



Dr. Gilbert Gravino

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1. What has the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted from your usual challenges?

In Malta abortion is illegal in all circumstances. The need to travel to access safe and legal abortions has always been a barrier for women in Malta (e.g. due to financial and mobility issues). This has become even more difficult and much more expensive during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to travel restrictions and limited flights. Women who manage to fly out of the country for such essential healthcare, including those with pregnancy complications, have to spend thousands of Euros. This has resulted in a large [increase in the number of women ordering abortion pills online](#). Some organisations, like Women Help Women and Women on Web, are reputable and provide genuine, safe medication along with the necessary guidance. However, there are many other non-reputable and potentially unsafe online providers that are taking advantage of the situation. Due to the total legal ban on abortion, it is not possible to control what sort of pills are being dispensed and who is dispensing them, and this can be very dangerous.

The current situation highlights the fact that the lack of local access to abortion care has dire consequences for women in Malta. It puts people's lives at risk, and it is clearly discriminatory against those who are unable to travel or do not have the financial means. Women should not be deprived, have to travel, or pay thousands of Euros to access essential healthcare. Women should not and cannot be left unsupported.

For more detail about the impact of COVID-19 on women in Malta who are seeking abortion: <https://bit.ly/2LWnTXI>

2. What impact has the pandemic had on you and the people you work with?

As Doctors for Choice Malta we have had an increase in the number of women seeking help and advice for abortion access. We have continued to refer to Abortion Support Network which does its best to help them access safe and legal abortions. Women who contacted us include those with pregnancy complications and victims of rape. The availability and access to contraceptives has also been affected, with some women informing us that they have had problems in getting their usual contraception.

We have endorsed [a statement](#) calling on all European governments to ensure safe and timely access to abortions during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an organisation, we continue to advocate for safe and legal abortion services. We also raise awareness about the negative impact that the lack of such services has on women in Malta. In addition, we have just launched a video campaign to raise awareness about the importance of contraception.

3. What do you need from the government in order to provide the best care?

The availability of medical abortion pills which have revolutionised abortion access and the assistance by Abortion Support Network (a UK based charity helping women to travel abroad for abortion) are making it possible for many women to access this essential care. Thankfully, this means that less women resort to unsafe, dangerous methods to terminate their pregnancy. However, this is a two-edged sword because the situation remains far from ideal standards and these options mask the extent of the problem of not having abortion available locally. This masking effect, the huge stigma, and the potential negative repercussions that stop women from speaking out, enable politicians to remain passive on this issue.

There are local politicians who understand and know very well that abortion being illegal in all circumstances is not right and hugely conflicting with the most reputable international medical authorities (this includes the World Health Organisation and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists). They also know that essential healthcare should not be determined by majority opinion. However, publicly admitting to these terms is seen as a threat to their political career, since it can be anticipated that this point of view will receive great opposition from the public. I would like to see these politicians work together and prioritise essential healthcare to bring Malta in line with acceptable reproductive health and rights standards, even if this is not considered a popular move and comes with a lot of resistance.

There are of course other politicians with self-perceived moral superiority who I wish would recognise and respect that others are equally capable of making their own decisions, and that a woman's decision to have or not have an abortion is a very personal matter that depends on personal moral beliefs which are equally valuable to their own. However, such politicians are mostly, although not exclusively, driven by religious dogma which is very difficult to shake off.

I would also like to see an international and European effort from politicians and relevant stakeholders to apply pressure on different states where abortion remains completely illegal or heavily restricted, which includes Malta.