI+Gozo in line with this belief in "not saying much but at the same time it was

saying a lot". Regarding this, he said that in making Gozo a safe space for LGBTQI+ Gozitans, symbolic representation matters alongside educational campaigns and seminars. LGBTI+Gozo has built a strong social media presence and engaged in online campaigns to amplify their voice in Gozo, including the "We stand with LGBTI+Gozo" social media poster campaign in 2017 where Maltese members of parliament, politicians and celebrities were photographed with these posters and the photos were released online over seventeen days, gaining over 40,000 interactions. LGBTI+Gozo's other methods of visibility have included a rainbow-coloured bench in Villa Rundle Garden, Victoria, a rainbow Pride flag on display in Xewkija and the 2021 bus campaign that displayed information about LGBTI+Gozo on some of Gozo's public bus service vehicles. These campaigns all contributed to LGBTI+Gozo's message that 'we are here' in a subtle, but powerful way by increasing visibility and raising awareness.

Since its creation and subsequent recognition as an NGO, LGBTI+Gozo has received a wide range of varying responses amongst Gozitans. In my interview with David, he said that "some responded by asking questions and showing interest in what the organisation was doing, but others responded with homophobia and the line of 'fine be gay, but don't wave the flag here' ... Some people chose not to speak or be seen with us. They were afraid that people would think that they were gay too.". He also discussed the impact of this on the general public's opinion of him in Gozo where there was no separation between him as an individual and him as the founder of LGBTI+Gozo. He said "People talk. They see me on TV. The younger generation is very exposed to what we [LGBTI+Gozo] do, but it is difficult for them to reach out to us or get involved.". We also talked about the Non-Binary Day photo exhibition opening ceremony, that had taken place a few days prior, and he told me that that some people were standing at the sidelines of the event but appeared to be afraid to join in or to sit down. He said, "Everyone knows everyone here and everyone knows me and what it means to be associated with me ... But

even them being there (the people standing) is huge progress and hopefully they will be sitting next time”. Here, the forms of advocacy that are specific to rural places are noteworthy, where the reliance on visibility as the main method of promoting equality in face-to-face communities can be instrumental in shifting people’s mindsets, but it can also have challenging implications for the people at the forefront of the movement, whose individual identities become inseparable with their role as the face of the organisation. However, LGBTI+Gozo’s use of visibility as a method of promoting their interests, which is specifically successful in rural locales (Ammaturo, 2018), and a transition away from modelling LGBTQI+ advocacy tactics off of urban spaces like Malta, may be one of the reasons for their success as an organisation. This was expressed by David who said “the problems in Malta and in Gozo are the same but the way they tackle them is very different. In Gozo, everyone knows everyone so you have to go about things differently like with the photo exhibition, so those who are interested can come and see it”.

In the summer of my research stay, LGBTI+Gozo was in the process of making the final arrangements for the opening of their official office in Victoria. LGBTI+Gozo had been granted this office space since named Qawsalla Hub (Rainbow Hub), and funding to furnish it from the government. Since its formation in 2015, LGBTI+Gozo has been a volunteer-run organisation without an official office or meeting place, and a major challenge faced by the organisation has been securing the funding needed to maintain operational matters (IGLYO Focus, 2021). In conversation with David, he told me that in Gozo “many NGOs are crying out to have an office, so this is a huge deal. Having our own space gives us autonomy and the opportunity to employ someone and have a project manager which is also funded by the government”. Collaborations between NGOs and governments, particularly when accepting funding, can bring bureaucratic requirements and over-regulation which may potentially restrict to the autonomy of the organisation (Butler, 2017: 9), however, LGBTI+Gozo’s

positive response stands in contrast to this assumption. David discussed LGBTI+Gozo’s early relations with the government, explaining that “when the organisation was being formed there were highly political debates going on but the organisation [LGBTI+Gozo] didn’t choose sides ... so it was easier to get access”. This position of neutrality was also mirrored in their perspective on the Catholic Church, where David stressed that “LGBTI+Gozo don’t see it as one or the other [Church and LGBTQI+ acceptance] ... It is about LGBT people but also about their families who are in need”. In both cases, the organisation places its emphasis on supporting the LGBTQI+ community in Gozo above local politics and religious divisions to greater promote equality and LGBTQI+ acceptance on the island. This was further emphasised by David in his description of Qawsalla Hub as “a brave space, not just a safe space ... It is a shift from us representing you [LGBTQI+ Gozitans], to them representing themselves”.

Gozo Youth Services

Gozo Youth Services is a regional branch of The National Youth Agency of Malta (Aġenzija Żgħażaġh) that offers support to youth by organising social activities and connecting them to programs in Malta and across Europe related to political engagement, future studies, and creative opportunities. Aġenzija Żgħażaġh offers a wide variety of programs with a few focusing on LGBTQI+ issues like the #standforLGBTIQ+ initiative held in Malta in collaboration with the EU campaign #standforsomething, where LGBTQI+ young people were invited to discuss the issues they face and offer suggestions for improvements. In Gozo, most activities take place in the Youth Hub centre, a space where young people can also go to seek support from the youth workers and to talk about issues they may be having.

