

# "If you can't go through the door, you go through the window" Three Gozitan Women, their Passions, and Creativity

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July 2012

## A B S T R A C T

This article is based on fieldwork research conducted on the island of Gozo, part of the Republic of Malta, during the month of July, 2012. Whilst engaging with a group of local women, it was perceived that three important discourses were dominant in their life narratives: the idea that Gozitan women have a 'hard life' (in comparison to Maltese women), that gossip is an ever present menace which constrains life on Gozo, and the idea of 'tradition', which was divided between a nostalgic wish to preserve it and the yearning to challenge the conventions that fall beneath this category. This paper is supported by the data gathered from conversations with several women from this island (four of them regularly, as well as about twenty others with whom I spoke casually), yet it specifically focuses on the lives of three women who have challenged the role of the 'typical Gozitan woman' by exercising their passions through different creative and artistic channels. The premise underlying the research is that artistic and creative expression can both be a complement to and an escape from the professional lives led by these three individuals, but also a means through which personal self-fulfilment can be achieved and exercised.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

### *Key words*

Gozo; gender; tradition; gossip; anthropology of art; phenomenology

### *How to refer to this article*

Vaghi F, "If you can't go through the door, you go through the window" Three Gozitan Women, their Passions, and Creativity, 2012, Omertaa, Journal for Applied Anthropology, <http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0066.pdf>

The first time I really observed a Gozitan woman, I was in her kitchen, and she was teaching us, a group of students from all over the world, how to preserve food in the typical Gozitan way. Hours later I would meet the faces of other intriguing Gozitan women, seen through the eyes of our cooking instructor, more specifically through the lenses of her camera. Her exhibition, L-Ghawdxija (The Gozitan Woman), was on display inside the building of the Banca Giuratale, nestled in the centre of Gozo's capital city, Victoria. From the walls of the gallery, the women's gazes were unforgiving, defiant and, in several portraits, hidden. I was both enamoured with and intimidated by these powerful photographs which, I would later discover, depicted very specific notions on what being a woman in Gozo entails.

It is commonly said that photographs contain more than a thousand words could speak; this project is an attempt to find out what these words could be.

## ***The field***

Gozo is a small island northwest from the main island of Malta, homeland to approximately 31,000 people. Its main city, Victoria, is a nucleus surrounded by several other smaller towns and villages. The island is rich in culinary and religious traditions, and the summer time is an ideal season to witness Gozitan folklore.

During my stay in July 2012 I was based in the town of Xlendi, a short distance away from Victoria, to which I commuted by bus almost every day.

My interest in writing a small ethnography on Gozitan women arose after I attended one of the religious festas on the island,<sup>1</sup> where I noticed girls and young women wearing a type of attire that would have been usually deemed inappropriate at other Catholic religious festivals I have witnessed before. In his exploration of the changing pattern of dress codes in Malta, Pullicino (1992) notices that even as far back as the mid- to late 19th century there was a perceived 'Europeanisation' of the clothes worn by Maltese women (1992: 144), as well as an American influence on dress brought on by increased immigration, and repatriation, of Maltese nationals. I asked myself what were the processes presently underlying festa behaviour and attire, thinking of an obvious transition (or perhaps transgression) of tradition, of ideas about femininity and beauty, or the changing nature of courtship and gender roles. These considerations alone seemed too big to be explored in just one month. To begin with, I needed to engage with local women, and it was difficult to determine where to begin with in this endeavour.

Shortly after this initial glimpse of Gozitan lifestyle, I met Diane<sup>2</sup> during the cooking lesson, and then I visited again at her restaurant to ask about her photo exhibit. Whilst she rapidly handled hot pans and dishes in the kitchen, she described what her experience as a Gozitan woman had been like up to that day, and what she believed were the experiences of other women living on the island—indeed, what inspired her most recent photographs. After this initial encounter, which unexpectedly led me to meet several other Gozitan women, it became clear that the situation of women in Gozo was a relevant research topic. Like in many other developed and developing countries, the situation of women and gender inequality in Malta are still subjects open to discussion. In 2010, Malta was ranked 89th out of 134 countries in the Equality Index compiled by the World Economic Forum (Times of Malta 2010a). In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report of 2011, Maltese women's ability to rise to leadership positions was measured 4.60 out of 7. Diane's social context provided me with first-hand insight to these

statistics, which anthropology seeks to explore further through qualitative analysis.

On the day I was introduced to Diane's life at the restaurant, I also became acquainted to Diane's mother, Maria, her aunt, Sylvia, and Lucie, a young painter working in Malta. Diane's, Sylvia's and Lucie's lives as three passionate and creative professional women quickly became the focal point of this project. The research focuses on the way the themes of passion, professional life and creativity have evolved in the lives of each of my informants, and how these are being transposed into the future.

## ***Theoretical Background***

This project has been written using a phenomenological standpoint in its analysis of art. I believe all aspects and processes surrounding the lives of informants influence their realities. This framework takes into account the subjective realm within which creative works are made, but also the broader historical and cultural transitions that envelop the lives of the informants. Furthermore, there is also an intersubjective dimension to be taken into account; as Belting contends, "research in art should also look into the artist's own artistic experience, as the artist is an active part of the public that addresses his work of art and, thus, contributes directly to its appreciation" (in Hainic 2011: 72). Furthermore, similarly to what Paul Crowther has contended in his *Phenomenology of Visual Arts* (2009), the issues of 'expression' and 'representation' can be explored at a deeper level through a phenomenological approach, feeding into my interest in the subjective/intersubjective element of my informants' art. Drawing from Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*, it is argued that creativity has a 'liberating' or 'emancipatory' function;

*"Liberating subjectivity constitutes itself in the inner history of the individuals—their own history, which is not identical with their social existence. It is the particular history of their encounters, their passions, joys, [which constitute their reality]" (1978: 14).*

Taking this argument further, Sandra Newville contends that an inherent aspect of creativity is 'knowing yourself'. She argues; "Knowing yourself is where emancipation happens. It involves knowing why we feel the way we do, the need to keep evolving and growing, being true to the heart and desire to be original" (2007). In her interpretation of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1980), she discusses art as "consummatory and transcendent [requiring] the interaction of all the functions of consciousness, of thinking and feeling, to come together to attain an organic whole" (2007: 33-34). These notions

underlie the dualistic framework within which Dewey explores the idea of 'experience', which implicates both the artist and the audience in the appreciation of the aesthetic, as well as a process whereby "the factors and forces that favour the normal development of common human activities [are transformed] into matters of artistic value" (1980: 11).

