

MARRIAGE AND RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGE IN MALTA



A theme that connects Chapters 6, 7 and 8 is the importance of the family to social life, including the dynamics of gender and sexuality that operate within them. Seen as a haven from the working world by Talcott Parsons, yet as a site of conflict by feminist sociologists, broader social trends related to the rights of women and sexual minorities often coalesce around the family and, more specifically, who can marry whom.

Debates about marriage include who can end a marriage through divorce. The right to divorce has long been seen as a feminist issue because women have historically had far fewer rights than men, particularly within marriage. In many countries, women have not been allowed to own land or vote, and British law stated for many years that it was not possible for a husband to rape his wife (see page 195). As such, the ability to divorce is a vital right for women, so that they can escape damaging relationships.

Yet marriage remains a dominant feature of almost all societies. Research shows that marriages tend to be more stable than non-married romantic relationships, even with rising divorce rates, and being able to marry is generally considered a basic human right. Relating to this, one of the major political battles of the early 21st century has been the right for same-sex couples to have full and equal access to the institution of marriage (see Brewer 2014). Indeed, the right to divorce and the right for same-sex couples to marry are two important ways marriage has expanded as an institution in the past 100 years.

The speed of change related to the family is different across many countries, yet rights for women have tended to occur significantly quicker than rights for sexual minorities (that is, for same-sex couples). Malta is one country where these rights occurred late compared to many other European countries, yet the change happened exceedingly quickly: people were only given the legal right to divorce in Malta in 2011, yet same-sex marriage became legal in 2017. This six-year difference is remarkably short. Consider, for example, that the gap between the establishment of the right to divorce and the legalization of same-sex marriage in the UK is 74 years.

Why did two significant social changes occur in such a short period of time? One answer might be the delay in legalizing divorce: that having waited so long (relative to other countries) for the right to divorce, attitudes toward same-sex relationships had already evolved. Another factor is more procedural: The wording of Malta's constitution also means that same-sex marriage could be brought in under its equal rights legislation, so did not need to go to a public referendum.

Professor Angela Abela at the University of Malta and her colleagues (2015) highlight some other reasons that likely resulted in these changes, describing a “turning point in Maltese society signalling a fast entry in [a] demographic transition” (p. 381). Unlike other countries where generational differences are stark (see Andersen & Fetner 2008), the size of Malta (with a population of just over 400,000 people) means that the younger generation are having a significant influence on the older. They write:

Given the small size of our island, we live in a face-to-face community (rather than anonymously). Such close interactions could help us make sense of the attitudes of more conservative citizens. Having been in contact

with other members in the community or indeed family members who are dear and close to them but who unlike them find themselves having to rebuild new relationships in their lives due to marriage breakdown, might have sensitized them to the need for the legislation of divorce.

As a country, Malta has certainly seen radical transformations in how families and relationships are organised. These demographic factors persist and mean that Malta may continue to provide a fascinating test-case to examine changing social dynamics in the future.

References

Abela, A., Casha, C., Debono, M., & Lauri, M.A. (2015). Attitudes about remarriage in Malta. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56, 369-387.

Andersen, R., & Fetner, T. (2008). Cohort differences in tolerance of homosexuality: Attitudinal change in Canada and the United States, 1981–2000. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 72(2), 311-330.

Brewer, P.R. (2014). Public opinion about gay rights and gay marriage. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 26(3), 279-282.