

*Building a new life: the challenges, hopes and trajectories of migrant women living in Malta.*

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**EMPOWERMENT CIRCLES**

DIALOGUE · EMPLOYABILITY · CRAFTS · HEALTH

# Migrant Women Association Malta

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	4
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	6
<b>DISCLAIMER</b> .....	6
<b>DEFINITION OF MIGRANT</b> .....	6
<b>ACRONYMS</b> .....	6
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	7
<b>MIGRATION INTO MALTA FROM OUTSIDE THE EU</b> .....	8
<i>The current scenario</i> .....	8
<i>Challenges</i> .....	9
<i>Gender and migration</i> .....	9
<b>THE EMPOWERMENT CIRCLES PROJECT</b> .....	11
<i>Context and participants</i> .....	12
<b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b> .....	14
<i>Research as part of the Empowerment Circles Project</i> .....	14
<i>Researching empowerment</i> .....	14
<b>METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH</b> .....	15
<i>Ethical considerations</i> .....	16
<i>Validation method and analytical process</i> .....	16
<i>Limitations</i> .....	17
<b>LIFE IN MALTA</b> .....	17
<b>DISCRIMINATION</b> .....	18
<b>THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES</b> .....	19
<i>National identity</i> .....	19
<i>Religion</i> .....	19
<i>Collective and individual identity</i> .....	20
<i>Motherhood</i> .....	20
<b>EMPOWERMENT AS AN ONGOING PROCESS</b> .....	21
<b>EVALUATION OF THE EMPOWERMENT CIRCLES</b> .....	22
<b>LESSONS LEARNED</b> .....	23
<b>LOOKING AHEAD</b> .....	24
<i>Recommended initiatives</i> .....	24

<i>Suggestions for future research</i> .....	25
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<i>Appendix 1 - Consent form</i> .....	30
<i>Appendix 2 - Resources</i> .....	31
<i>Appendix 3 - Self-reflexivity</i> .....	31
<i>Appendix 4 - Overview of empowerment circles</i> .....	32

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Empowerment Circles Project, designed and carried out by Migrant Women Association Malta, is funded through the Voluntary Organisations Project Scheme managed by the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector on behalf of the Ministry for Education and Employment. The core aim of the project is to support migrant women living in Malta to build their confidence, communication and social skills, as well as increase their employability.

The Empowerment Circles Project took the form of 32 weekly meetings, held between November 2018 and June 2019, where migrant women were invited to participate in group activities, such as crafts and yoga, discussions on the challenges of being a migrant woman in Malta, and information sessions on various topics such as employment, education and citizenship.

Using a participatory research approach, one female researcher followed the women's journey and participated first-hand in the discussions and the activities. Furthermore, the data collection process included the conduction of a focus group, where the researcher's preliminary results were discussed with the project beneficiaries. This report presents the findings of the qualitative research conducted on the Empowerment Circles Project and represents an attempt to explore and better understand migrant women's experiences of starting a new life in Malta and the perceived and concrete barriers to their integration.

Although the women involved in the project were grateful to be in Malta, a country which they perceived as and safe, the data gathered reveals that life in Malta is riddled with **obstacles and logistical barriers**, negatively affecting the women's wellbeing and possibilities. In addition to difficulties arising from bureaucratic processes and procedures, the women face daily challenges such as **discrimination and bullying on their children in school, incoherent school policies on religious matters, feelings of isolation and unemployment**. Another major stress factor is the constant **apprehension about their family's and friends' wellbeing** back home. Moreover, the research provides valuable information on migrant women's multiple and overlapping identities, such as their national, religious, collective and maternal identity and how these identities can affect self-esteem, self-confidence/self-representation and sense of belonging to the host country.

### *Main conclusions & recommendations*

The research documents how daily concerns, logistical and cultural barriers negatively affect migrant women's wellbeing, as well as their possibilities of feeling welcome and accepted within Maltese society. According to the women's positive feedback on the empowerment circles, the meetings seem to have acted as a temporary patch to the longer-term problems that the women face. Hence, although they were useful, they should be considered as a stepping stone towards



more substantial change and systemic support. In view of this goal, the report recommends future research and actions in the following areas:

### **Initiatives to support migrant women's employability**

- There is a need for a personalised and targeted approach to courses and trainings, in light of the women's different educational backgrounds, needs, skills, and career goals.
- Courses for migrant women on job interview structure, cultural norms and expectations, including training in presenting personal and professional skills, would be extremely beneficial.
- Training of job consultants and employers focusing on cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity, is strongly recommended.
- Intensive courses in crafts, cooking and food handling offering a certificate of completion or accreditation, should be made available to migrant women.

### **Initiatives to support the wellbeing of migrant women and their children**

- There is a need to strengthen the support offered to foreign children in schools through training for teachers in how to handle bullying and by harmonising school policies in religious matters.
- Activities such as culturally-sensitive yoga and meditation should be more readily available to migrant women.
- Support groups for migrant women on how to cope with various challenges (e.g. religious conflict within the family; feelings of isolation etc.) should be established.
- It is highly recommended to encourage migrant women to learn English and Maltese, as this will help them to communicate effectively and to support the integration of them and their family to the host community.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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I would like to thank all the women who participated in the Empowerment Circles Project and contributed so generously to the research with their honest reflections, ideas, thoughts and personal stories. I would also like to thank Umayma Elamin, Erika O'Donnell and Isotta Rossoni for valuable discussions and feedback on the research findings.