The theoretical base used to analyse the phenomenon of gossip in Gozo stems from Gluckman's functionalist approach, which argues that "gossip crystallise[s] and reinforce[s] common community values, thereby furthering the coherence and unity of the social group" (in Wilson 1974: 93). In his ethnographic explorations of the topic, Gluckman found that communities are "partly held together and [maintain their] values by gossiping and scandalizing both within cliques and in general" (Gluckman 1963: 308). I have developed this argument in my project by hypothesising that gossip can function both as a unifying and a centrifugal force in Gozo, reinforcing the social cohesion of groups, whilst deepening cleavages existing in the same group. There is, again, an element of intersubjectivity to be taken into account, namely that "privacy must be considered a most critical condition of social existence, for it is the state of relations between relationships" (Wilson 1974: 101).

Lastly, the idea of tradition has been approached in a social constructivist manner, whereby tradition is theorised as local, intangible perceptions and attitudes, shared and constructed by the members of a same group. Zaner, writing about Alfred Schütz's phenomenology of social relations, remarks, "An everyday knowledge of the world is...a system of constructs of its typicality" (Zaner 1961: 75). Ideas of gender and gender roles are tied to this discourse; in his article 'Anthropology of the Mediterranean Area' (1982), David D. Gilmore discusses the position of women as a 'cultural contradiction'. He argues,

*"Women are said to be private creatures who are inactive economically. Yet there is constant evidence of the importance of female contributions to the domestic economy. The view of woman is itself dualistic: she is both madonna and whore" (1982: 180).*

These notions were reflected in several of the conversations carried out during the research period, and evident in the contrasts observed during the festas. My argument expands within these premises, and explores how tradition is negotiated as a construct that has to be challenged and preserved.

### **Methodology**

Research was carried out through conversation and daily engagement with Gozitan women, in particular with Maria, Sylvia and Diane. I visited Lucie, the Gozitan painter, in Valletta once, where I was able to see her

paintings, visit tourist sites with her, and get a different perspective of life in Malta. Participant observation was another main approach used particularly during festas, meals out and beach days with this group of women. Some informal interviews were also carried out, of which I took handwritten notes during and after conversations.

I further found support in secondary sources, such as online articles from Maltese newspapers and the recently published 100 women, 100 stories: a journey through words (2011);<sup>3</sup> the former provided access to relevant quantitative information, the latter with a comparative view of life narratives similar to those of my informants. It has to be kept in mind that this data seldom reflects Gozitan viewpoints specifically, but rather those of Malta as a whole.

### **Household and Professional Life**

It is clear that, with the passing of time, the situation of Gozitan women has transformed. However, it is important to note that the discourse describing these changes is not defined by a dichotomy where women in the past were powerless and women in the 21st century are completely emancipated. During the reflexive turn in anthropology, early feminist critics argued that,

*"although women appeared to be denied formal power and authority in the public or political sphere, they were not without any individual power...they emphasised the domestic power of women, manifested in individually negotiated relations based in the domestic sphere but influencing and even determining male activity in the public sphere" (Barnard and Spencer 2010).*

Many women in Gozo have always exerted agency in their social sphere, particularly within the private space of the household. Similarly, one of the testimonies found in 100 women, 100 stories says, "I believe restrictions are only in one's mind" (Silvio 2011: 60); another woman, protagonist of the chapter titled 'Better Late than Never', speaks of her career as an educator and her independent travels around the world, without any mention of marriage (Ibid: 92-93). These premises were confirmed during my first conversation with Diane, who does not believe that Gozitan women generally suffer from oppression; "They are the ones that call the shots in the household, they are the glue that holds the family together". Later that day, Lucie and Sylvia would explain to me that, in Gozo, the household is almost considered as a 'temple', and it is the woman's responsibility to maintain it in an orderly state. During that conversation, Lucie expressed her disapproval

for the fact that "Gozitan mothers can't let go [of their sons and daughters]". Sylvia, mother of two and now a pensioner, replied; "Children are hard work. Once women start having them, they quickly realise that work equals independence". Further, as Borg and Clark contend in their study of young Maltese women's leisure time, "employment [...] entail[s] many benefits, such as increased self-esteem, opportunities for socializing, daily structure, greater financial and psychological independence" (2007: 88). Indeed, Diane, Lucie and Sylvia have lived this experience on their skins.

Diane is a single mother, whose culinary career has reached very far considering her young age. She told me that, for a long time, she fought against her passion for food, studying to become a beautician and working in other sectors. Pursuing her vocation and opening a restaurant represent a sacrifice for her; "I've been through so much, and I've worked so hard to have what I have today. I am lucky to be able to combine passion and work. But it took me four years to get to where I am today and to be happy with what I've achieved". Together with running a restaurant and hosting cooking lessons in her house, she organises culinary tours to Sicily, as well as doing the photography for Maltese cooking magazines and, most recently, a Gozitan cooking book.

