

LIVING THE CHANGE : EXPERIENCING MALTA AS A YOUNG PERSON AND A YOUTH WORKER

[Alisa Jordan](#)

Text in english

As we grow to associate activism with direct and radical action regarding a given issue, we often lose sight of how seemingly small and daily actions may prove to still be fruitful in tackling the matter at hand, although not as overt and clear as protesting or speaking out publicly. Indeed, it is through this lifestyle approach to activism that Laura Rio¹, a young person and youth worker with Aġenzija Żgħażaġh (AŻ), seeks to make a difference.

Being a youth worker as well as a young person provides Laura with a unique perspective on the actuality of Maltese youth climate, experiencing as well as dealing with the matters which she finds concerning. Being passionate about discrimination based on gender, sexuality and cultures, as well as overall matters of inclusivity, Laura feels motivated to act on them as these matters are ones she directly experienced and dealt with.

When asked about how she can tackle these issues and make her voice heard, her approach takes on a more holistic and organic nature. Indeed, it is through her work and daily life that she seeks to make the impact she wants to see. "It is through action that you can create changes", says Laura, "when seeing that something is not right, do something about it". Indeed, she outlines the importance of being active, leaving behind a bystander and commenter role and becoming an active participant in matters she feels passionate about. However, she says, "it is also important to choose your battles, to soberly assess your capacities and take on matters on which you know you can help, rather than try and reach heights and enact changes which are beyond your reach. Sometimes, all it takes is a seed to be planted within someone's mind and it may sprout, bloom and create small but lasting change".

Dinner conversations, daily acts of kindness and an overall positive attitude can create change, no matter how small. By being active and vocal in our daily lives, we lead by example, and seeking to educate those around us on matters on which they may lack knowledge, is of great importance. In the context of youth work, this approach allows Laura to be a model for the young people she encounters, allowing them to witness the capacity that they have and potentially motivate them to actualise it.

Yet, taking a step back and keeping an open and flexible mind is also of great importance. Humbly, Laura says that she is still learning her way of dealing with certain matters, still finding her voice and approach to facing issues which arise in both her personal as well as professional life. "Allowing yourself to be educated by those around you, ensures a greater level of empathy and understanding of the diverse situations some may be going through. It also enhances your skill set to deal with these matters head-on".

Furthermore, by giving an opportunity to take charge and voice their concerns to young people she works with, they can feel comfortable in standing up for themselves and others in the future and therefore prepared for life when they will need to act on matters which concern them. Indeed, it is the role of the youth worker to foster individual agency within young people, encouraging voluntary participation as well as allowing them to take the lead in activities. "This is different from a formal education setting where the class has a clear leader and set rules which must be followed", argues Laura, "through placing the needs and well-being of young people at the forefront of our work, we give them the freedom to do things their way, prioritising their needs and desires. This is not to say that formal education does a better or worse job at dealing with young people", cautions Laura, "we as youth workers just have a different approach and different priorities when it comes to the young people we work with".

However, keeping boundaries and establishing authority is still an important skill for youth workers, being able to maintain a balance of clear understanding of who is in charge and responsible for the wellbeing of youths without making them feel oppressed and powerless.

When working with young people in several projects and programmes, Laura makes sure that she manages the balance between being cautious and understanding the boundaries of young people, while still taking charge and seeking to inspire and encourage them toward new experiences and changes. Some young people need guidance and the motivation to get out of their comfort zone and create meaningful change in their lives for the better. "Being a youth worker is all about balance", says

Alisa Jordan, is a student pursuing an Honours Bachelor's Degree in Sociology at the University of Malta. Having always been enticed with the way that our society works and desiring to understand it, a degree in social sciences was a natural choice. With a special interest in social statistics and demography, Alisa believes that through numbers we can get a fuller picture of the way that the society behaves and we are able to make inferences about future trends.

Laura, "It is all about prioritising the holistic wellbeing of young people. It is important to pay close attention to them, noting various cues and hints that may reveal more than they say about how they feel and what is going on in their lives. Never let go of something they want to speak about, encourage them to open up and speak further or try to discern why they do not wish to do so. Giving young people an opportunity to feel like they have someone to talk to, someone to hear and support them is of great vitality, also empowering and leading them to adopt these patterns of healthy communication and empathy into their lives".

One of the ways Laura enhances these notions is through social media, by being active in posting useful information and resources to her young followers to ensure the dissemination of educational and accurate information. Social media also allows effective communication between her and young people. Through the use of online polls in which the opinion of the young people themselves are asked regarding the things they wish to see more of, Laura can empower and give voice to them. Many young people indeed feel more comfortable in online messaging, with less pressure than face-to-face interaction. "Some may reach out to further talk about something they mentioned in passing during the in-person session, finding messaging more private and comfortable", notes Laura. However, she cautions, it is important to be careful and encourage young people to step out from the online realm and gain confidence and comfort in real-life communication. It may lead to a slippery slope where young people do not exit their virtual life and fail to gain the necessary skills for in-person interaction. Digital spaces provide an excellent steppingstone from which young people can move further, but they should not be viewed as the primary channel of communication or interaction.