## **DISCLAIMER**

This project is funded through the Voluntary Organisations Project Scheme managed by the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector on behalf of the Ministry for Education and Employment

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## **DEFINITION OF MIGRANT**

In this report the UN definition of migrant is adopted, to describe 'someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status' (UN, n.d.<sup>1</sup>)

## **ACRONYMS**

**IOM:** International Organisation for Migration

**MWAM:** Migrant Women Association Malta

**UNHCR:** The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/definitions>

## INTRODUCTION

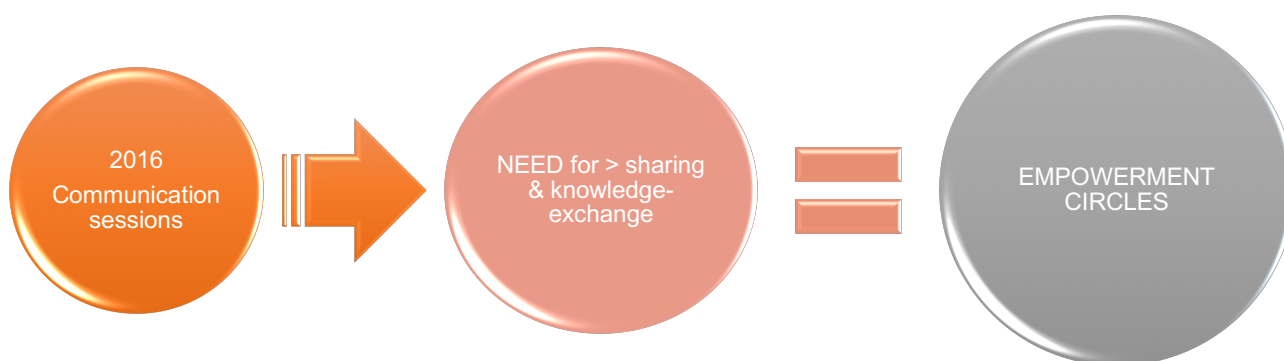
International migration is a heterogeneous and multifaceted phenomenon. While some people may choose to migrate to pursue better opportunities, others are forced to flee due to conflict, persecution, and a profound lack of human security (IOM, 2018). The UNHCR (2018) estimates that by the end of 2017 alone, 68.5 million people, most of them from developing countries, were forced to leave their homes; out of them, 25.4 million fled their countries due to national conflicts and persecution. New displacement is on the increase as well, with 16.2 million people being displaced in 2017 only (UNHCR, 2018). Migrants and asylum seekers often travel in inhumane conditions and are frequently exposed to abuse, violence and life-threatening risks by smugglers and traffickers along the way.

Life post-arrival in a foreign country is often riddled with numerous challenges as well, which include feeling unwelcome, discriminated against and excluded from the labour market. In fact, migrants and asylum seekers who have left their home countries due to conflicts, poverty and persecution constitute a group that is extremely vulnerable to labour and other forms of exploitation, with women and children being particularly affected. Thus, women and girls constitute 56% of victims of forced economic exploitation and 98% of victims of forced commercial sexual exploitation (UNHCR, 2014).

In Malta, the MWAM, a local independent, voluntary, non-profit organisation, was born out of the desire to attend to the complex needs of migrant women who live in Malta. Established in 2015, the MWAM strives to advocate for migrant women, supporting them towards empowerment and integration. The organization believes that all migrant women should be treated with dignity and respect and that no one should be left behind due to lack of opportunities or discrimination. In November 2018, MWAM initiated a new project called the Empowerment Circles Project, funded through the Voluntary Organisations Project Scheme (VOPS), managed by the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector (MCVS) on behalf of the Ministry for Education and Employment.

The journey that led to the creation of the Empowerment Circles Project began in 2016, when MWAM volunteers organized workshops and communication sessions with migrant women to facilitate a social forum where they could improve their English skills. Based on the feedback from the women who participated in these sessions, there appeared to be an unmet need for a safe space for migrant women to share thoughts and ideas, practice creative hobbies, develop their English skills and learn more about Malta and Maltese society, starting from the local employment culture. MWAM's answer was the Empowerment Circles Project. Thus, from the start, the aim of the empowerment circles was both interpersonal and educational. Interpersonal, in that it encouraged relationship-building and interaction between migrant women in Malta and educational, as the project

enhanced women's know-how, promoted skills-development, as well as allowed for mutual learning. In addition, the project envisages a qualitative research *about* the empowerment circles to document and describe experiences on the ground and better articulate and share outputs.



This report presents the findings of the qualitative research conducted on the Empowerment Circles Project between November 2018 and June 2019. It represents an attempt to better understand migrant women's experiences of starting a new life in Malta, and the perceived and concrete barriers to integration. Thus, this research strives to explore how migrant women in Malta can attain greater empowerment.

## **MIGRATION INTO MALTA FROM OUTSIDE THE EU**

### *The current scenario*

Malta's recent refugee history has been dominated by boat arrivals from Libya. According to the UNHCR, more than 20,000 boat arrivals have reached Malta since 2004. The numbers dropped dramatically from 2014 onwards as a result of Italian and joint European operations, which involved the transportation and disembarkation of rescued migrants on Italian soil (UNHCR, 2018). This is, however, already changing due to the new policies that are currently being implemented by Italy's coalition government. 2018 has shown an increase in the arrival of migrant boats to Malta (Malta Independent, 2019).

From 2018 and onwards political debates between European States over how to best manage migrant flows and who has the legal responsibility for vessels carrying migrants at sea have intensified (BBC, 2018). Since 2018, several disagreements between Italy and Malta over migrant arrivals have led to both countries refusing to

let ships with migrants dock at their ports, even in severe weather conditions, resulting in the exposure of migrants, especially minors and those in urgent need of assistance, to enhanced risks (The Local, 2019). A large part of the anti-immigration discourse in Malta has focused on the small size of the island and the fact that asylum applications in Malta remain the second highest in the EU, when compared to the number of residents (Times of Malta, 2018). The Office of the Refugee Commissioner processes between 1,600 - 2000 asylum applications a year of which the majority is granted with international protection. The majority of the asylum applications today are from Libya, Syria, Somalia and Eritrea (UNHCR, 2018).

### *Challenges*

Migration never comes without challenges, especially for third country nationals. According to The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2018), Malta has some of the most unfavourable conditions for naturalisation in the European Union and there is no systematic provision of language or cultural support for adult migrants. The report from ECRI also describes how third country nationals in Malta constitute a vulnerable and marginalised group, experiencing isolation and a low level of interaction with Maltese people. Furthermore, the overall climate and public opinion towards migrants has a harsh tone of negativity, often expressed through offensive and occasionally, blatantly cruel statements on social media (ECRI, 2018).

The described hostility and “othering” could be linked to the fears of the consequences of migration on the Maltese population, for instance in relation to employment. This despite the fact that Malta’s unemployment rate is extremely low, i.e. only 4% in the third quarter of 2017 (Kopin, 2018). In a recent Eurobarometer survey, 63% of Maltese respondents stated that they see immigration as a key *problem*. Respondents were presented with a set of issues and asked to choose the two most pressing and worrisome. Crime was the top concern (mentioned by 45% of the sample), while immigration ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> (mentioned by 32%) (European Commission, 2018).