Sylvia, who has now retired, had a career as an educator, becoming the headmistress of an institution in the main Maltese island for several years. When I asked her about her profession she explained:

*"It was never meant to be a career. I always wanted to be a teacher, so before I married I worked as a teacher for two years. Then I got married and, back then, women didn't work after getting married and having kids. But then the boys grew up and I got tired of being in the house, so I went back to work; I worked and worked and then somehow became headmistress. But I never meant for it to happen, it just did! I am glad because I can say that my work was something I did for me that I created for my own sake and to make myself feel good."*

Lucie is Gozitan, although she spent part of her childhood in Canada. She studied fine arts at the University of Malta and she now works for the restoration and conservation sector in the Maltese capital, Valletta. Her passion is painting, although it is difficult to exert this talent as a profession in Malta, especially since her work "is not considered traditional enough". One day, when I asked her what she found challenging about being a Gozitan woman painter she told me, "I find it strange to even think of myself as a 'female Gozitan artist' because there aren't many...the

art world in Malta is still very male dominated". Despite this fact, she still thinks women are moving forward in Malta, and that tradition is indeed changing.

Explaining one's role as an anthropologist in the field, and to one's informants, is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks at the beginning of one's research. When I introduced myself to women, telling them I was researching women's lives in Gozo, my first questions was: "What is it like being a Gozitan woman?" The concise answer always appeared to be: "It is very difficult".

The notion that Gozitan women have a 'hard life', that they have 'suffered' or 'sacrificed a lot', was prominent in the narratives of all the women I spoke to. By extension, Diane thinks this makes women "very angry", and that some of them use this anger to get ahead in their lives. Sylvia would one day tell me, "Suffering. That's how a woman becomes responsible: through suffering".

The factor identified as the cause for women to have a hard life in Gozo is Gozo itself: its condition as the nation's smaller island is a hindrance. "[Women suffer] by being brought up in Gozo", said Diane, "there's a lack of resources, and women have to work extra hard if they want to make their lives worth living". Indeed, 'the hard life' begins with the desire to attain a higher education, with the associated need to commute to Valletta daily to attend schools at a higher level: this problem is by no means restricted to the female gender. However, as was explained by my informants, the hardships begin when one wants to start working and forming a career. Schemes to promote female entrepreneurship do exist in Malta, as shown by initiatives such as the EU funded project AMIE (Ambassadors in Malta for Increasing Women Entrepreneurs) (Il-Mara Newsletter, No. 87 2012), the organisation Malta Women in Business,<sup>4</sup> or the Malta Association of Women in Business.<sup>5</sup> An article published by The Malta Independent in 2006 states, "Five years ago only 16 per cent of the country's senior officials and managers were women. That portion is now up to 23 per cent. This government is committed to ensure the existing imbalance continues to be adjusted" (The Malta Independent 2006).

If this was a reality six years ago, it is even more so today: Maltese MP Chris Said claimed that the percentage of women's participation in the workforce "increased from 33.5% in 2004 to 41.1% last year [2011], and the number of gainfully occupied women increased by 8,200 between 2007 and 2012" (The Malta Independent 2012). Nevertheless, this is a reality that seems to be confined to the domain of Valletta, and the idea that there isn't much progress to be made in Gozo is shared by several working women on the island. I spoke to one of Diane's close friends,

Joanna, who works in Valletta for Vodafone. She expressed some chagrin for her condition. She would prefer working in Gozo, and thinks that there is enough capital (human and otherwise) to kick start industries here as well; she concludes, however, by saying that companies don't see any potential in Gozo, and thus the island remains, in her view, somewhat stagnant. I found a similar opinion speaking to a woman working in a travel agency in central Victoria:

*"We have a good life here. Except it gets difficult with jobs. In Malta I could work my way up [the work ladder] but here you never get promoted, and the business doesn't expand, it doesn't grow the same way it would on Valletta."*

In Diane's view, the government is also cautious when it promotes initiatives that make the professional world more accessible to women, or that make it easier for them to start up a business; "They [policy makers] want to promote advance in this area, but they are really careful about it because they don't want to mess up the integrity of the family". Sylvia agreed: "There is a lot of balancing to be done". According to Abela et al., "The [Maltese] woman's traditional sense of identity and fulfilment is derived mainly from a belief system focusing on the emotional well-being of the family" (2005: 17). More recently Joe Borg, a journalist writing for the Times of Malta, points out, "[Maltese] women are still vulnerable in several situations. For example, a culture that attributes marriage and family breakdown to women because they work is one of the main negative situations women still face in our country" (Times of Malta 2010b). These issues are exacerbated by the lack of 'culture' regarding women in the business world. Diane's experience starting up her restaurant is an example:

*"When I went to sign to start up [the restaurant] they thought that Joe [Diane's brother] was my husband instead of my business partner. Once a man marries, his wife will end up owning the same as him, so they usually expect her to be there to sign things off with the husband. They just couldn't understand that I was there to set up the business."*

Despite these difficulties, some women in Gozo successfully manipulate their available resources to achieve what they want; it just takes longer and, as agreed by my informants, it is "very difficult". Yet, as Maria once merrily told me, "If you can't go through the door, you go through the window. There is always a way".

### **Gossip: "A shadow you can't shake off"**

It remains unsaid yet, to an extent, it could be argued that the biggest problem for working women is that a

professional life moves them out of the private space of the household into the public sphere. In fact, Borg and Clark note, "a consequent interpretation of the code of honour should almost necessarily lead to a separation of genders, restricting women to the family network and men occupying the public sphere...Women are rather invisible in the so called 'public sector'" (2007: 77-78). In Gozo, increased visibility equals more vulnerability. Already within the ambit of one's house-keeping skills there is a fear of being criticised; "There is a lot of judgement regarding the way a woman keeps a house", said Diane. Distinctions made between one's own house and somebody else's give rise to a discourse featuring a division between the dignified self versus the unkempt other; indeed, Diane adds that this ideal of perfection is also applied to the appearance that women are expected to have:

*"Women on Gozo try to keep appearances up all the time, but I like to accept that there are days in which you just look like shit, that you don't look perfect when you've just woken up. If I took time to do my makeup and hair everyday and pay attention to what I wear I could look really great all the time. But that's not me."*

Nevertheless, according to Diane there is still an element of privacy that can be safeguarded within one's household,

*"Keeping the household together [...] is a lot of work and people will judge you if your house is not well kept [...] When a Gozitan is invited into another Gozitan's house they will show them the living room and the dining room, but never the bedroom or the kitchen, never the private spaces where things might not be perfect."*

Sylvia and Lucie would also comment on this aspect of living in Gozo, telling me about an old local proverb that says, "You can have as many friends as you like but don't bring them to your house". Sylvia remembers how one of her mother's fears was neighbours' envy; "If someone came to your house and noticed that you were a little better off, they would get jealous, and that's when the gossip began".