I met with the full-time youth worker with Gozo Youth Services, Pauline, who told me about her work with Gozitan youth. She discussed her involvement with young people, stating that “I think one of the things that strikes

me is that many of them [youth] look to engage in conversations with me especially when they are not with their friends, it's like an opportunity for them to talk with someone who is not a teacher, and who is not an adult they have a kind of formal relationship with ... so that is why they can be comfortable to have a conversation with us". She attributed the high level of youth engagement in activities and her ability to offer them support to her familiarity with them as individuals, here she said, "the most effective way is to reach them is on a one-to-one basis which is why first and foremost I think it is important that we get to know the young people, especially through the Youth Hub when we are in schools, so we get to know their interests and when we have a particular program ... I know that for example that that young person would be interested". In this case, the familiarity that exists in face-to-face communities allows for youth workers like Pauline to offer greater support and guidance to youth because of acquaintance through prior community connections, as well as the possibility of knowing them through their family or the Church network.

In response to a question on the future of Gozo Youth Services, Pauline discussed the opening of new office space in the coming months in Victoria and said that this was particularly important for their visibility as an organisation. She followed this by saying "I stress visibility because I think it is important that people know about our services ... It took some time for people to see that we are here for all the young people aged thirteen to thirty ... and visibility is something I'm really focusing on right now". Here, similar to LGBTI+Gozo, the importance of visibility was recognised as vital for spreading awareness about the organisation in Gozo. This further emphasises the importance of drawing on methods for spreading awareness that is specific to rural places, as discussed by other scholars, where the recognition of the role of visibility as the main method of spreading awareness in face-to-face communities is vital to our understanding of rural advocacy.

Conclusion

Gozo acts as an intriguing geographical and cultural space in which to analyse how young LGBTQI+ people navigate their sense of self, and how this is supported by the presence of local organisations. As a peripheral island of Malta, the young LGBTQI+ experience in Gozo is wholly different to that of the mainland Maltese island. While a disparity exists between the legislative promises and the reality of LGBTQI+ acceptance, we must note the often reductionist cause-consequence-solution approach that policies follow. Looking more deeply into the conditions of Gozitan society which act as barriers to LGBTQI+ youth in navigating their sense of self, we see that they are multi-layered and co-constitutive. The lack of representation of young queer youth, the island's intimacy, heterosexual norms, and the strong Catholic faith act as barriers to the self-discovery journeys of LGBTQI+ youth and their ability to flourish here. However, each of these challenges highlights an area of resilience on the ground. LGBTI+Gozo and Gozo Youth Services offer consistent representation and support for young people, and the intimacy of the island creates a chance for personal connections which transcend preconceived notions. These more tangible issues which lean more on agency help to dissolve the relative structural issues of a heteronormative society and Catholic values as the dominant form of morality.

The findings from this research resist the misconception which equates rurality with a disharmonious LGBTQI+ existence and instead focus on the methods by which Gozitan society utilises and can utilise their specific context to foster inclusion. Moving away from the metronormative matrix and the rural risk paradigm allows us to see the transformative grassroots efforts of individuals and organisations in fostering belonging through a collective sense of understanding. The paradigm used for this research contributes to other scholar's calls for the transition away from categorising rural places as inherently backward, undeveloped, or intolerant to LGBTQI+ people (Ammaturo, 2018; Butter-

field 2018; Jubany, Adiego and Grau. 2021; Pacey 2020), and towards a critical regionality which investigates the experiences of LGBTQI+ rural life within its own framework of analysis that is inclusive of both the difficulties and the strengths of rural locales.

This research has revealed the complexity of rural LGBTQI+ youth experiences and the often-overlooked strengths of rurality including familiarity and closely linked personal ties, the influence of advocacy through visibility, and support networks within rural LGBTQI+ communities where shared experiences of growing up LGBTQI+ here can lead to greater understanding and closeness. Here, the discussion on the resilience and community-building practices of Gozitan LGBTQI+ youth does not negate the challenging experiences of coming out or the effects of facing rejection and discrimination from family, friends, or the local community. However, persisting despite this by building up one's inner strength and resilience to be an activist in a place that has rejected you is a testament to the strength of the LGBTQI+ youth here and the potentiality of building a solid family-like community that supports and looks out for each other. LGBTI+Gozo's presence in Gozo resists the previously unbreakable cycle of LGBTQI+ youth staying silent about their queerness and moving away from Gozo to be more open. By showing that it does not have to be this way, LGBTI+Gozo's visible presence communicates to closeted LGBTQI+ individuals in Gozo that they can come out here and find a supportive and welcoming community. These findings can thus offer a sense of hopefulness to other rural places, including my rural hometown in Ireland, that LGBTQI+ advocacy is not limited to the urban, where the strengths of rural locales discussed here can be similarly utilized to shift public perceptions, promote inclusivity, and form an alternate community wherein LGBTQI+ people can lean on each other for support.

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