Malta’s first-ever National Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan, launched in 2017, represents a positive step to addressing these gaps, with its core aim being the improvement of migrant integration. The strategy for the years 2017-2020 was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers and a related Action Plan is currently being finalised (ECRI, 2018).

### *Gender and migration*

From 2001 to 2014, the number of men from outside the EU migrating into Malta was higher than that of females. However, according to a report by IOM (2016), there has been a relatively steady increase in the number of women arriving in Malta every year (IOM, 2016). If we look at migration into Europe as a whole, it is the first

time since the beginning of the "refugee crisis", that migrant women and children outnumber adult men. In 2015 about 70 % of migrants were men, whereas in 2016 women and children made up nearly 60% of the total number of people that cross into Europe (Council of Europe, 2016).

As stated by Paulina Lucio Maymon (2017), Research Associate at the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide, an increasing number of people leave their countries of origin to escape poverty, look for work and better economic opportunities. Female migrants play an important role here, with Maydon referring to the spike in the inflows of female migrants as *the feminization of migration*: the number of women that migrate is higher than ever before in history and women from poorer countries typically move to follow the growing demand for migrant women's labour in wealthier countries, especially within care and domestic work (Maymon, 2017). Castles and Miller (2009) describe this as migration having become a private solution to a public problem, referring to the major consequences that social inequality and political crisis often have on individuals in a given country, forcing them to find their own, individualised solution to the problems they face (Castles & Miller, 2009).

The existing research on migrant women in Malta provides useful information on the unfortunate positions they often find themselves in. For instance, the report *My Diversity: Age, Gender and Diversity Perspectives in the Maltese Refugee Context* by Integra (2015) describes how language barriers, illiteracy, and gendered social norms hinder female migrants' access to information and the *Stepping Up* report, produced by MWAM in 2017, provides useful insights into the challenges migrant women face with regards to employment. *Stepping Up* involved empirical research drawing on 91 interviews with women and focused on exploring migrant women's access to the Maltese labour market. According to the findings of the project, employment is one of the main concerns for female migrants living in Malta. They face difficulties in finding a job, with discrimination, particularly on the basis of age (44.3%), religion (31.4%), and nationality (15.7%) being perceived as the dominant hurdle. Out of the total women interviewed, 85.7% were unemployed. The reasons for unemployment varied from not being able to find a job, to having other responsibilities, or being busy pursuing training and studies. The majority of the women interviewed were unwillingly unemployed. In fact, 46.7% of them had been searching for a job for over a year (Chana Merino, 2017). Reading these findings in conjunction with a report by the European Commission, depicting Malta's sorry state of affairs in the sphere of gender equality, it comes as no surprise that migrant women face challenges (European Commission, 2019).

## THE EMPOWERMENT CIRCLES PROJECT

As previously mentioned, the Empowerment Circles Project is the product of a journey that MWAM started in 2016, when a group of volunteers organised a series of workshops and gatherings with a twofold objective: on one hand, to create a safe space where migrant women in Malta could carry out social and educational activities; on the other hand, to give them the possibility to build or improve their English skills. Further developments were reached through the Communication Sessions, during which English lessons were provided at different levels, in conjunction with a childcare service offered by MWAM's volunteers. These meetings gave MWAM access to valuable feedback on the concerns, interests and challenges that migrant women have or face in Malta.

The most important feedback that was received was the need for women to have culturally sensitive outlets to practice their hobbies, develop their skills and learn more about Malta and Maltese society, starting from the local employment culture. MWAM's answer was to design the Empowerment Circles Project with the main aim for the women to build and improve their confidence, communication and social skills, and employability.

The Empowerment Circles Project took the form of weekly meetings where migrant women were invited to participate in group activities and discussions hosted by MWAM. The meetings were divided into four main groups:

TYPE OF CIRCLE	TOPICS
<i>Meeting</i>	Maltese culture and active citizenship, handling discrimination and bullying; key communication skills, family & parenting, the education system in Malta, self presentation skills & confidence-building tools
<i>Employment</i>	Career choice, recognition of qualifications, value of volunteering, job hunting, successful job application/CV, identification of soft skills/hard skills, interviewing skills, mock-interviews, employer's expectations/work ethic, business development, freelancing/Microfinance, conditions of employment
<i>Health &amp; Wellbeing</i>	Stress management, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, nutrition, self care, healthy boundaries, work-life-balance, maintaining a healthy weight, active lifestyle Zumba, women's health discussion with a Doctor
<i>Crafts</i>	Print making, self portraits, book binding, still life painting, crocheting, knitting, macramé

The meetings were organized as focus groups. Focus groups were chosen as the qualitative tool employed as they are, by nature, social gatherings and therefore well suited to the project's aim of facilitating a social and engaging space where

women have the possibility to connect with each other. Furthermore, focus groups allow participants to reflect on each other's opinions and challenge each other's ways of viewing the world. Efforts were made for the meetings to be conducted in a climate of trust and informality. The sessions were led by facilitators with a competence in creating a collaborative and participatory climate and although each meeting had a specific topic, facilitators allowed for the discussion to follow the needs and interests expressed by participants.

### *Context and participants*

The Empowerment Circle Project welcomed all migrant women in Malta to join the project as participants, regardless of nationality, status, age, employment, interests and so on. The women were recruited in various ways:

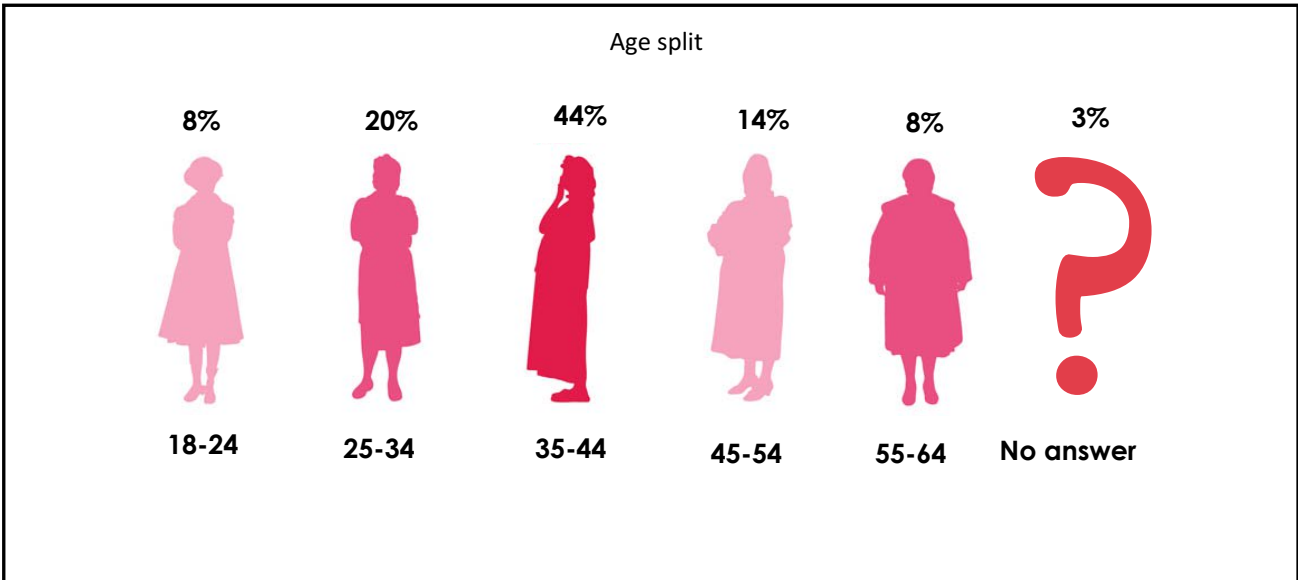
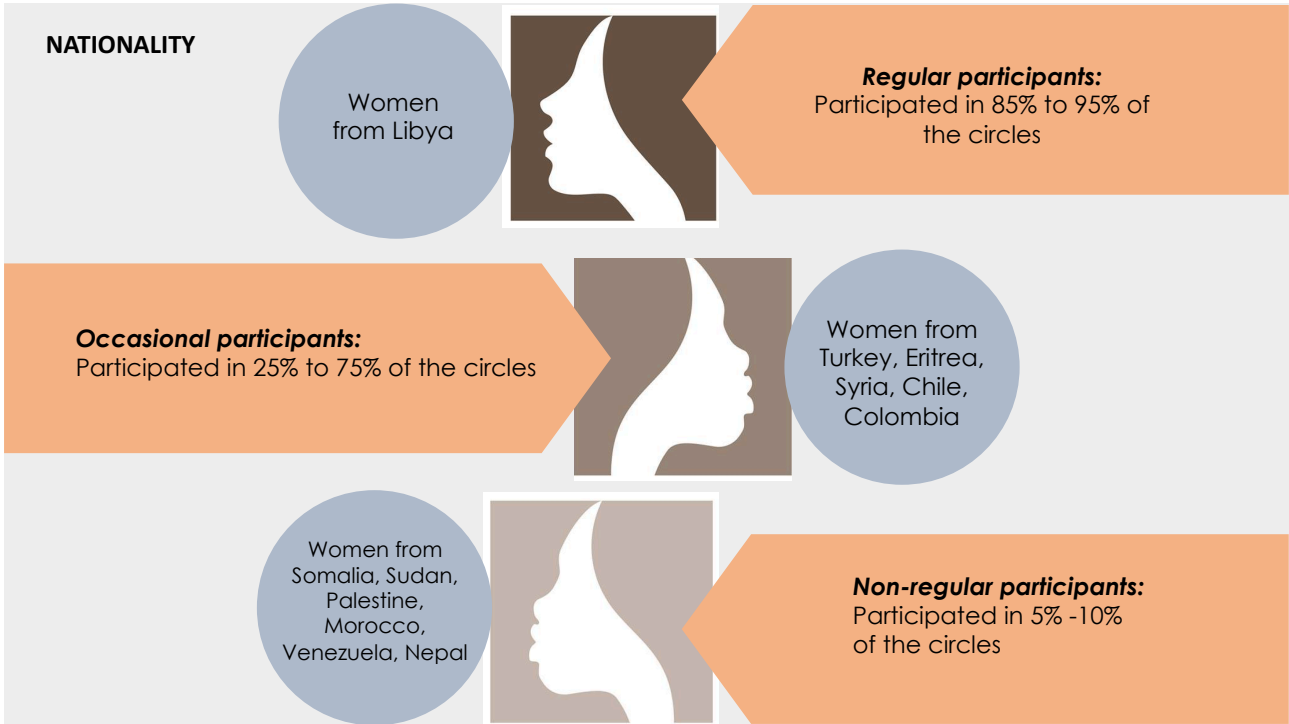
- By outreach workers who visited the open centres hosting asylum seekers and refugees in Malta.
- By advertising the Circles Project on Facebook and via an established WhatsApp group
- Through the so-called "Snowballing technique" (participants encourage others to participate).
- By MWAM network

All circles were conducted at the LEAP centre, Melita Street, Valletta. The duration of the meetings was of two hours long and they were held weekly on rotation (i.e. each category took place once a month, approximately). Conduction of the sessions began in November 2018 and finished by the end of June 2019.

A total of 32 meeting circles were carried out, 8 of each of the different 4 categories. The number of women attending the weekly meetings ranged from 3-18. **There was a decrease in participation during the Ramadan period May-June.** There did not seem to be any correlation between the theme of the meeting and the number of participants.

It was not possible to collect reliable statistics on all participants' nationality and age, as they typically arrived at different times, often after the meeting had begun; there were also participants leaving the meeting halfway, for instance if their children demanded their attention. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a rough estimate of the participants' nationality and age as following infographics show:





## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *Research as part of the Empowerment Circles Project*

Research on the empowerment circles helped document the project's learning outcomes, in order to share these insights with relevant stakeholders. Through the research we explored the complexity of the lived experience of being a migrant woman in Malta, as we believe this is important to create and support initiatives within the field of integration.

One female researcher followed the women's journey and participated first-hand in the discussions and the activities such as the crafts and yoga sessions. She acted as a 'participant observer', mostly witnessing the natural development of the circles and occasionally chipping in, for instance to ask the women to elaborate on their reflections when this was considered to be important and enriching for the research. The researcher participated in approximately 80% of the circles. She drafted field notes, transcribed the recordings of the meeting circles, shared ideas and reflections with other MWAM employees/volunteers throughout the project and conducted a focus group with the migrant women halfway through the project to allow them to give feedback on the content of the final report.