The issue of reputation and gossip was brought up by most of my informants as one of the primary concerns one faces as a Gozitan. In Diane's narrative, 'being strong' also meant not being intimidated by rumours, to not shy away from developing one's life beyond the role of a housewife, just for fear of being judged. There was also general consent that gossip is somewhat of a local pastime, especially for non-professional women; Diane stated, "Women's role is to run the household and take care of their children.

They don't do anything; it is always the same every day". A woman I met during one of Diane's cooking lessons, who opened a spa in Gozo seven years ago, commented, "People gossip on Gozo because there are no other diversions or attractions". Such remarks were made in conjunction with the suggestion that gossip is a coping mechanism; "A way to keep oneself afloat, to feel better about oneself", adds Diane. This is not dissimilar to what Peter J. Wilson points out: gossip is a "technique of communication [used] in defence of [someone's] own good name, and to attack or defend the good name of others" (1974: 101).

Undoubtedly, gossip also seems to inflict a degree of social control in several women's lives, particularly women that do not assume a passive household role. Lucie, who is to an extent subverting the lifestyle of 'typical Gozitan women', relates the following episode;

*"You can't get away with anything here, people will always know. I was driving away the other day, I had parked in front of a nearby house. I scraped the front of my car on the sidewalk, but I didn't check what had happened and drove off. Later, while in my house, I had the window open and I heard people on the street talking about how they had seen me ruining that person's sidewalk...I just wanted to say, 'I am right here, I can hear you!'"*

I was struck by this statement, a point of view which was later reflected in one of Lucie's paintings; the canvas was covered with the shapes of eyes, staring out of a tree trunk, against a dark background, in a powerful, bright, almost neon, green. Of this particular piece she commented, "And these could be the Gozitan eyes...always looking at you". To some degree, this instant reflects aspects of Martin Heidegger's philosophical agenda, construing visual art as "[an important embodiment] of Being and reality understood in the most general ontological senses" (Crowther 2009: 3). Lucie's work, appreciated through the lens of phenomenology, becomes a narrative about herself, and about Gozo, for "visual artworks embody complex relations between the human subject and its objects of perception, knowledge and action" (Ibid: 9).

It seems self-consciousness also permeates the professional world. During a visit to Malta, Rúna Magnúsdóttir, a prominent Icelandic woman entrepreneur, noted that "the Maltese were industrious but very conscious of how others perceived them" (Times of Malta 2011). According to Diane, this is because people always remember each other's mistakes, and even the mistakes made by family members before them;

*"In a place like Gozo people will know what you have done, and the mistakes you've made will always be associated to you and your family [...] no one forgets. If a girl has her*

*boyfriend and she starts to sneak out at night with him, people will start gossiping, and they will start to make comments about her family; they will probably say, 'She is just like her mother'. It is a shadow that you can't shake off."*

At a later instance, I talked to Diane about my experience living in Mexico City, in particular, about the safety issues that are increasingly constraining people's lifestyles there. I told her that it is a different way of "watching one's back"; in my case, not because I am scared of gossip, but because I often feel in danger of being a victim of crime. Diane was understanding, but she cut me off; "What women do to each other on Gozo is still a crime. It is a manipulation of your well-being in a different way. Even if they don't steal something from you, they steal your privacy. They make you feel insecure".

Traditions shift with the course of time, through the interplay of numerous social developments. Kevin Birth argues, "Although there are clear differences between writing history, maintaining oral traditions, and remembering events, the relationships between these different techniques of reconstructing the past are dense" (2006: 173): there is a degree of complexity involved in defining tradition and conceptually constructing how it is to be preserved. Birth further contends that "the past in the present structures the reproduction of knowledge and subjectivity, as much as present concerns can shape the past" (Ibid: 186). Is it possible that gossip in Gozo acts both as a unifying and a centrifugal social process, in the context of local tradition?

Amongst the older generations, both male and female, there was wide agreement that change is occurring rapidly in Gozo. On a day out with Sylvia and her Maltese friend Laura, we discussed the factors that have caused this 'loss of tradition'. For these two women, the moment during which social transformation could be most clearly perceived was during the advent of television on the island, in 1958. Both women have fond memories of this time period; Sylvia claims her family was the first to own a television set in Gozo. Nevertheless, coupled to these innocent reminiscences, there are mixed feelings about the influence that television spread in Gozo—some of it positive, like the opportunity if offered of learning Italian and English, some of it less beneficial, like the arrival of the 'wrong role models', particularly in the present era.<sup>6</sup>

