

THINKING OF
STIGMA AND HOW
WOMEN* CREATE
KNOWLEDGE
ON ABORTION
WITHIN
A COLLECTIVE
SPACE

Liza Caruana-Finkel
(Voice for Choice)

**This interview was made on Friday,
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by Alexandra Ivanciu and Jolanta Nowaczyk

Hi Liza! OK, we would like to start by asking you to introduce yourself.

So most of what I do is concerning abortion I would say. I'm currently doing a PhD at the University of Liverpool and the focus is on abortion in Malta. And I've also been involved in other research projects on abortion, mainly about Malta. Apart from that, I volunteer with Abortion Support Network on the helpline team. So helping people across Europe access abortions, including people in Malta and Poland, and other places. And I'm also part of Voice for Choice, which is the pro-choice coalition in Malta. It's made up of a number of groups, and organizations, and it has grown over the years. I'm part of Moviment Graffiti (specifically the women's working group), which is one of the founding members of Voice for Choice.

Could you tell us a bit more about all these pro-choice organizations which are active at the moment in Malta? How are they connected to the international ones?

So Voice for Choice was launched in March 2019 on Women's Day and it started off with a number of groups. There were a number of already existing groups basically that worked on social justice and women's rights and things like that. So groups such as Moviment Graffiti which is a leftist group, Women's Rights Foundation, and others. And then after that, some new groups started emerging, basically, and joining the coalition. So there's Doctors for Choice, there's Lawyers for Choice, and so on. So it's quite a new movement because, you know, it's only been around for four years and I feel there has been progress in this

recent time. It also brought connections with other international groups, I guess. I mean there is some collaboration and networks. So like for instance speaking at different events, where there are activists from other groups speaking. So there are some connections with broader international organizations.

And what about in the sense of support? Do you also get support from these bigger organizations?

Some activists from Voice for Choice have joined, you know, like training by IPPF and we have received funding from IPPF for instance. But Voice for Choice is not a member of IPPF. So there is, there are, yeah, some networks of support and things like that and also maybe more informal kind of connections with activists in other locations for instance. You know, for example, there are activists in Ireland who go to lots of different events and other places and they have been to the pro-choice March and rally in Malta. So there are connections that are made on an individual basis as well with individual activists. Because Voice for Choice basically is not an organization in itself. It's a coalition of other groups. So some of the groups within the coalition may have more connections with others. So for example, one of the groups within Voice for Choice is called Women's Rights Foundation. And they are closely linked with, for instance, the Center for Reproductive Rights, which is a legal organization. And then, for example, there are Doctors for Choice that have a close link with global Doctors for Choice.

How old is the pro-choice movement in Malta? Like, what was the first organization or let's say

initiative that started fighting for reproductive justice?

So the first organization that publicly took a pro-choice stance was the Women's Rights Foundation. And that was in March 2018, so one year before the launch of the coalition. And they basically said that abortion should be at least available in certain circumstances. And then a number of groups came together. So the original members of Voice for Choice are six groups. And also a few individual members. So I was one of the individual members at the time. And then following that we kind of moved to having just groups as part of the organisation. So the original members are: Women's Rights Foundation, Moviment Graffiti, Integra Foundation, aditus foundation, Men Against Violence, and Malta Humanists Association. Those were the six original ones. And then if you notice, you know, like the newer groups, they specifically work on abortion for instance, or reproductive rights. So these ones I already mentioned had already existed and they worked on other kinds of aspects, I guess, you know, migrant rights or human rights in general. And then the newer groups would have "for choice" in their names, like Doctors for Choice, Lawyers for Choice, Parents for Choice, Academics for Choice... so there are a lot of groups that are for choice, who are focusing specifically on this.

And do you know maybe more or less how many people are involved in the Voice for Choice in total?

It's difficult to say because groups work in different ways. Organizations that had already existed may have different, smaller

working groups within their organization and not all of them are officially involved in any of the abortion activism. There are some people who are very vocal or visible, but there are others who are part of that but not visible. They want to be members, but they don't want to show themselves in a way. So it's difficult to say.

And how many groups? I think we have about 14 at the moment: the original 6 and then Doctors for Choice, Young Progressive Beings, Lawyers for Choice, Students for Choice, Parents for Choice, Grandparents for Choice, Academics for Choice, and MGRM (Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement).