### *Researching empowerment*

As the title indicates, 'empowerment' was a crucial part of the project. What is 'empowerment' and how do we conduct research on and around it? The term has somewhat become a buzzword with multiple associated connotations, reflecting different underlying understandings of power. To discuss empowerment, one needs to grasp first of all that the concept of power, which is strictly related to empowerment, can also have many different meanings, ranging from people's physical or verbal skills to the way they view themselves and the extent to which they know their rights and capabilities. Power can, in this sense, be external as well as internal (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2007).

Empowerment refers to a range of different processes, from individual development and self-assertion to collective protest that challenge basic power relations. In the empowerment process, the individual is placed in the central position of a participatory process, with the freedom to express needs and individual constructs of life (Fetterman D.M, 1994). Sharing such viewpoints can help a group of individuals to feel a connectedness to other humans, analyse and compare common problems and thus gain a clearer understanding of, for instance, power relations, social exclusion and structural oppression. Empowerment in this sense is not a destination, a final goal, it is a process that can hopefully motivate individuals to use their available resources to change the status quo.

When looking at 'empowerment' as a way to identify and discuss structural oppression in a given society, a parallel can be drawn with the second-wave feminism movement that emerged in the US and in Europe in the late 1960's and 1970's where activists opened up a space where women could share feelings, thoughts and ideas. These groups formed part of a ground-breaking process, which would challenge dominating definitions of 'womanhood'. A central idea that emerged from this wave of activism was the insight that personal problems, were in fact, collective problems, common to all women from many different walks of life.

Second-wave feminism has, however, been criticised for not being as all-inclusive, as initially intended, because the battles of activists were mainly those of white, middle-class women (Hollows, 2000). In this sense, the actual possibility to challenge and protest against the oppression of women, was a privilege, that excluded minority women for whom gender was not the sole source of oppression. The activists of second-wave feminism did not consider how gender intersects with other factors such as class and race, distinctly colouring each individual's unique experience of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality', referring to the overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination that women face, for instance related to class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989).

According to Srilatha Batliwala (1994), author of several books on women and empowerment, the above-mentioned factors can determine access to resources and power. In this case, the first step of empowerment will be, for a group of people, to start recognizing the systemic forces that oppress them and endeavour to change the power relationships that determine them (Batliwala, 1994). This viewpoint is relevant to the Empowerment Circles Project, as one of the expressed needs that led to its creation is closely related to multiple vulnerabilities that migrant women face in Malta. Thus, MWAM met the need to create a culturally sensitive forum where migrant women could speak freely and candidly about their lives in Malta, practice their hobbies, develop their skills and learn more about Malta and the Maltese society, starting from the local employment culture.

Drawing on these reflections on power and empowerment, this paper investigates the ways in which migrant women can be empowered to truly shape their own life, encouraging them to question their roles, rights and opportunities so as to strengthen their feeling of inclusion, dignity and fulfilment.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

The research combined a *participatory research approach* with elements of the *phenomenological research method*. The participatory method of conducting research implies a process of learning and reflection. Participatory research gives participants a greater, more explicit, role in the research and can empower and strengthen their feeling of identity and autonomy by helping and encouraging them to imagine a different world where their voices are being heard. The participatory

approach allows a high level of thematic reflexivity, allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes across the meetings and serving as a basis for the co-creation and exchange of ideas. This iterative process secures a high level of validity as it opens up opportunities for the researcher to develop and test the different project hypotheses (Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

The participatory approach fitted well with the project's focus on *empowerment*. Our belief was that to reach this objective, it would be most beneficial to allow for a methodology that amplified women's active participation as a key parameter for creating change. Our goal was that the participatory process, in itself, would be a learning and empowering activity for the women involved.

Phenomenological research identifies and explores the content and essence of a given human experience about a phenomenon, as this is experienced and described by the participants. It was selected as methodological framework for the research because it explores the unique experience of the individual, while also including the unavoidable subjective interpretation of the researcher (See section on self-reflectivity) (Bjørner, 2015).

#### *Ethical considerations*

The participants were fully informed about the aims of the project and the fact that their contributions to the focus groups would go into a research report. Participants agreed to sign an agreement that allows for the information gathered through the focus groups to be used for research purposes (see appendix). In terms of confidentiality, the signed agreement ensured that their names or any information that might render them identifiable, would not be included in any future publication. All recordings were deleted after being transcribed by the researcher.

#### *Validation method and analytical process*

The meeting circles were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis to secure accuracy in the analytical process. The participatory approach enriched the analytical process by allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes in subsequent meetings and to continuously reflect, adjust and evaluate findings as the research proceeded. The findings were crystallised into themes that stand as the main insights of the Empowerment Circles Project. The trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the analytical process was built by using the following techniques:

- Coding of data that summarized the topics discussed and how participants related to them. Following an evaluation of the four types of empowerment circles, the data was organised into three broad categories named '**Life in Malta**', '**Discrimination**' and '**Identity**'. The latter were broken down into subcategories, named '**National identity**', '**Collective and individual identity**', '**Motherhood**', and '**Religious identity**'

- Meeting at the end of the project between the researcher and the other MWAM employees who were present during the meetings. The researcher shared her thoughts and main findings and the others added on their ideas and reflections
- Independent review of identified themes by an external consultant to reduce the risk of losing out on relevant details that might act as “blind spots” for the researcher
- Discussion of research findings with participants. Halfway through the project participants became co-researchers as the researcher presented them with the main findings of the research to allow them to give feedback. This reduced the risk of misinterpretation, allowed the researcher to double-check the relevance of the main findings and empowered participants to take ownership of the research.

### *Limitations*

The participants’ English skills varied a lot; from absolute beginners to fluent speakers. To reduce the risk of getting lost in translation, an Arabic/English speaking translator was present in all focus groups to make sure that the intended meaning of the words and statements came through. However, this *did* inevitably reduce the researcher’s communicative access to the women with only basic English skills. The intention for the focus groups was to function as a safe space. The participants were free to listen and not obliged to participate verbally. However, this effectively meant that some voices were heard, while others were not.