As previously stated, reputation plays a significant role in defining one's status in Gozo; the choices one makes are consequently, and often, viewed as either traditional or transgressing. Sylvia's choice of going back to work after

her sons grew up might have been controversial at the time; Diane's choice of breaking off a five year engagement was cause for outrage; and Lucie's lack of desire to devote less time to her passion, in favour of becoming a mother, is shared amongst several other Gozitan women I spoke with. These choices have consequences; it is a shadow you can't shake off. By contrast, other women follow a more 'traditional' role, taking care of their homes and children.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not this decision is more considerate in regards of tradition is hard to determine; it is perhaps wise to listen to the words of Sylvia on having a family and a career—"There is a lot of balancing to be done". Tradition is not necessarily better preserved because a woman decides not to work, and a working woman can transmit the 'appropriate' values to her family regardless of her career. Undoubtedly, if the conventional Gozitan woman is constructed as a modest, stay-at-home wife, there is indeed a visible change of this trend taking place, manifested in what is viewed as a 'rebellion' from part of younger generations. Diane's perspective, shown through her photography, is a reflection of this social pattern—that women are tired and 'angry' of being 'silent'. Developing professionally and adopting new attitudes and fashions are, largely, ways in which women have been able to 'break' the silence. At the beginning of this article, I mentioned my observations of young women's attire at Kercem's festa. My curiosity about this phenomenon led me to ask informants what they thought about it, and why girls have adopted non-traditional fashion to attend traditional events. Many of them seemed to convey it is an attention-seeking behaviour, giving easy access to underage drinking and other, less pleasant, situations such as teenage pregnancy, a very real problem taking place in the Gozitan context. An article written this year on the Times of Malta talks about this issue, demonising the words 'modern' and 'progressive'. The media is also implicated in this narrative;

*"One comes face to face with depersonalised and recreational information promoting sex as romantic and exciting; trends to reduce sex, also pre-marital, to something commonplace; and distorted individualistic concepts of freedom, perhaps in an ambience lacking basic values" (Times of Malta 2012).*

Aware that these are indeed powerful factors at play, I would argue, further, that these particular behaviours could be associated with a wish to be heard and seen, to be part of the wider context of the world and not be limited to the constraints of Gozo, as maintained by Diane. Because the clothes are in such disaccord with the ideal of 'tradition', they are immediately deemed subversive, and since more and more girls and women are adopting this

trend, it may very well be that this kind of fashion could become the norm. This is the centrifugal (exclusionist) force of gossip at play, which moves individuals away from the traditional nucleus of this social group. As assumptions about the unknown are made by older generations, they are also dealt with through hostile means.

Thus, it is not unnatural that a discourse in which tradition is looked upon with some nostalgia also exists amongst several Gozitans. Some instances of 100 women, 100 stories envision a lost past laden with values: "Nowadays I feel that people are abusive of freedom. Families no longer stay together, while some children are given house keys at a very young age, as well as given the freedom they're not yet ready to handle" (Silvio 2011: 41); "I don't think that today's parents exercise enough control" (Ibid: 25).

While some young women find different means to part from, and challenge, what they perceive to be a stifling social atmosphere, others try to return to the roots of tradition—some by abiding to old customs, including gossiping as a 'unifying' force,<sup>8</sup> others by more creative means, as will be discussed in the next section.

### ***Passion, art and creativity***

*"Passion is something that has dominated my existence [...] I have always believed that passion should be expressed and lived to the full, filling both you and those around you with happiness"—'The Actress' (Silvio 2011: 81).*

As my research progressed, I increasingly found that a large part of my informants who had a professional life were also involved in some artistic occupation. One night, during a dance show put on in Victoria, I saw one of Diane's photographic subjects, who is a school teacher, on the stage taking one of the main roles. I spoke to a lawyer working in Gozo whose out-of-hours passion is ballet; she owns a dance school. She is also the childhood friend of one of Diane's sisters, who works as a hairdresser and has been a ballerina since she was eight years old.

Yet, there is also the issue of creativity in one's profession. Besides her artistic talent behind the camera, Diane's cooking requires daily inspiration—the blackboard at the restaurant displays a different specialty every day, always put together using ideas of seasonality, aesthetics and local and foreign influences.<sup>9</sup> Food itself is also the subject of countless photographs taken by Diane, where colour and composition strike the viewer instantly. The same can be said about the woman who opened the SPA in Gozo; the main feature of her beauty treatments was aromatherapy, and she explained the philosophy behind these practices as a very creative and inspired process, definitely something

that could be deemed 'an art'.

Following these considerations, I began to think about Sylvia's narrative, and how it could fit the discourse on the interconnectivity between passion, creativity and the subversion of tradition—when I spoke with Lucie and Diane, it was easier to make this link. After some reflection, I concluded that Sylvia's passion, the profession she dedicated her life to, was a creative process: a successful educator presumably needs considerable enthusiasm and dexterity to perform their job adequately. Her art was teaching, whilst her career challenged tradition at a time when married women did not typically pursue a professional life.

In her previous remarks about her life as a working woman, Sylvia concluded that her career, regardless of how unexpected the achievement, was an accomplishment she had built—indeed, created—for herself. The notion that there is a parallel between the impalpable creation of Sylvia's lifework and her sense of self-accomplishment is ubiquitous. Indeed, I was curious about Sylvia's experience as a retired woman: to an extent, I speculated retirement caused a reversal of her past role, from professional woman to housewife, once more. I rapidly dismissed this view the day I was invited for lunch to her house; as we entered the door I noticed the table was set and something heating on the stove—her husband had made everything ready for the occasion. Talking to him that afternoon, I noticed his admiration for Sylvia's unconventional mentality. In his account of meeting her when they were young, one of his initial remarks was, "When I met Sylvia, I thought she was Maltese". He perceives Gozitan women to be rather close-minded, indeed, mostly able to fulfil the typical roles assigned to them by tradition. I was slightly surprised by this comment, as Sylvia had assumed this role until their sons grew up—evidently, being a young housewife never posed any restrictions on Sylvia's intellectual interests.

That Sylvia had, in some way, transgressed the model of a 'traditional Gozitan woman' in the past was undeniable. Nevertheless, the question still remained about how her role had evolved after retirement. Making the assumption that this had led to a role reversal—from unorthodox to more traditional—I enquired about any new pastimes she had acquired recently: "I go to art history lessons in the winter. And to pottery classes as well".