It sounds really amazing. It sounds like there are a lot of things happening with this group self-organizing.

Yeah, so the one thing that Voice for Choice always does is to organize once per year as a coalition the March and Rally for Choice. The first Rally for Choice was held in September 2019, for International Safe Abortion Day. Obviously, because of COVID, there weren't any in 2020 and not even 2021. Then last year we had not just a Rally but also a March, so we went through the capital city, and then we had a Rally in another place.

So how is this like, how are you organizing this alliance? Is it like the groups do their own activities? Do you have meetings with all of you? How does it work?

Yeah, we do have meetings across the whole coalition. Obviously, not all the members come, it would be a bit too much. So for instance a few members from each

group would be present and we do have meetings like that. In terms of other events... the point also with Voice for Choice is that each separate group can organize their own events. Some groups organize talks or do social media campaigns. So it could also be like a separate group taking on the lead and doing something specific.

Let's talk about the direct help itself. Malta is the country with the most restrictive abortion law in Europe. What kind of help can people who need abortion expect from the pro-choice organizations in Malta?

So people in Malta either travel abroad to access abortions or they can order abortion pills online from Women on Web or Women Help Women. When they need to travel abroad, if they need financial assistance or anything like logistical information, they usually contact Abortion Support Network, which is obviously not a local organization, but I just think it's relevant to mention here. So they can get financial support, but also just information on which clinics to go to and things like that. When they need to get abortion pills, if they know where to go, they can obviously go directly as well.

In 2020, a new service was launched, it's called FPAS Malta, Family Planning Advisory Service. It was launched during the pandemic by three organizations basically: Doctors for Choice, which is part of Voice for Choice, Women's Rights Foundation, which is also part of a part of Voice for Choice. There is a helpline that people can call, but they can also contact online. The helpline is for people to ask for any kind of information related to sexual and reproductive health. So the questions that they get are also about contraception,



but also obviously about abortion. And a lot of people do ask about abortion, so they basically signpost people to Women on Web or Women Help Women and Abortion Support Network and any other group that can help them. Another thing they do is they can signpost people to pro-choice professionals. So for instance, if someone wants to speak to a pro-choice gynecologist or a pro-choice psychologist or something like that, they can direct people in this way. So that is sort of more official in a way and people can get information and that kind of support.

There has been, I don't know if you've seen in the media, basically a right-wing politician or a very very small religious party has requested the police to investigate pro-choice activists who they say, assist people with abortions and that is specifically linked to FPAS. They mentioned specific people. Because as I said, FPAS was launched by the Women's Rights Foundation, Women Help Women Foundation and Doctors for Choice. So they were mentioning people in those organizations and asking the police to investigate them. Obviously, there is no law against providing information. But in a way you can say that the law can be stretched and say that if you provide information and the person has an abortion, you're assisting an abortion. So they said that they provided some evidence... This is what is going on currently.

This was exactly our next question, how dangerous is it for activists in Malta to provide information or help people to get an abortion? So the law says it's ok to give information, but it's not legal to help or assist?

I guess not specifically. And I was thinking about it recently. There is no law that says you cannot give information and there was a case law in the European Court of Human Rights related to Ireland where they voted on it. So they said that you cannot restrict information, basically, you have to give people information.

So in Malta, you're criminalized if you have an abortion yourself, so you can risk up to three years imprisonment. And anyone who assists in an abortion is also criminalized, that is for healthcare professionals, it's up to four years in prison and they can lose their professional license.

So it says, you know, "assisting"... It's also a bit open to interpretation in a way, you know... But what I wanted to say is... I was involved in a research project in the last few years which was on the experiences of health and social care professionals in Malta in providing abortion-related care. This was not about asking for anything that was illegal, this was within the legal framework. For example, pre-abortion care would be a provision of information mostly. And it was very clear that people are really scared. So this is not activists specifically, some of them were activists, but not necessarily and especially those who are not activists. There wasn't as much as understanding of what they can do, and what they cannot do because there are no guidelines and there was a lot of fear-mongering. So for instance, doctors are told when they're in medical school that you cannot provide information because that's illegal. So if your superiors are telling you, you're going to believe it even if you're not sure if it's true. So a lot of people are scared about even providing information because they're worried that they're doing something illegal.

