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Perceived Precarious Employment in Malta

Manwel Debono and Vincent Marmarà¹

Abstract Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to shed more light on the phenomenon of precarious employment by examining the nature and level of perceived precarious employment in Malta.

Design/methodology/approach. The paper is based on a telephone survey carried out among a sample of 388 employees.

Findings. Results indicate that perceived and objective precariousness do not necessarily tally, and due to its subjective aspect, precariousness is a relative term. The extent to which perceptions of precariousness are anchored in objective reality might be debatable, but their effects are nonetheless real. While the link between precariousness and socio-demographic data is not straightforward, persons with lower levels of education or in fixed-term employment contracts are significantly more likely to experience precarious employment.

Research limitations/implications. The research proposes that it is in the interest of both employers and employees to have an agreed definition and measure of precarious employment. A definition which includes both objective and subjective aspects of the phenomenon would enable researchers to examine situations where the subjective and objective aspects of precariousness do not match.

Originality/value. This study highlights the value of viewing precariousness as having both objective and subjective dimensions. It gauges the often-neglected perceptions of workers towards the important though not clearly understood phenomenon of precarious employment.

Paper type. Empirical research.

Keywords: *Precarious Employment, Subjective Perceptions, Quantitative Research.*

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1. Introduction

The topic of precarious employment has increased in salience in scholarly research in recent years. The prevalence and form of the phenomenon has been studied in many developing countries, including China,² Mexico,³ Vietnam,⁴ India,⁵ South Africa,⁶ and Argentina,⁷ to name but a few, and across more advanced countries such as Canada,⁸ Japan,⁹ South Korea,¹⁰ the USA¹¹ and Europe.¹² Such research indicates a growth of precarious employment across the world, in both developing and more advanced countries.

A decade ago, the term precarious employment was largely unheard of in Malta. Then, in the wake of the international economic downturn starting in 2008, Maltese unions spearheaded by the General Workers Union, Malta's largest union, started voicing their concern about the apparent rise of precarious employment. Despite the employers' associations' attempts at playing down the issue, unions were successful in moving precarious employment up on the public agenda. Indeed, while in 2005 there were no

² Y. Zhou, The State of Precarious Work in China, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, Vol. 57 no. 3, 354-372.

³ T. Aguilar-Ortega, Migración y Desarrollo en el Noroeste de Michoacán, 1995-2005 (Spanish), in *Convergencia: Revista De Ciencias Sociales*, 2011, vol. 18, no. 55, 135-160.

⁴ D. Arnold, Social Margins and Precarious Work in Vietnam, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 4, 468-487.

⁵ D. Maiti, Precarious Work in India: Trends and Emerging Issues, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 4, 507-530.

⁶ F. Barchiesi, Wage Labor, Precarious Employment, and Social Inclusion in the Making of South Africa's Postapartheid Transition, in *African Studies Review*, 2008, vol. 51, no. 2, 119-142.

⁷ N. Menéndez, La Múltiple Dimensión de la Precariedad Laboral: El Caso de la Administración Pública en Argentina (Spanish), in *Revista De Ciencias Sociales*, 2010, vol. 128/129, 119-136.

⁸ P.M. Evans, (Not) Taking Account of Precarious Employment: Workfare Policies and Lone Mothers in Ontario and the UK, in *Social Policy & Administration*, 2007, vol. 41, no. 1, 29-49.

⁹ M. Osawa, M. Kim, J. Kingston, Precarious Work in Japan, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 3, 309-334.

¹⁰ K. Shin, Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 3, 335-353.

¹¹ A.L. Kalleberg, Precarious Employment, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition, in *American Sociological Review*, 2009, vol. 74, 1-22.

¹² H.C. Broding, A. Weber, A. Glatz, J. Bünger, Working Poor in Germany: Dimensions of the Problem and Repercussions for the Health-care System, in *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 2010, vol. 31, no. 3, 298-311.

articles referring to precarious employment or precarious work in the Times of Malta,¹³ Malta's most accessed website, the number peaked to over 250 articles in 2013. By then, the major social partners, politicians and other stakeholders were actively discussing precarious employment and trying to find ways of combating this phenomenon. Among others, the previous government enacted the Employment Status national Standard order¹⁴ through which it sought to curb bogus self-employment. The ruling Labour Party¹⁵ included the 'fight against precarious employment' as one of the objectives of its Electoral Manifesto, and has over the last years started implementing measures to tackle the issue. However, despite the increasing popularity of the concept in Malta, it is still not well defined and there is hardly any local scientific data about it. This study aims to shed more light on the nature and level of precarious employment in Malta by analysing data gathered from a survey carried out among a representative sample of employees.