As a young person, Laura is still learning and moving through life at her own pace and dealing with several challenges and limitations that her setting may impose. When asked to outline what it is like to be a young person in Malta today, she stated that it is a strange and difficult time to be young and pursue life goals. The economy, the environment and the political climate all play a role in the growing ambiguity that permeates the minds of young people, being expected to 'bloom' in a time riddled with crises and subsequent limitations. Moreover, as the national attitude towards younger persons is still one of mistrust and, to a certain extent, neglect, Laura feels like her interests remain on the side-line. Although the Maltese government has launched several initiatives to encourage greater involvement of young people in national matters, there is still room for improvement for more impactful changes.

Indeed, there are several challenges unique to Maltese young people and youth workers that make their lives more difficult. "Culture plays a big part in our struggles", Laura contends. She outlines that the older generations tend to view the youth as children, incapable of making their own decisions and not deserving of trust. And yet, Laura points out, young people are expected to uphold grown-up responsibilities when it is convenient, thrusting them into a completely new realm without any warning or preparation. It is this disbalance that Laura argues to be among the key challenges to Maltese youth. No agency is facilitated among the young until they are confronted head-on with the entirely new world of responsibilities, ending up feeling lost and powerless in an entirely new realm from which they were removed before. "The constant tensions among the generations do not help", says Laura, "with both young and old mutually reinforcing negative responses from the other. A greater degree of the intergenerational alliance is needed", she puts forth, "with greater empathy and understanding towards the young people to be encouraged among the older generation". Often encountering hostility from local law enforcement and security towards the young people, Laura makes it a point to stand up for those in need, urging for greater sensitivity and awareness about young people.





It is a common misconception that due to lack of experience, younger people are not trusted with important matters. "If one measures experience with time, then yes, younger people are at a disadvantage", Laura contends. Yet, oftentimes it is the young person who is more up to date with current issues and trends, being more aware of the current world and how to help matters which they feel strongly about. Laura wishes to see more youth representation on a national level and have greater exposure to youth matters and issues.

Another challenge that is unique to the Maltese youth is the size of the country. "We are a very small island which makes anonymity and privacy harder than in bigger States" Laura contends. Indeed, it is due to this fact that many feel unsafe in being vocal about certain matters, or uncomfortable to voice their support or opposition to a given matter in fear of repercussions. "Everyone knows everyone, therefore what others say about you can have a strong impact on your life. You never know what person may end up in authoritative positions, for this reason many simply play it safe and keep quiet. Voicing concerns that are not part of the mainstream discourse and challenging the status quo is still something we need to learn as a nation" says Laura. As a result, Laura says "as young people are raised in this environment, we seek as youth workers to create a safe space in which they can become more accustomed to freedom of expression and speech". It is through smaller steps that youth workers at AŽ are seeking to facilitate this agency among young people. "We are focusing on raising active citizens", Laura affirms "through allowing them to express agency and independence in their daily lives, educating them on how various problems can be solved and how they can take charge of their matters, we are gradually preparing them for their later lives in which they will have to exercise assertiveness and willingness to be responsible".

And yet, Laura expresses that being a young person in Malta today is advantageous. Organisations like AŽ, which are a rather recent phenomenon, provide young people with more opportunities to reach their potential, with non-formal education becoming an option as well as many initiatives seeking to augment the daily experiences of young persons. Furthermore, as youth work is a university-level degree, exposure to matters concerning young people and awareness of their needs and wants is becoming a more prominent dimension of current Maltese society, creating fertile soil for the greater wellbeing of the younger generation. AŽ, she says, provides young people with new opportunities that were not there when she was younger. Indeed, as she reminisces on her younger years, she wishes that she had the option of pursuing programmes being offered by AŽ nowadays and expresses the desire to have known about the possibility of pursuing a degree in Youth Work earlier. She feels that she would have been more motivated to study had she known about this higher education path.

Working in the youth sector gives Laura hope for the future, being surrounded by like-minded people and given the platform and opportunity to make changes for the better. It is through her work that Laura finds solace in the face of challenges, feeling happy to help those in need and create lasting changes. Results of her labours, however, are not immediate. "It is one of the main challenges of being a youth worker", says Laura, "finding peace with the idea that you may not see the impact that you are having immediately". Some young people may come-back a few years later and credit something a youth worker said to them and the effect that it had on their subsequent lives, highlighting how the products of youth worker labour are far from immediate and apparent. "Yet, I feel motivated to know that I am capable of sowing seeds within people, it doesn't matter if I do not get to see them bloom", concludes Laura. ♦

♦ I'm Laura, Maltese-Sicilian. I started roller skating around a year ago after starting an initiative with friends to encourage female skaters in Malta to feel more included and less intimidated in the sport. I hate windy days. I'm a youth worker by profession and most would say I think and talk a lot ... I agree

