

MAGYAR GERONTOLÓGIA

15. ÉVFOLYAM KONFERENCIA KÜLÖNSZÁM

2023. 15. évf. Konferencia Különszám

On-line verzió: ISSN 2062-3690

[www.https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/gerontologia](https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/gerontologia)

Starting from scratch: realities of older Maltese ex-sisters

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Keywords: religious, congregation, ex-sister, well being, Malta

Background

Statistics have revealed how not only globally but also in Malta the number of women religious has decreased. This study delved into the experiences of older ex-sisters from apostolic congregations who held simple vows, lived in the convent, subsequently leaving the congregation.

Aims & Objectives

The study focused on the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by the older ex-sisters and took into consideration, (a) timeline of entering and leaving the convent, (b) education at time of entering/leaving the convent, (c) independent living vs returning to the family, (d) current living conditions and support network, and (e) experiences of a senior citizen.

Methodology

IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) was applied to provide detailed examinations of the lived experiences of this particular cohort of persons. Through snowball sampling 9 older ex-sisters were recruited, successively participating in face-to-face interviews.

Results

Five (5) ex-sisters returned to their previous homes, whilst 4 lived independently. Family support was mostly limited. All sought employment following their departure; one ex-sister applied for social assistance. Academic qualifications impacted on their employment, with unpaid work and social security contributions during the convent years further fueling hardships and financial constraints.

Conclusion

None of the ex-sisters expressed remorse for years they spent in the convent, nor on eventually transitioning back to laity, even though they had to start from scratch. Recommendations were made for both policy makers and Ecclesiastical authorities to safeguarding the well-being of ex-sisters with respect to assistance regarding their spiritual, emotional, psychological, social and financial aspects.