2. Defining Precarious Employment

In Malta, there is not yet a commonly agreed definition of precarious employment. This point has often been emphasised by employers' associations including both the Malta Employers' Association (MEA)¹⁶ and the Malta Chamber of Commerce Enterprise and Industry (MCCEI).¹⁷ Their reasoning is that the concept of precarious employment is murky and can mean anything or nothing. The employers' logic is that since there is no agreed definition of such concept, one cannot measure it, and so one should not implement new measures (especially legislation) trying to tackle it, since these may lead to more harm to the economy than to positive outcomes. To sustain this line of thought, MEA rightly points out that locally, precarious employment has often been conflated with flexible or atypical work including part-time work, fixed-term contracts

¹³ Times of Malta Website, available at: timesofmalta.com (accessed December 6, 2015).

¹⁴ Government of Malta, *Employment Status National Standard Order*, 2012, <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11844&l=1> (accessed December 6, 2015).

¹⁵ Labour Party, *Malta Taghna Lkoll – Manifest Elettorali 2013*, Labour Party, Malta, 2013.

¹⁶ Malta Employers' Association, *Position Paper on Illegal and Atypical Employment Practices*, 2013, <http://www.maltaemployers.com/Portals/22/Precarious%20employment.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2015).

¹⁷ Malta Chamber of Commerce Enterprise and Industry (MCCEI), *Position Paper on Precarious Employment*, MCCEI, Malta, 2013, unpublished position paper circulated among social partners.

and self-employment.¹⁸ On its part, the MCCEI states that in the local context, “there is no distinction between precarious and illegal employment”.¹⁹ As will be discussed below, international literature disentangles the concepts of precarious and illegal employment. However, by conflating the two concepts, the MCCEI attempts to distance precarious from flexible employment, and at the same time ties it up to something that social partners in Malta agree upon, namely that illegal work should be curbed. While the main employers’ associations in Malta assert to be in favour of safeguarding acceptable employment conditions,²⁰ they appear to concur that the issue of precarious employment is “a problem blown out of proportion”.²¹

On their part, as stated in the introduction, trade unions have been vocal in trying to sensitise workers and the government about precarious employment. Employers have argued that by sensationalising the issue and creating alarm, unions are doing more harm than good as they are sowing negative sentiments in workers’ minds. However, whether or not one agrees with them, unions have been effective in placing the issue high on the public agenda and government policy. Over the last years, many if not most Maltese adults have heard about precarious employment and have developed their own ideas of what it constitutes. This point leads to an important element relating to the concept of precarious employment, namely, the element of subjective perception. Precariousness is not only about unmet absolute thresholds relating to working conditions; it is also about subjective feelings and thoughts experienced by workers. In other words, the phenomenon does not only exist as an objective fact outside the individual but may also exist in workers’ minds. The objective and subjective dimensions of precariousness may exist in parallel and may not necessarily correspond to each other. This fact may be viewed as supporting the logic of employers’ associations who warn against sensationalising too much the issue.

Acknowledging the impasse on a shared definition of precarious employment in Malta, it is useful to turn to foreign literature for an

¹⁸ MEA *op. cit.*

¹⁹ MCCEI *op. cit.*

²⁰ MCCEI *op. cit.*

²¹J. Piscopo, Employers’ Association Against Further Legislation on Precarious Employment, *Maltatoday* 3 July 2013, <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/28053/precarious-employment-employers-association-against-further-legislation-20130703#.Vapi0Pn051E> (accessed December 6, 2015)

understanding of how the concept has developed and is understood internationally. Over the years, researchers across the world have used different terms to describe notions similar to the concept of precarious employment, including ‘contingent work’,²² ‘flexibilisation’,²³ ‘pauperisation’,²⁴ ‘marginalisation’, ‘informalisation’,²⁵ ‘deregulation’ and ‘casualisation’²⁶. Researchers have highlighted varying aspects of precarious employment, including low statutory entitlements, lack of social benefits, low wages, high risk of ill health.²⁷ Uncertainty, unpredictability and risk from the point of view of the worker are also commonly mentioned with reference to precarious employment.²⁸ Perhaps the best term that summarises all these different aspects is that of ‘insecurity’. Precarious work may lack security in employment, security of job descriptions and career paths, security of safety and regularity of work conditions, security of gaining and using new skills, and security of income.²⁹ Indeed, the International Labour Organisation defines precarious work as a “work relation where employment security, which is considered one of the principal elements of the labour contract, is lacking”³⁰.