### **LIFE IN MALTA**

*“My husband and I both applied at Jobsplus and they told us we will call you but they didn’t call back. And we live in Hal Far and you know Hal Far is not a place you can survive a long time and we need to find work to move from there”*

*“I went to the kindergarten and they told me to show the work permit. But how can I get a permit when I don’t have childcare? How can I take care of my kids and at the same time look for a job?”*

When discussing life in Malta, the first feelings expressed were those of **gratitude** and **safety** in the most basic sense, i.e. living in a place without war, conflicts and constant threats to personal safety. Most of the participants were mothers and their **children’s wellbeing** and safety came before everything else. In this context, Malta was highly praised for providing the children with a safe environment and the possibility to go to school, which would hopefully be the foundation for a stable future.

However, everyday life in Malta was also perceived as being riddled with **obstacles** and **logistical barriers**, negatively affecting the participants’ general wellbeing and

possibilities. Issues related to long waiting times for **ID cards** and the process for the renewal of ID cards for all family members were pinpointed as major hurdles. Apart from administrative problems, participants also found that they were treated with **distrust** and **hostility** when dealing with administrative staff, which made them feel very unwelcome and uncomfortable.

**Finding a job** was a goal for many of the participants for several reasons: in order to improve the quality of life, become financially independent, be part of Maltese society and/or for self-fulfilment/career/interest. As free **child care** in Malta is only offered for parents who have a job and can present a contract, the participants who were looking for work found it to be very difficult to do this while also taking care of the children, let alone being able to go to job interviews without having anyone to look after the children in the meantime. **Learning English** was also mentioned as a key priority for most participants but the lack of child care was a clear barrier for being able to attend the offered English courses.

## **DISCRIMINATION**

*"After the Arab spring, the situation here got worse, I feel much more discriminated, in the streets, in the bus, in the supermarket...it's everywhere"*

*'I went to Mater Dei hospital yesterday to have my tooth removed... they asked me to go to another clinic, because, they said 'you are a refugee, you are not allowed here' ...*

*"I used to be afraid of bullies. But I have learned by experience to be reserved and take distance"*

**Discrimination** was experienced as being part of daily life; in public places, in schools, in shops and even in real estate agencies where several women experienced house owners' refusal to rent property out to third country nationals. The **hijab** was described as playing a central role in the daily episodes of discrimination, but also the women who did not wear a hijab reported **frequent incidents of bullying**, mostly related to their skin colour. Usually the bullying was verbal and a typical incident involved being told to "go home to your country". However, there were incidents where the bullying had become physical and the victims had not reported it, as they did not expect to get help from the authorities. Discrimination was so common for the women that it had, unfortunately, become the **norm**, which resulted in a state of resignation. However, discrimination against their **children** was still a major concern, causing **fear** and a sense of **powerlessness** as the women did not know how to help them. Bullying and discrimination in schools against migrant children was reported to happen on a frequent basis. Unfortunately, the general perception was that the issue was not properly handled by the teachers or school principal. Some participants reported that teachers had actively taken

part in discriminatory action against their children which had, in one case, resulted in the mother having to change the child's school.

The participants found that employers did not wish to hire them due to **nationality and religious belonging**, for instance they were sure that wearing a hijab in their CV photo or even having a foreign name would reduce their chances of getting called in for an interview.

## **THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES**

Globalization is said to have an effect on people's self-perception, generating multiple, complex (and occasionally conflicting) identities, especially in the case of people who leave their home country to settle somewhere else (Bauman, 2005). As described in other studies on migration, it is common that migrants hold multiple attachments that go beyond the common dichotomy of the past and the present, as they continue to be 'present' in their homelands while also being part of the host country. The way that cultural norms, identities and values attached to the country of origin are perceived and interpreted in the host country will, inevitably, have implications on the integration process (Pustulka, 2015).

### *National identity*

*"If it wasn't for my kids being safer here, I would move back home, although there is war going on. It is my country; it is where I want to live and die"*

The participants' emotional attachment to their home countries was strong and when they referred to 'home' this usually indicated their country of origin. The women from Libya in particular, showed a very strong sense of belonging and expressed a wish to return there in the future. In general, the participants often expressed an existing divide between 'us' (migrants) and 'them' (Maltese people in general) which resulted in a stigmatization of themselves as foreigners, mainly caused by appearance and the self-perception of being 'different'. Thus, their national identity took precedence over their gender, parental or societal identity. This had a negative effect on their sense of belonging to the Maltese society and exacerbated the tendency to marginalization, with little interaction with the locals.

### *Religion*

*"My daughter's classmates ask her: why does your mum wear a hijab? I don't know what to tell her to answer...we really need some cultural mediation"*

Although religious issues were only addressed by the Muslim women, for these women it was a pivotal issue exhibiting several related challenges. For these women, religion was a personal matter, tightly related to their self-esteem and mental wellbeing. One participant described her religious guidelines by comparing them to traffic rules, that 'tell you how to navigate, where to turn, where to go and where

not to go in life'. One significant worry for the participants was how to incorporate religious rituals into their life in Malta and, especially, how to keep the rituals a part of their children's life. In general, they found the schools' handling of religious matters problematic as there was no coherence in school policy. It seemed to be more a matter of sheer coincidence for a teacher to show concern for children during, for instance, Ramadan without expecting the children to participate in any physical activity during this month. On the other hand, some teachers rejected what they saw as 'special treatment' and would demand the children to participate fully in all classes. There appeared to be a lot of insecurity among the women concerning how to tackle the religious issues, especially how to address it in their children's schools. This might be due to the topic being personal and somehow 'taboo'; the women may have also feared further stigmatization.

### *Collective and individual identity*

*"The interviewer wanted me to tell about myself and not only about my family. But I didn't know what to tell her about myself!"*

In one of the employment circles, representatives from Jobsplus simulated job interviews to encourage participants to practice their skills. Some women did not wish to participate as they did not feel comfortable in the situation, mostly due to a lack of experience or confidence. Of the women who did agree to participate in the interview training, a few found it to be a useful experience for potential future job interviews and were eager to listen to the interviewer's feedback and improve their performance. The majority, however, had a hard time answering the interviewer's questions and the feedback was difficult for the women to take in. This situation was a clear example of the confusion or miscommunication that might occur when there is limited awareness of the impact of culture on identity. In particular, the interviewer viewed negatively the fact that when asked about themselves, the women replied by talking about their families. This was considered irrelevant for the interview; however, it also indicates that the women had a strong sense of their collective identity (family), which took precedence over their individual identity. This could be an important finding for potential future initiatives directed both at job-seeking migrant women and employers.