To an extent, this answer reflected a return to tradition through art—the inverse of what Diane and Lucie achieve in the fulfilment of their own creativity. In 'Understanding the Individual Craftsperson', Kathryn Lichti-Harriman contends;

*"the range of craft practices in society is valuable because nuances of production and skill are highly variable.*

*Makers [...] help us understand social-cultural discourses that arise from the conflicts between two different ways (or modes) of being creative" (2007: 2).*

This notion seems to apply to Sylvia's newfound creative outlet; in her explanation of the pottery lessons, she emphasized the importance she attributed to being able to have something in one's life that "you can call your own", as a direct result of one's skills and to attest for personal creativity. Whereas before Sylvia's 'mode of being creative' was teaching, now it is making ceramics—I believe this reflects a tension between subversion and compliance with tradition, whilst seeking self-fulfilment through one's creativity. And, although Sylvia's art is not created with the intention of displaying it publicly, like Diane's or Lucie's, her career had an important public element to it.

One day, Maria and Sylvia had a disagreement: Maria claimed it was time for Sylvia to learn to drive properly, so that she wouldn't depend on others or public transport to get around. Sylvia refused this idea saying, "I would want to learn just to be able to say that I did, but I am not going to be driving around at my age". In refusing this kind of 'independence', she immediately added,

*"I don't care about learning these kinds of things at my age now. I prefer doing the pottery lessons we take in the winter. Of course I know that I don't make masterpieces out of the clay but there is something about clay that has always fascinated and attracted me."*

In this discussion, the idea that there needs to be something palpable, or visible, that can account for one's skill was prevalent in Sylvia's discourse.<sup>10</sup> Here, I find 'always' to be the operative word in Sylvia's statement, conveying a yearning that had perhaps been previously suppressed, as well as the desire to turn towards a more manual occupation, indeed, to develop a more 'traditional' talent. In one of the chapters of 100 women, 100 stories, we find a similar narrative, "Now I am a retired lady who has started to enjoy her passion for the arts. I have written some poems [...] and have also started making jewellery" (Silvio 2011: 93).

One final comment can be made about Sylvia's new interest; in a recent paper by Reitzes and Mutran, George H. Mead's theory on "roles as a set of symbols" is discussed;

*"[in] Mead's theory of time [...] not only do experiences of the present influence our understanding of the past (symbolically reconstructed past and implied objective past), but that past social structures influence the choices and opportunities available in the present (social*



*structural past), and symbolic interpretations of the past motivate action in the present (mythical past)" (Maines, Sugrue and Katovich in Reitzes and Mutran 2006: 335, emphasis added).*

Reitzes and Mutran's paper provides a sociological analysis of the implications retirement has on individuals; they explain employment as a source of identity and self-worth, further arguing that "it is not role occupancy itself but an active individual who selects the social meanings that provide the reference for self-identification" (Ibid). Sylvia's handicraft embodies a 'mythical past', within which there is a new identity to be discovered and explored: a traditional role of sorts, which had been dormant in previous years.

In his tracing the history of philosophical anthropology, John Michael Krois maintains that "Philosophical anthropology shifted the focus typical of modern philosophy from the abstract notion of 'mind' to embodied human beings, positioned in a world in a particular place and time" (2005: 558). He discusses Cassirer's view of man as a 'symbolic animal' and, subsequently, that "social activity [is] a form of symbolic interaction" (Ibid: 559). Most importantly, it is relevant to note that, "Cassirer claimed that symbolism served the end of human self-liberation, liberation from fear, repression, and ignorance" (Ibid: 568).

I believe this notion is very much present in Diane's photography and Lucie's paintings, but also in other creative, professional and artistic endeavours sought by other informants. The narrative offered by Anna, the Gozitan lawyer/ballet dancer, conveyed the parallel between her own creativity and self-liberation; although she has been married for eight years, she just recently had her first son, under the influence of her husband's awakened sense of "fatherly instinct". She told me, "I didn't want to study so hard [to become a lawyer] and then not do anything with it". She also told me she now spends less time teaching at her dancing school, and expressed her chagrin for the lack of career opportunities in this ambit, other than teaching. Borg and Clark's analysis is centred on this situation; "young married women in Malta experience a substantial decrease in their leisure time once they become mothers" (2007: 74). This seems to be a widely held notion, and it appears as if any activity which does not relate to a woman's motherly duties is seen as wasteful or luxurious;<sup>11</sup> talking with Lucie, we touched upon the subject of her not having many acquaintances who could relate to her work;

*Lucie: "It's true that sometimes you can feel isolated on Gozo; none of my female friends are artists or interested*

*in art. People say I paint because I have no children."*

*Me: "As if you had nothing better to do..."*

*Lucie: "Exactly. But when I do something I want to dedicate myself to it one hundred per cent; when I studied, I gave it all to my studies, when I work I am completely immersed, and when I paint I want to be constant, to see a project through. Then I realise the things I also want to dedicate my time to, like being with [my husband] or my family, and I also want to devote myself to that completely. In that sense I could be considered a 'traditional Gozitan woman..."*

To an extent, the idea of symbolism conveyed by Cassirer contrasts the social forces mentioned by my informants. For example, the painting of the 'Gozitan eyes' mentioned at an earlier instance negatively depicts a social activity (gossip); this is perhaps a cathartic action. One of the most prevalent issues touched upon when talking with Lucie about her paintings and exhibits, was the fact that her work "isn't considered traditional enough": "I don't care about landscapes; I've painted about two in my life but I didn't like them".

As in any other artist's work, there has been a shift in Lucie's art; her current paintings predominantly depict trees, covered in indistinct faces and featuring womanly shapes, suggesting a blurred demarcation between life and death. The female motif is salient—this has to be emphasized.