However, one can still argue for the need of an outline of specific and more detailed aspects of precarious employment that render the definition more practical in nature. The resolution issued by the European

²² M. Quinlan, The ‘Pre-Invention of Precarious Employment: The Changing World of Work in Context, in *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, vol. 23:4, 3-24.

²³ J. Breman, An Informalised Labour System: End of Labour Market Dualism, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2001, vol. 36, No. 52 (Dec 29, 2001 - Jan 4, 2002), 4804-4821.

²⁴ W. Morehouse, D. Dembo, The Underbelly of the US Economy: Joblessness and Pauperisation of Work in America, 1995, Council of International and Public Affairs, Apex Press, New York.

²⁵ R. Munck, The Precariat: A View from the South, in *Third World Quarterly*, 2013, Vol 34, no. 5, 747-762,

²⁶ J.D. Schmidt, Flexicurity, Casualisation and Informalisation of Global Labour Markets, 2005, Institute for History, International and Social Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark.

²⁷ L. McDowell, A. Batnitzky, S. Dyer, Precarious Work and Economic Migration: Emerging Immigrant Divisions of Labour in Greater London's Service Sector, in *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, 2009, vol. 33, no. 1, 3-25.

²⁸ A.L. Kalleberg, *op. cit.*

²⁹ G. Standing, 2011 in P. Frase, The Precariat: A Class or a Condition? in *New Labor Forum (Murphy Institute)*, 2013, vol. 22, no. 2, 11-14.

³⁰ International Labour Organization, *ILO Thesaurus*, 2011, <http://www.ilo.org/thesaurus/defaulten.asp> (accessed December 6, 2015).

Parliament in 2010 aptly provides an answer to this concern. The resolution states that:

precarious work refers to ‘non-standard’ forms of employment with any of the following characteristics: little or no job security owing to the non-permanent, often casual nature of the work, with contracts containing poor conditions or without any written contract, for instance in the case of temporary, involuntary part-time contracts, unclear working hours and duties that change according to the employer's will; a low level of remuneration, which may even be unofficial and unclear; no social protection rights or employment-related benefits; no protection against discrimination; limited or no prospects for advancement in the labour market; no collective representation of workers; a working environment that fails to meet minimum health and safety standards.³¹

An agreed definition of precarious employment would facilitate the quest to scientifically measure the objective extent of the problem. A working definition of precarious employment would establish the parameters of the concept and clarify the aspects that compose it. From a research perspective, a good definition would increase the reliability and validity of studies. From a practical perspective, an agreed definition of precarious employment would ensure more consistency when the responsible authorities treat employment cases that might fall or not fall within such definition. However, it is clear that there is no political will for the stakeholders in Malta to agree on what constitutes precarious employment, a phenomenon whose perceived size depends on whether one is an employer or a trade unionist. Since employers and unions have different agendas, they might continue not agreeing on what constitutes this notion. Thus, as will be elaborated in the methodology, this study investigates the phenomenon from a different perspective than that adopted by the European Parliament – from the subjective perceptions of employees.

3. The Rise of Precarious Employment

Despite the difficulty in agreeing on a shared definition of the concept, it is still worth studying precarious employment as it negatively affects the lives of a growing number of workers and their families. Besides, as will

³¹ European Parliament, *Precarious Women Workers: P7_TA(2010)0365* (2010/2018(INI), 2010, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2010-0365&language=EN> (accessed December 6, 2015).

be discussed in this section, precarious employment is difficult to curb as it is intimately connected to capitalism.