### *Motherhood*

*"What I'm afraid of is that my children will lose the self-esteem that comes from having a strong religious belief"*

The women's roles as mothers constituted a crucial part of their identity and self-perception. As some of the women mentioned, the main reason for leaving their home country was to find a safer place for their children to grow up in and they were at peace being in Malta. However, the women were not as involved in their children's school activities as they wished to be. Due to their limited English skills, they



were not able to help their children with their homework as they would normally do in their home country. This had a negative effect on their identity as mothers, as they felt that they were missing out on an important part of parenthood. Another issue that emerged were their worries in relation to the children losing their national identity and belonging, since they wouldn't study in their mother tongue, and - for the Muslim children – because education in Malta is non-confessional.

## **EMPOWERMENT AS AN ONGOING PROCESS**

*"I have become more confident to practice my English and socialize with my Maltese neighbours after meeting so many different cultures here, in the circles"*

*Did we manage to create empowerment?*

The concept of empowerment was a main theme during the whole project, rarely mentioned openly, but always underlying all activities. There was an initial lack of knowledge among the women about basic rights and opportunities as citizens in Malta, which was a heavy barrier to feeling empowered in daily life. With the purpose of minimizing this barrier, the women were informed about their rights and opportunities, for instance in terms of health care and education. They were also introduced to organizations that could help them if they needed support and guidance, (e.g. in terms of parenting or discrimination) and they were introduced to professionals who discussed with them the Maltese job market and culture, and who trained them in writing a good CV and preparing for job interviews.

There were signs that we managed to plant some seeds that can contribute to the women's journey of empowerment, which is, as mentioned previously not a goal, but a constant process. Apart from the informative aspect of the empowerment process, the feeling of inclusion proved to be crucial for the women, as many expressed a feeling of isolation in their daily lives. There was a general agreement, that the empowerment circles made a substantial difference in terms of feeling included and understood by likeminded people . There was also an expressed desire to use this growth beyond the circles themselves. Furthermore, the empowerment circles were considered as a safe space for the women to practice their English skills, which some found challenging to do in their daily life. As one of the facilitators put it at the end of the project:

*"I believe we empowered them by creating a support network of likeminded women in similar circumstances tackling isolation that migrants often experience being foreigners in a foreign land. I also believe that we empowered them with knowledge - many shared their 'aha' moments with me during the circle and it was very rewarding to witness that. My aim was to boost their self-esteem, confidence and communication skills and judging from the feedback I received from ladies after the workshops, they had a very positive learning experience".*

## EVALUATION OF THE EMPOWERMENT CIRCLES

*"The circles have helped me to leave my house, to spend less time alone"*

*"My English has improved because I have a chance to use it here"*



The empowerment circles were conducted in an atmosphere characterized by trust, respect, empathy, solidarity and curiosity. The women listened to and helped each other overcome language barriers. There was a great interest in the topics and numerous questions and comments. As many of the women were regular participants, they started getting to know each other. They joked and laughed a lot, and the atmosphere became more informal and friendly, as the project proceeded. Many women spoke up about their personal struggles, fear, hopes and dreams. Heavy and emotionally challenging topics were handled with a high level of sensitivity by the facilitators and approached in an indirect rather than a direct manner, whilst also enabling everyone to contribute with as much information as they felt comfortable sharing with the group.

The women told us that they found it very rewarding and useful to participate in the meetings because they offered them a free space to socialize without cultural constraints. They also found that the circles successfully addressed many of their daily worries and needs, while also introducing them to useful skills, for instance how to manage discrimination and conflicts with children, or how to approach the job market in Malta. Overall, the empowerment circles seem to have acted as a temporary "solution" to the longer-term problems the women face. Hence, they

were instrumental but more importantly, we hope that they acted as a stepping stone towards more substantial change and systemic support.

A recurring topic in the circles was the importance of physical and psychological self-care. However, self-care was generally neglected and many women found it difficult to make the move from theory to practice/action. A common stress factor for the women was the impossibility of being physically and mentally present in two places at the same time. Thus, the women often described how they were constantly worried about what was going on in their home country and if their loved ones were okay while, at the same time, they were also striving to make the daily life in Malta meaningful, especially for their children.

The yoga sessions and the crafts circles were highly praised for providing a break from the constant stream of worries to focus only on the here and now, enhanced by an activation of the body. The feedback about the yoga sessions was overwhelmingly positive, and many women highlighted these sessions as the best and most enjoyable part of the project. No one had any prior experience with yoga before participating in the health and wellbeing circles, but after having tried it, there was a wish to do more. As for the crafts circles, the feedback was also very positive. Many of the women were highly skilled in creative techniques and had extensive experience in arts and crafts. These activities brought back beautiful memories of their childhood, that were shared with the rest of the group. In this sense, the crafts circles went beyond the production of crafts and became a space to share personal memories in a very spontaneous and unstructured way.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

The migrant population in Malta is diverse, and as such, has varying needs. This project endeavoured to include all migrant women, however, a more targeted initiative might have brought more value to a specific group or community. An example relates to Open Centre residents. Efforts were made to encourage residents of open centres to participate, however, despite outreach work and promotion of the project on-site, very few chose to attend. Transport was cited as an obstacle, hence a bus was provided. Regrettably, the service was hardly ever used. Feedback has indicated that had the sessions been on-site, of a more practical nature, and perhaps, more sensitive to their lived realities, many more open centre residents could have participated.

Furthermore, the theme of empowerment might have been conceptualized too vaguely. As many migrant women face harsh daily realities and come from variegated cultural, religious, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, empowerment - as a subjective concept - proved too elusive, theoretical and at times, abstract for some participants. Practical means and hands-on terminology could have attracted more women to the project.

Furthermore, the sessions lacked some continuity and were thematically too sporadic. As the project consisted of four categories of circles: Meeting, Employment, Health & Well-being and Crafts, each category took place on rotation, meaning that there would be roughly one of each per month. While this allowed for variety and embraced a holistic approach, in practice, it proved too scattered and gave rise to absenteeism. For potential future projects, it would be better to cover separate subjects as modules, or block courses.