*"I never thought I would start painting women. When I see the trees they just look like women to me. When I saw the first tree I got inspired and drew what I saw [the shape of a woman]. I look at them and I see a face, an arm, curves, and it all looks female to me. For instance, the one [painting] with the woman with her legs spread [during childbirth], when I saw the tree I just had to get home and start painting it. My friends were quite shocked with that one."*

It is not scientific to base a conclusion on speculation, and my interpretation of Lucie's paintings remains as such—a speculation. Yet, the notions conveyed by most of my informants were strongly felt in these paintings; being a Gozitan woman is very hard. The figures expressed a yearning to be free of old ties, the pain of motherhood, and the loss of a friend, as well as the face of hope, timidly peeking out its gaze amidst new-born leaves. I cannot speak about Lucie's passion, yet I take the liberty to speak about what it communicated to me, and the thoughts those paintings provoked did not conform to the gender stereotype spoken of in Gozo. If landscapes are the

traditional form of Maltese art, Lucie cannot, indeed, be categorised as a 'traditional Gozitan artist'.

Diane's photographic exhibition was, in the words of Sylvia, considered somewhat of a "revolutionary event", despite the nostalgic hints of a Gozitan past—suggested in some of the portraits through the appearance of lace-work cloth garments. In particular, one portrait, the detail on Quartet #4, was evocative of a particular tradition. It shows the image of a young woman standing at a door's threshold—in the background, an old man is busy in front of a sewing machine and, behind him, there is a mannequin with a model of a man's suit. Of this photograph Diane said,

*"He is one of the last dress makers on Gozo, and he lives close to my house; I see him every day when I pass [his business]. That photo represents the old and the new generations, and the traditions that are being lost with the older generation. In this photo I wanted to show what was in the past, of which we still have glimpses of now in the present, but which we won't have any more in the future. He is the ever present then, the fading now and what we will be missing tomorrow."*

Although Diane clearly has an awareness of the changing social trends occurring on Gozo, her photographs reject several Gozitan conventions. Some depict the desire to not be judged—many of the portraits show the subjects covering their faces. The most striking shots showed the defiant stares of all these women, young and older; a girl looked up from a sitting position, holding a pair of scissors about to cut a lock of her hair, her feet up on a table—"She represents rebellion. I asked her to put up her feet on the furniture, the worst kind of disrespect in a house that isn't yours".

A photograph contains more than a thousand words could speak, or so people say. Diane's pictures converse with the audience, and tell us that beyond the images there are also voices, no longer afraid to speak and eager to challenge conventions. According to Lichti-Harriman, women's art displayed in galleries (rather than closed shops) is separated from the realm of 'hobby', attributing it with a degree of legitimacy and agency, attained through the artist's intention: "intention to create may be willed by a human maker, but agency also originates and returns to the human and non-human products of this creativity" (2007: 3). Furthermore, the view that "a Western artist may express in symbolic form ideas of a challenging, even revolutionary, nature which his society could not otherwise tolerate" (Coote and Shelton 1996: 17) is applicable to the impact that Diane's photography had

in Victoria. Phenomenology is relevant here; as Mikael Pettersson argues, photographs provide "epistemic access to what they are of" (2011: 191). They imbue on audiences a sense of 'proximity' to the images, intertwining the subjectivities of the artist with those of the viewers. Photographic representation enables them to understand the artist's reality, and images become 'depictive traces' which, in turn, offer audiences the aforementioned sense of 'proximity' (Ibid: 193).

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It is thus in Sylvia's, Lucie's and Diane's move into the public sphere that their passions become legitimate in the Gozitan context, challenging conventions by rejecting constraints otherwise imposed on them due to their status as Gozitan women. Passion, here, is a voicing of one's interests and the expression of one's talents. Art and creativity complement their professional lives, beautifying their careers.

### **Conclusion: compositions of the future**

On my last day in Gozo, I spent the afternoon at Maria's house by the beach, as usual. Diane's seven-year-old daughter, Elena, was also there, chatting away and showing me her collection of seashells. She grabbed a plate and rapidly placed the seashells in an orderly manner, a composition that she was evidently proud of, and aware that I was impressed by the arrangement she proceeded to tell me about each shell and why she had placed it in such or such manner. I had noticed her creative games in other occasions; her mum's work obviously being an influence, I had seen her arranging her breakfast foods in particular ways when we had cooking lessons at her house; she helped Diane by chopping vegetables at the restaurant; she had very strong foundations in what she thought were good or bad foods for her and why. She was definitely not at all convinced about some of the dishes her mother presented to customers as delicacies. She had created her own notions about what she liked, and how she would present these tastes to others. Her obvious talent and knack for compositions was clear in adorns she made with seashells and collages, as well as the games she played on her portable videogame console.

Elena will, like my informants, grow up to be a Gozitan woman, and at her already young age she is exploring her inspirations and making things to represent them. A seed containing a very particular tradition has been planted around her, and doubtlessly she learns from her mum, her grandmother, and all the other women that she engages with daily. Possibly, her life as a Gozitan woman will not be a difficult one; perhaps, she will be able to go through the door, rather than having to climb through the window.

Elena is receptive of those around her; nevertheless, there is another point of view on sociality that can be used to assess this case study. Christina Toren has developed a theory on childhood development that takes into account the idea of 'human autopoiesis', whereby a person constitutes him or herself as a function of their position in a particular place and time, and in relation to the intersubjective experience they have of other people around them (2003: 223). She notes that "others structure the conditions of existence that are lived by the child but...they cannot determine what the child makes of them" (Ibid), and further, that "A child's ideas are related to, but do not precisely mirror, those of its peers and seniors" (1993: 466). Prior to becoming familiar with this theory, I had not paid much attention to the way children constitute their own reality, taking for granted that they learn from adults. In observing Elena's playing behaviour, I began to understand this concept, and indeed, cannot this notion be applied to the behaviour of the women I engaged with in my research?

Arguably, Diane has similar notions to those of Toren; I asked her what she hoped for Elena and her future, what she aspired for her to be. She told me, "Anything that she wants. That is not for me to decide or make her decide". And thus, the future begins to compose itself, driven by the force of self-nourished passion.