Researchers have traced the roots of precarious work to the current economic structure, through the “refinement of manners of exploitation that characterize the whole history of capitalism”.³² Economic crises lead to precarious employment.³³ The economic slowdown which has been affecting the European Union since 2008, has worsened the working conditions in many countries including Malta in recent years. Evidence points to a deepening of inequalities in European countries.³⁴ The growth in long-term (and structural) unemployment experienced in Europe has exacerbated precarious employment, as unemployed persons are more desperate to find any type of job, even if with poor conditions. A rise in nonstandard employment in many countries was brought about by balancing labour market demand and supply in a difficult economic environment. Temporary or fixed-term contracts are used by employers to adjust the workforce to meet the fluctuating demand in the market at lower cost and in a way that their work is easily discontinued.³⁵ On the other hand, it is also interesting to note that even economic growth fuels precarious employment. For example, Maiti writes that “workers in India are becoming increasingly precarious in spite of its significant economic growth during the past two decades”.³⁶ An often uneven economic development coupled by difficulties in creating sufficient decent jobs for a growing labour supply may be among the main causes of the apparent rise in precarious work in some countries.

The politico-economic model of less state interventions in the private sector adopted by many governments across the world has also been blamed for the rise in precarious employment. For example, discussing the situation in Thailand, Hewison and Tularak argue that an economic liberalisation movement after 1997 “delivered policies and practices that have weakened unions, kept wages low, and expanded the use of contract

³² I.F. Borsoi, Vivendo para Trabalhar: Do Trabalho Degradado ao Trabalho Precarizado. (Portuguese), in *Convergencia: Revista De Ciencias Sociales*, 2011, vol. 18, no. 55, 113-133.

³³ H. Hsiao, Precarious Work in Taiwan: A Profile, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 3, 373-389.

³⁴ D. Vaughan-Whitehead, *Work Inequalities in the Crisis: Evidence from Europe*, 2012, International Labour Organization, Geneva.

³⁵ N. Arunatilake, Precarious Work in Sri Lanka, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 4, 488-506.

³⁶ D. Maiti, *op. cit.*

and agency-supplied labour”.³⁷ The trend in the liberalisation of the labour markets is leading to more workers in atypical contracts and a consequential reduction of trade union membership.³⁸ The marginalisation of the trade union movement inevitably increases the risk of precarious employment. Multinational organisations, with their ability to shift production from one country to another appear to contribute considerably to precarious employment. For example, “food and clothing retailers source their products through extensive global supply chains, with a very strong negotiating position over their suppliers. This enables them to dictate terms and conditions of supply and to create the low-cost, flexible supply chain that they seek”.³⁹

Whereas in their role of regulators, governments might not be sufficiently curtailing the rise of precarious employment in the private sector, in their role of employers, governments are at times promoting precarious employment, especially through outsourcing.⁴⁰ The practice of outsourcing, which is meant to reduce the expenses of the public sector and increase the effectiveness of the services provided, increases the risk of inappropriate working conditions that lead to precarious employment. Aware of this issue, the Maltese government acted to improve the working conditions of contracted workers, by among others setting up a Commercial Sanctions Tribunal with the competence to blacklist contractors breaching public procurement regulations.

The level of precarious employment varies among and also within countries, with some regions hit worse than others. Besides, particular categories of workers appear to be more prone to suffer from precarious employment.⁴¹ Undocumented migrants are at risk of precarious employment due to lack of awareness of rights, lack of skills, and language barriers.⁴² Ethnic origin is also related to the phenomenon.⁴³ Women also

³⁷ K. Hewison, W. Tularak, Thailand and Precarious Work: An Assessment, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 4, 444-467.

³⁸ K. Shin, *op. cit.*

³⁹ T. Kidder, K. Raworth, 'Good Jobs' and Hidden Costs: Women Workers Documenting the Price of Precarious Employment, in *Gender & Development*, 2004, vol. 12, no. 2, 12-21.

⁴⁰ I. Tjandraningsih, State-Sponsored Precarious Work in Indonesia, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2013, vol. 57, no. 4, 403-419.