As the themes covered in the circles were so varied, it also meant that a high volume of people and organisations were involved, rendering logistics difficult. With reference to future project implementation, these issues could be avoided by conducting thorough planning at design stage, focusing on a specific subject and engaging a single trainer.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

### *Recommended initiatives*

Combining the statistics on female migrants in Malta with the qualitative findings from the Empowerment Circles Project, there proves to be a need to bolster women's sense of belonging to Maltese society, which acts as a potent barrier to successful integration. An important parameter is employment, as having a job can strengthen both integration, understood as feeling connected to the rest of society, as well as personal empowerment and self-esteem. However, when the daily concerns are paramount and the logistic and cultural barriers are overwhelming, concrete possibilities for migrant women to build a bond with Maltese society are drastically reduced. The spirit and conviction behind the following recommendations is that female migrants need support to create a meaningful, empowered life in Malta and that, with the right type of support, have the potential to make a valuable contribution to Maltese society.

To work towards a better and smoother integration than the one we are currently witnessing, and to create a stronger sense of belonging to Maltese society, we recommend to focus on the following initiatives:

- **Targeted initiatives to strengthen migrant women's employability.**  
There is a need to move away from 'one fits all' training and take into account the fact that migrant women come from different educational backgrounds and have different levels and types of experiences, skills and career goals.
- **More training for migrant women on the process of job seeking and coping with job interviews.**  
This should focus on interview structure, cultural norms and expectations, including training in presenting personal and professional skills. An effort must

be made to help the women feel secure and less exposed in the situation as jobseekers.

- **Focus on enhancing cultural awareness among job consultants and employers.** Future training should include cultural sensitivity to the multiple identities of migrant women and pay attention to the power imbalances that are, inevitably, part of the interview session which, if not handled with care, can cause 'dis-empowerment'.
- **Establishment of intensive courses in crafts, cooking and food handling** that consist of various modules with allow to obtain a certificate of completion.
- **Discover and develop the personal skills for migrant women** to overcome the language barriers and to bring diversity and different working styles to the host community.
- **Encourage migrant women to learn English and Maltese.** This will help the women to communicate effectively and to support the integration of them and their family to the host community.
- **Enhanced support of foreign children in schools** through training for teachers on cultural sensitivity, management of discrimination/bullying situations and harmonisation of school policies with regards to religious matters (e.g. as regards students' expected level of participation during the month of Ramadhan).
- **Work to engage migrant women in holistic activities** such as yoga and meditation, which address both their physical and emotional wellbeing. Sessions should be offered in a culturally-sensitive setting.
- **Support groups for migrant women** on how to cope with the numerous challenges they encounter in daily life – e.g. identity conflicts, coping with cultural and religious issues in family life and vis-à-vis children.

### *Suggestions for future research*

There are many gaps in knowledge that persist, despite the insights gained from the research undertaken. We therefore put forward following research questions/themes as suggestions:

- **To investigate the perceived lack of integration of migrant children in Maltese schools** by exploring the interaction between migrant children and parents on one side and local children, parents, teachers, and school principals on the other. This research should be as comprehensive as possible and include all groups or individuals identified as relevant to the project goal. To obtain an

in-depth knowledge, we would suggest an ethnographic approach, which implies observations and on site interviews in schools and in relevant public places such as playgrounds and sport facilities.

- **To explore the described discrimination towards migrants among local employers.** This will help to better understand the barriers that migrants encounter when seeking work in Malta and hopefully aid in minimizing the barriers and/or prejudices that currently reduce migrants' chances of finding employment in Malta.

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TERMS OF CONFIDENTIALITY

By signing here, you consent for the information gathered through this circle to be used for research purposes.

*Your name or any information that might render you identifiable, will not be included in any future publication.*

NAME:

SIGNATURE:

## *Appendix 2 - Resources*

The number of hours assigned to the research on the Empowerment Circles Project was 80 hours in total. The researcher participated in all the *meeting circles* and in as many of the other three types of circles as possible.

## *Appendix 3 - Self-reflexivity*

Based on the assumption that data collection and analysis are inevitably shaped and informed by the researcher's subjectivity, a high level of researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the research project by continuously questioning and validating the importance given to the different topics. It is relevant to mention that all of MWAM's staff and volunteers involved in the project are migrant women themselves. This allowed for the women to connect with them and feel better understood. This can be perceived as a strength, as it provided an opportunity to empathise with the expressed feeling of cultural discrimination in Malta. On the other hand, the shared status of being female migrants in Malta (regardless of country of origin) involved a risk of bias. Thus, we constantly had to remind ourselves not to transfer our own experiences as migrants onto participants.

Appendix 4 – overview of empowerment circles

Nov 27th 2018	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Choosing a career, recognition of qualifications and value of volunteering
Dec. 4th 2018	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Getting to know each other
Dec. 11th 2018	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Stress management & meditation
Dec. 18th 2018	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Job hunting
Jan 8th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Printmaking
Jan 15th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Maltese Culture and Active Citizenship
Jan 22nd 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Nutrition and yoga
Jan 29th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Writing a successful Job application, CV, identification of soft skills and hard skills
Feb 5th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Self portraits
Feb 12th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Book binding
Feb 19th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Self care and healthy boundaries & yoga
Feb 22nd 2019	Friday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Handling discrimination and bullying: key communication skills
Feb 26th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Still Life painting
March 5th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Job interviewing skills
March 12th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Family and parenting
March 22nd 2019	Friday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Mindfulness/meditation
March 26th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Mock interviews
April 2nd 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Crocheting
April 9th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	The education system in Malta
April 16th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Handling discrimination and bullying: key communication skills
April 23rd 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Employer's expectations and work ethic
April 30th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Knitting
May 7th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Career planning
May 14th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Business development and freelancing / Microfinance
May 21st 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Employment	Conditions of employment
May 28th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Macramé

May 31st 2019	Friday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Work-life balance and self care
June 6th 2019	Thursday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Maintaining a healthy weight and yoga
June 11th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Active lifestyle and Zumba
June 18th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Crafts	Completing chosen craft Project; knitting, crochet or macramé
June 21st 2019	Friday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Meeting	Self presentation skills and confidence-building tools
Jun 25th 2019	Tuesday	10:00-12:00	Valletta LEAP	Health&Wellbeing	Women's health discussion with a doctor & yoga