What is the difference between Poland and Malta is that in Poland ending your own pregnancy is still legal and in Malta you can go to prison or face the court because of that.

Nevertheless, people are ordering pills from WoW and WHW and I saw that these numbers are quite increasing in the last year. And I saw that no one faced court or had any issues¹. I don't know if this is the right information. Could you tell us something about this?

In terms of the numbers, we can't really tell how many people have abortions. But there are exact statistics from Women on Web. Women Help Women don't give the exact statistics, but obviously, we have to add those as well. The estimate was that at least one person a day has an abortion with pills in Malta. And I think there are some reasons why the number of pills is increasing. And I think one of them is because there is more awareness that pills exist, there is more awareness that this can happen, people share their stories anonymously... And I think because of COVID especially it made people realize that there is another way than travel.

In terms of people being criminalized, there have been people who were questioned by the police. There was a case in 2014, which I mean wasn't that long ago, there was a woman.... It was a weird case to be honest, like from what I found in newspapers, because a friend of hers gave her pills. So her friend was also, I think, criminalized, but the woman got a suspended sentence. The weird thing is that she got an ultrasound and it showed that there was no foetus. So, like, she didn't actually end her pregnancy, so I'm not really

¹ Update from 26.07.2023: a woman in Malta has been charged in court for having an abortion in June 2023: https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/123250/woman_convicted_of_abortion_suffers_from_mental_health_issues_has_abusive_partner_

sure why she got a suspended sentence. Anyway, it's a really confusing case. So yeah, maybe you can say that the law isn't as enforced as maybe in other contexts, but there's still a lot of fear around that, and people would worry. Women say that they worry about the police coming to their door and what happens if something goes wrong. And I've also heard that in hospitals, women are now being asked more than before if they took anything.

What is the situation of a person who goes to the hospital after ending the pregnancy by pills? Do the hospitals actually share this information with the police or do they respect patient confidentiality?

So Women Help Women and Women on Web both tell people what to do in case there is an emergency. They tell people to take pills orally because if you take them orally, you cannot find any traces of them. It basically presents as a miscarriage. So they do tell people if anything happens, just tell them you had a miscarriage. If you put them in your vagina, that's a different story because you can find traces. I guess that the people are still worried and I have heard that doctors or nurses do sometimes ask, and you don't know. Maybe they ask because they just want to know the truth, the whole situation and to see how to deal with that. But there could also be people asking specifically, you know, to report them to the police. And I have heard that there was at least one case where someone, a healthcare professional, called the police about the patient because she suspected that the person took pills or something like that. So these are things that can happen, yes.

Besides the law and how restricted it is, are there any exceptions?

No, as it is now it's a total ban. There was a bill that is currently going through parliament. I don't know if you've seen it, it's called Bill 28². It's not radical at all. Basically, if it passes in its original wording it will allow abortion when the woman's life is at risk. So yeah, if she's going to really die... and if her health is in grave danger. So it's really not radical. And even then, it has faced a lot of opposition. A lot of opposition. Especially to the word "health". Because, yeah, in 2023 when you know, you think that physical and mental health should not be separated into which one is more important, there have been people who were like, we'll accept this if you just make it physical health. So there's a lot of pushback. There was a huge protest. So yeah, there isn't an exception.

But the thing is, opponents of any change will say it's not true that we let women die, no woman has ever died, and that it is allowed to do an abortion if a woman's life is at risk. The truth is, it's not in the law. So when they talk about this, they're talking about the Catholic principle of double effect. This basically means that if you end the pregnancy, but that's not your intention because your intention is to save the woman's life, then you know you're not liable. But it's not part of the law. It's just, you know, Catholic principle.

And I'm sure you've seen the case of Andrea Prudente and there was also another one some years before, of women who had to be basically taken out of the country to receive abortion care. And I'm sure there are other ones because these

² Update from 26.07.2023: Bill 28 was enacted, but in fact the law became more restrictive than originally. Voice for Choice revoked support for the Bill and also spoke against the Bill in Parliament, at the Consideration of Bills Committee.

two were ones who had citizenship of another country and insurance companies that got involved. So like if it happened to these two women, how can it not have happened to Maltese women, more local women who may not realize the situation or not have obviously the insurance companies that are able to move them to another place.