⁴¹ D. Vaughan-Whitehead, *op. cit.*

⁴² United Nations, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right of Everyone to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Physical and Mental Health*, Anand Grover, 2013. General Assembly (A/HRC/23/41).

experience a higher risk of precarious employment,⁴⁴ which may stem from having to combine domestic responsibilities and work.⁴⁵ Due to their full-time parenting responsibilities, single parents (who are often mothers) might be unable to find decent jobs with sufficiently flexible conditions and may often end up in low paid jobs with no vacation leave and no bonuses⁴⁶ among others. Young inexperienced workers lacking qualifications and those overqualified for the available jobs are at a higher risk of precarious employment, since it could be their only way of getting employed and gaining experience; hence they may be under-qualified or over-qualified for the available jobs.^{47 48} Eurostat data indicates that the number of young people who are constrained to work part-time as they could not find a full-time job increased in recent years.⁴⁹ Older long term unemployed persons are also at risk of precarious employment since they lack transferable skills.⁵⁰

Precarious employment in Europe, as in other parts of the world, appears to be on the rise. However, due to the lack of a commonly agreed definition and the consequent lack of internationally recognised criteria for measuring the phenomenon, it is difficult to estimate its magnitude. There exist links between the growing atypical or non-standard work and

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session23/A_HRC_23_41_ENG.pdf (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁴³ F. Barchiesi, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ T. Kidder, K. Raworth, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ N. Kabeer, *Women's Economic Empowerment and Inclusive Growth: Labour Markets and Enterprise Development, Discussion Paper 29/12*, Centre for Development Policy & Research, School of Oriental & African Studies, 2012, <http://www.soas.ac.uk/cdpr/publications/papers/file80432.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁴⁶ P.M. Evans, *Challenging Income (In)security: Lone Mothers and Precarious Employment. Inequality and Development in a Globalised Economy - The Basic Income Option*, 12th BIEN Congress, Dublin, Ireland, June 20-21, 2008.

⁴⁷ Global Unions Forum, *Towards Social Justice: Applying Labour Standards to Precarious Work*. International Labour Organization (ILO), 2008, <http://www.global-unions.org/IMG/pdf/WelcomeAddressPrecariousWorkForum.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁴⁸ World Youth Report, *Youth Employment*, 2003, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch02.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁴⁹ Eurostat website, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat> (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁵⁰ European Commission, *Study on Precarious Work and Social Rights*, Working Lives Research Institute (VT/2010/084), 2012, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=7925&langId=en> (accessed December 6, 2015).

precarious employment. However, it is apparent that many workers with atypical contracts are not and do not feel vulnerable and so are not in precarious employment. Very atypical work (VAW) is definitely more strongly related to precarious employment. VAW includes non-written contracts, part-time work of fewer than 10 hours a week, very short fixed-term contracts of six months or less, on-call work and zero hour contracts.⁵¹

While no data exists about on-call and zero hours working in Malta, data about the other three aspects of VAW is available. The Fifth European Working Conditions Survey indicates that Malta has a very high ratio of persons working without a contract (27.3% in Malta when compared to a much lower 4.7% across the EU 27).⁵² While in Malta it is legally possible to work without a written contract (as long as there is a verbal one), the high proportion of persons working without a contract indicates a large shadow economy. In 2014, 2.5% of all workers in Malta had a part-time work of less than 10 hours a week, whereas 3.6% of all workers worked on very short fixed-term contracts as their main occupation.⁵³ While the ratio of workers working without a contract decreased over the years, that of part-time workers of less than 10 hours a week and very short fixed-term work increased. Besides, whereas a higher percentage of men than women in Malta work without a contract, the situation is reversed with regards to part-time work with less than 10 hours a week and very short fixed-term contracts. The degree of overlap of the above-mentioned percentages of workers in very typical work is unknown. However, one assumes that work which includes more than one of these five aspects is more likely to be precarious in nature. Meanwhile, 5.9% of the workers in Malta are at risk of poverty.⁵⁴ The ratio of workers at risk of poverty is higher among men, individuals in the 25-54 age bracket, with a lower level

⁵¹ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, *Very atypical work: Exploratory analysis of fourth European Working Conditions Survey*, 2010, http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1010en.pdf (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁵² European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, *EWCS 2010 - Data Tables*, 2013, <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/2010/datatables> (accessed December 6, 2015).

⁵³ National Statistics Office, (NSO), Unpublished data provided specifically for the use of this study, 2015.