### ***Appendix: reflections and considerations for future research***

July 2012 was the first time I stepped into the field as a social scientist; inevitably, there are several aspects of my research which I wish could have been different, and my methodological practices can only be described as inexperienced.

In the first place, the brevity of my stay enabled me to only fulfil the role of an observer. Consequently, I was not enmeshed in the local discourse of gossip in the same way as my informants are; as Gluckman contends, "the outsider cannot join in gossip" (1963: 312). I collected informants' narratives and observed the process as it unfolded in daily life, but always from a marginal standpoint. This reality was pointed out to me several times during my stay on Gozo: during our first conversation, Diane told me that as a foreigner I had a much higher chance of being invited into people's homes than a local would—no one fears the judgement of a tourist. Similarly, the time I forgot to take my bathing suit on a day trip to Mgarr ix-Xini, Sylvia and her friend Laura persuaded me, "Swim in your underwear if you want, no one knows you here, no one will care". Distinguishing myself from the average tourist or visitor, and defining myself as an anthropologist within my new

circle of social relations was perhaps one of the greatest challenges I faced during my time in Gozo.

Equally challenging was gathering data that reflected the reality of the average women living in Gozo. As Maria pointed out to me, I was not engaging with women living common lifestyles; I was talking to people who led privileged and unordinary lives. It is perhaps for this reason, and for the easiness with which I could communicate with my informants, that I have been able to put this research project together. The process would have been different had I been faced with more reserved women who had no command of English, a strand of the Gozitan population that is absent in my ethnography.

By the same token, my bias came from the admiration I developed for my informants. During a conversation with Marc Vanlangendonck, during which I expressed the positive impressions I had of my findings, he told me: "Just remember: one person cannot change culture". My aim in writing this short ethnography was to portray what I perceived to be a revolutionary social process stemming from three different individual histories, yet Marc's statement made me take a step back: I realised that my aim was too ambitious and, although fascinating, three life narratives are insufficient to make a case for a cultural revolution.

The final problem I encountered arose during the writing up stages of this project, during which I became apprehensive of the way I have portrayed my informants, and whether or not I have done their voices justice through my writing. Considering the successful communicative bridges I established, and have maintained, with these women, I am uneasy about having used the language of my discipline to depict their lives. I am increasingly convinced that the subjects of an ethnographic study should see themselves reflected in this kind of publication: the purpose of a good and fair ethnography is defeated if informants cannot identify with the text written about them. This concern has been voiced by some present academics, such as Paloma Gay y Blasco; "although ethnographies deal with the lives of informants, informants are kept out of the conversation of ethnography" (2012: 1).

In my considerations for further research, this is a problem I would first and foremost want to tackle, primarily by obtaining some command of the Maltese language. Similarly to Gay y Blasco's current ethnographic project, the writing up process would be carried out in the company of my informants, who would be able to add much more to the text than what can be achieved through a mere academic interpretation derived from observation.

It would be equally important to engage more exhaustively with the 'common' women of Gozo, particularly in

peasant families. It is equally relevant to move away from the construct of peasant lifestyle as a consumer good of the tourist sector, like the one provided by the Ager Foundation in Xewkija. This kind of activity promoting an image of the 'traditional Gozitan life' does not offer a holistic perspective of how the social world of the island has changed, as it seems to reflect the notion of peasant life as a historically isolated phenomenon.

My position as a woman researching other women also has to be questioned; although my research did not focus on a cross-gender analysis of the Gozitan community, it is nonetheless clear that the data for my project would not have been as readily accessible to a male anthropologist. Finally, the theoretical basis for the project should be more overarching and more relevant to the local context: at this stage, it is my belief that the theoretical data available to me is very limited for this case study.

### **Acknowledgements**

*I would like to thank my family, whose support has been fundamental in nourishing my anthropological endeavours at this early stage.*

*My gratitude also goes to Dr. Marc Vanlangendonck for his constant advice and invaluable suggestions during my time in Gozo. Thanks also to all the other members of staff at the Anthropology Field School, who were always helpful and eager to discuss our projects.*

*Above all, thanks to all the Gozitan women that made my research possible, and who have now become the soul of this project. Your kindness, generosity and genuine nature are infinite and an inspiration: meeting you has been an unimaginable fortune, and I look forward to seeing you again in the near future.*

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Festa celebrating the Madonna tas-Sokkors (Our Lady of Perpetual Help), in the town of Kerzem, July 8th 2012.

<sup>2</sup> All informants' names have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> Collection of memoirs from Maltese women living in retirement homes.

<sup>4</sup> <http://maltawomeninbusiness.webs.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mawb.eu/>

<sup>6</sup> This notion was also fervently expressed by a local man who dined with the Anthropological Field School group on 13th July 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Lucie told me, "You could say that my sister is definitely your typical Gozitan woman. She is younger than me and she already has a family; she moved very close to my parents. She doesn't want to work in Malta and neither does her husband..."

<sup>8</sup> There are other reasons for which I consider gossip a unifying force; it is a way of excluding and including individuals, as well as creating rivalry amongst villages, particularly during festa season. It seemed clear to me that it is a mechanism that also feeds into a specific identity, and within which dichotomies can be created by individuals—divisions which, of course, touch upon the discourse of modern indecency vs. respectable traditional values.

<sup>9</sup> One weekend, Diane took a group of us from the Field School for a culinary trip to Sicily. During one of our cooking lessons, we got taught how to make sweet and sour aubergines; the week after the trip, one of the specialties at the restaurant was a salad—the main component: sweet and sour aubergines, Sicilian style.

<sup>10</sup> Lichti-Harriman further argues, "Makers act on the physical world, investing objects with the intellectual, emotional, or spiritual processes they feel bubbling inside. In doing so they create an external object that represents their psycho-spiritual state and is their own intellectual and physical property" (2007: 2).

<sup>11</sup> "Married women typically fit their leisure activities around their responsibilities" (Borg and Clark 2007: 79).

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