How did the pandemic affect Malta in regard to the activist work and because of the territorial restrictions?

So obviously with COVID, it became more complicated, exactly because it's an island. So to get out, you need to travel, you can't travel across land. And there was actually a travel ban and I wrote a commentary about this on how things changed because of COVID and basically, there were travel bans, so people could not leave the country. I guess maybe in very limited circumstances they could... because there is a particular story that says that one woman managed to travel abroad, but maybe because she had more money or I don't know, or she got some certificate that she was going to do some medical procedures, stuff like that. But mostly people could not travel abroad. And then this is why people resorted more to pills and to be honest, of course, people should be able to access either surgical abortion or medical abortion pills depending on their preference. But from my time on the helpline of ASN³, I kind of noticed that Maltese people mostly preferred to be in a clinical setting rather than do it with pills. I guess part of that could be because it's not something that's illegal. You're traveling abroad, just having it done, and then going back. But maybe part of that is also the

feeling of being taken care of and if anything happens you're already in a medical setting...

And the thing is with pills, there were issues as well because there were delays. So I don't know, I don't know if you've seen *Break the Taboo Malta*?⁴ It publishes abortion stories from people in Malta. So there are a number of stories from people who had abortions during the pandemic. There was a woman who said she waited for the pills for a couple of weeks. And she felt suicidal. So, you know, if people had anxiety and mental health issues, complications in terms of waiting for the pills and not knowing whether they're going to arrive or not were quite hard on them. And I'm sure this meant that some people may not have been able to access the abortions they needed if the pills arrived too late or if they never arrived. So yeah, there obviously were complications because of COVID.

But this is also when FPAS Malta⁵ launched so at least then people could get in touch and get information about abortion and other reproductive health issues.

What are the biggest obstacles you are facing now as reproductive rights activists?

So I think a big obstacle was that before the pandemic we wanted to have, you know, in-person events. It's good to have online events and be able to connect online, but it's also good to have events in person with people. So there were a number of things that could happen in person, like talks or panel discussions, events, and screenings. There's also this initiative where some activists would go out with a stand or like a table and have brochures and all of these

³ <https://www.asn.org.uk/>

⁴ <https://www.breakthetaboo.mt/>

⁵ <https://www.fpas.mt/>

things. The Rally for Choice is something that can only be done in person. So we still had events, but they had to switch online. So that was a challenge.

A lot of things have changed and even public perception is changing, like if you look at surveys, public surveys, there has been a trend of people being more accepting of the decriminalization of abortion and things like that. And usually, people who are younger or more highly educated are more likely to be in favor of abortion access. But there is still pushback, there is still social media and hateful comments that activists face. There were specific cases where the comments... There was a man who said like these women should be put together and shot in the head⁶. And one activist was even physically assaulted, she was pushed on the street⁷. So there have been these cases where people have been harassed both online and also in person.

Those are some of the challenges I can think of right now also. Sorry, I just thought of something else also. You know, some groups might not want to take on a pro-choice position or might not want to join Voice for Choice because they worry about, for instance, not getting funding or losing funding. I heard of these things happening or individual people not wanting to be publicly seen as being abortion activists because they may have repercussions at home, with family members, or at work

We have this case of one activist who's with Doctors for Choice⁸ and she's also an academic at the university. It's been



in the news. So basically it's in the case of Andrea Prudente, who has sued the Maltese government, and this activist that I'm mentioning, Isabel Stabile, was one of the witnesses. And basically, she had been transferred from one department to another in the University and she said that she was ostracised because of her views. So you know, there are kind of consequences that can happen if you present yourself as pro-choice.

How could people help? Or how could people contribute to a pro-choice organization in Malta?

I think raising awareness is important because I often find that people don't realize the situation in Malta. It's a small country and it's easy to ignore it I guess. So I think an important thing is to spread awareness - follow social media platforms of pro-choice groups. You know, there's the Voice for Choice itself, there are groups within Voice for Choice that you can spread awareness about. Also, Break the Taboo Malta where there are abortion stories from Malta. And if people want, they can donate to some of the groups that are registered organizations, so they accept funding. Voice for Choice itself is not so you can't donate directly there. But FPAS for instance as a support service accepts donations and some of the groups as well.

And just coming back to the topic of people who need abortions in Malta. How do they get to know about their options? How do you spread information in the public space, is it only online or also on the streets?

So FPAS, for instance, has a website and a social media presence. Then we also have

⁶ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/shoot-them-in-the-head-one-by-one-facebook-user-reported-to-police.714337>

⁷ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/pro-choice-activist-assaulted-by-woman-during-roadside-protest.953848>

⁸ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/university-denies-academics-transfer-motivated-prochoice-views.1018509>

this thing where different groups or different activists would write media articles. So not for social media, but there would also be in print and we'd always try to include information about how to contact FPAS. So it wasn't just online, we are also present in print media and newspapers for example.

And another thing is stickers. Stickers around the country. So stickers that are normalizing abortion and addressing stigma, but also ones that provide information like FPAS or ASN helpline numbers. And there was also a campaign where we made digital ads on bus stops, one specifically for FPAS. It was really complicated as well. We had some funding and we really wanted to do an ad on the back of the bus. We wanted to do something on the radio. And there were so many restrictions and no one wanted to do something with abortion. It's annoying because the back of the bus, they were worried about being vandalized, but they did something like that for anti-abortion groups. What they agreed on was digital ads because they're less likely to be vandalized. They're not fixed and so and it wasn't you know "abortion is normal" and stuff like that. It was "if you need help this is the number to call". So I guess they thought it was less controversial or whatever... The ads were also close to the university or to hospitals. So there were physical spaces where these numbers were shared. We also had one from Voice for Choice that had a message about decriminalizing abortion.

Since you mentioned the destigmatisation of abortion and I know this is one of your topics of research... I'm curious about your methods and strategies, what are you implementing to destigmatize abortion?

I feel like when you notice something, you can't unnotice it. So I'm very particular about the words which are used and, you know, making sure we don't say things like the mother's life or things like that. This is something I am really focused on in terms of stigma. So I currently manage Break the Taboo Malta and its role is also to destigmatize abortion.

In recent years, I noticed that media articles, even by journalists who might be maybe pro-choice or not specifically very anti-abortion, would write in a certain language or use certain images that were very stigmatizing, like these always headless women with huge pregnant bellies. And so I would just send them this document that was produced by IPPF⁹ and the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion, a four-page document that speaks about language to use when you report on abortion and the images to use and I used to send it to them as well and I have noticed the change because sometimes people just don't realize that they're doing, they don't do it on purpose.

My PhD project is focused very much on social-cultural change. So I basically created this series of workshops that I'm doing with women from the general public in Malta. And each workshop has a number of different creative activities and also discussions on abortion. And then I also asked them to write some reflections in an online space. So I've done it with two groups so far, and I'm recruiting participants again. I feel like it's been really good because it's kind of looking at abortion beyond even the spoken words. I'm interested in thinking of stigma and thinking of how women create

⁹ <https://www.ippf.org/resource/how-talk-about-abortion-guide-stigma-free-messaging>

knowledge on abortion within a collective space as well. And in fact, my participants say that they reflected a lot on their views and it helped them process what they actually thought of abortion and they feel more convinced about their views perhaps, and after that they go on to speak to other people about abortion.

So it's my way of addressing this because I feel that through this they get to speak to others about it. It's a slower process of course, but I don't think that legal change is the only necessary thing. I think legal and social-culture change are both equally important. Because, well, first of all, you can say that one can lead to the other or in the reverse order. But also even if there's no legal change, I think we should still work on social and cultural change anyway, because that's the way at least people who do have abortions, whether legally or illegally or whatever, can at least not worry about facing the social judgment. And I think that's also relevant and important and could speed up the process of legal change as well.

Yeah, actually when you mentioned the journalist earlier, it reminds me of one of the first interviews I gave to the Polish press as an activist. And when it was out, I was really depressed because they attached a sad photo of the woman who was crying and holding her head in her hands... It was nothing about the empowering message that we are here in the Czech Republic to help.

It's slightly different but I remember one of my first interviews and it wasn't even about activism. It was about my master's project where I spoke to women who had had abortions. But basically, the image that the journalist was going to use was like a

tray of medical instruments. I was like, why? Why are you using that? It helps to talk to people... because sometimes, like when people Google abortion images, that's what they see, right? Instruments and blood and floating fetuses or really pregnant women without any heads. And when you talk to people, they do realize because they don't do it on purpose sometimes. Now Malta has had a number of events, like protests where we had pro-choice messages and badges, that's what they use now.

Can you tell us how the situation with the morning-after pills is in Malta? Are they accessible over the counter?

So the morning-after pill has only been available since 2016 through a judicial protest that was filed by the Women's Rights Foundation. This is one of the main founders of Voice For Choice. So, it has been available since then and you don't need the prescription, you can go to a pharmacy and get it, but individual pharmacists can act as conscientious objectors, and also the pharmacy itself can decide that they are conscientious objectors. So basically what this means is that not all pharmacies give the morning-after pill. There was this list made by activists when they called pharmacies or went to pharmacies to see whether they got it or not. So there's a limited number of pharmacies that would be open, for instance on a Sunday, or on a public holiday. There are a lot of public holidays in Malta. So if it happens that you need it over the weekend, it might take a while for you to get it or you'd have to go to the one pharmacy that maybe is open on a Sunday or public holiday. And the other thing is that for years it wasn't stocked

in the primary public hospital Mater Dei. So basically that means if you were a rape victim who was admitted to hospital, you'd have to get someone to go buy it in a pharmacy and then bring it to you in hospital. It is completely ridiculous. I think it became available for free there in 2020, but only for in-patients.

Do you see any positive change coming soon regarding reproductive justice in Malta?

I think I see change in different respects. When we talk about legal change, this law proposed now has to pass because it has been voted on, but of course, there is still a process and the language of the law can still change and it can become even more restrictive than it already is. If I was to think of how the law should change, I would not obviously pick this because it's ridiculous. I'd say that abortion has to be decriminalized and then there has to be service provision within the country and nothing to do with the Criminal Code. But it's still better than nothing in a way. And it could push for more change.

In terms of socio-cultural aspects, we definitely have seen a change in the last few years since we started pro-choice activism. Because you know, there are more people now who are comfortable saying that they are pro-choice and you can see it and feel it and it's getting better. And even if you look at surveys, even though some of the language in the surveys themselves is really bad. But there was a survey that asked specifically about decriminalization. So you know, if you ask people: do you agree with abortion? It's different than saying: do you agree that women should go to prison for having abortions? Because you can say: no,

Decriminalize abortion

I don't agree with abortion, but I don't want them to go to prison for having abortions. So the surveys specifically on decriminalization actually showed there is change and the younger generations are more progressive in the way they think about abortion. Not that long ago we had Malta's main LGBTIQ rights group join the coalition, which is a huge thing I think because... But first of all, they have a lot more experience than us in terms of activism because the group itself has been around since the early 2000s. So it's been around for much longer than the pro-choice movement and that's actually a question that people used to ask, how come Malta is so different in terms of like the LGBTIQ rights are so good but then abortion is so bad?

And so also the pro-choice movement itself wasn't as diverse in a way. But now with new groups being joined, like LGBTIQ groups, it'd be good to have more intersectional groups joining the coalition as well. Because sometimes there's this perception of who can be pro-choice and it's a bit limiting sometimes. There were also comments about it. You know, like this idea that women who are mothers cannot be pro-choice. So yeah, the short version is, I think there is a change in the future. There's ongoing change. There is a change in the socio-cultural dimension and also in the law.

That's something very positive to hear for the end.

I'm not very optimistic in general, as a person, but...

Yeah, but who is?

Those were all the questions we had. If you have anything that you would like to say that you feel it hasn't been said or you think it's important?

Yeah, just that: I think abortion should be available for anyone who needs it. It should be decriminalized and accessible locally without any fear of judgment, stigma or criminalization.

Thank you so much for your time. It was really great to talk with you.

Yeah, nice talking to you, and good luck with everything. I hope the exhibition goes well and I look forward to it.

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