⁵⁴ Eurostat website, *op. cit.*

of education, working part-time, in temporary occupations, and with dependent children.⁵⁵

Specific research on precarious employment in Malta is very rare. An EU-funded study examined the situation of vulnerable workers in the tourism, cleaning and language schools sectors in Malta.⁵⁶ More than half of the vulnerable workers were found to have a secondary level of education. While the majority of vulnerable workers in the tourism and language school sectors were aged between 15 and 29 years, most of those operating in the cleaning sector were aged 40 and over and were mostly women. Whereas 9% of vulnerable workers in the language school sector were not formally engaged, the figure increased to 34% and 33% in the cleaning and tourism sectors respectively. Nearly half (45%) of the respondents said that they were not entitled to sick leave, while only 24% of male and 16% of female workers received the mandatory government bonus. Union representation was found to be low. Most vulnerable workers (69%) stated that they were being paid on an hourly basis, while 14% alleged to be paid less than the statutory minimum wage.⁵⁷

4. Methodology

The above review of literature indicates the apparent growth of precarious employment and also the difficulties in agreeing on a precise definition of the term. In the absence of locally agreed definitions of what constitutes precarious employment, this study intends to investigate the perceptions of the Maltese employees about the precariousness of their work. As was discussed earlier, the subjective perception is an important component of precarious employment.

A brief questionnaire enquiring about demographic details and perspectives relating to precariousness in employment was developed. After being pilot tested, the questionnaire was administered through telephone interviews among a sample of 388 employees representing the adult Maltese employed population (aged between 16 and 65 years). Interviews were carried out during May 2013. This study has a confidence interval of 4.97% and a confidence level of 95%.

The random sample was selected from the government's Electoral Register using stratified random sampling by district in order to ensure

⁵⁵ Eurostat website, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE), *Entrepreneurs and Vulnerable Workers in Malta*, in *Unlocking the female potential*, Malta, NCPE, 2012, 64–120.

⁵⁷ NCPE, *op. cit.*

geographic representation. - In total 620 persons were approached and 388 accepted to be interviewed over the phone. The sample selected coincides fairly accurately with the official statistics as published by Malta's National Statistics Office (NSO).⁵⁸ In fact, according to NSO, during the last quarter of 2013, 63% of all employed persons were men while 37% were women. 14% of the employed persons were aged between 15 and 24, 53% were aged between 25 and 44, while 32% were aged between 45 and 64 (NSO). 88% worked full time-whereas 12% worked part-time in their main occupation.⁵⁹ Besides, according to NSO, 73% of all employed persons in Malta were employed within the private sector while 27% were employed within the public sector at the end of 2013.⁶⁰ While most of these figures are close to the statistics in Table 1, the sample collected was weighted according to NSO statistics to ensure that the sample's answers are representative based on age, gender and sector of employment.

Table 1 illustrates the composition of the sample divided by gender, age, level of education, type of contract and sector of employment. The largest groups of respondents were in the 45-65 and 25-44 age brackets (45% and 44.3% respectively). While 65.7% of the respondents had a primary or secondary level of education, 34.3% had a post-secondary or tertiary level. The majority of respondents were in full-time employment and on permanent contracts, while a minority were in part-time employment and on fixed-term contracts. Whereas two thirds of the respondents worked in the private sector, a third were public sector employees.

Table No. 1 - Respondents' Demographics

		Count	%
Gender	Males	257	66.2
	Females	131	33.8
Age Bracket	16-24	43	11.1
	25-44	172	44.3
	45-65	173	45.0
Level of education	Primary/ Secondary	255	65.7

⁵⁸ National Statistics Office, (NSO), *Labour force survey: Q4/2013*, 2014, https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/View_by_Unit/Unit_C2/Labour_Market_Statistics/Documents/2014/News2014_057.pdf (accessed September 14, 2016).

⁵⁹ NSO, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ National Statistics Office, (NSO), *Labour force survey: Q4/2013*, 2014, https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/View_by_Unit/Unit_C2/Labour_Market_Statistics/Documents/2014/News2014_086.pdf (accessed September 14, 2016).

	Post-Secondary/ Tertiary	133	34.3
Type of contract	Full-time	323	83.2
	Part-time	65	16.8
	Permanent	311	80.2
	Fixed-term	70	18.0
	No contract	7	1.8
Sector	Public	127	32.7
	Private	261	67.3

Descriptive and inferential statistics were derived through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

5. Results

As can be seen from Table No. 2 below, whereas the large majority of respondents (87.5%) believe that their current work is not precarious in nature, a significant minority (12.5%) believe to be in precarious employment. Chi-Square analysis reveals that there is no significant gender difference in this regard: $X^2(1, N = 384) = 1.12, p > 0.05$.

Similarly, age bracket does not appear to be strongly related to perceptions of being in precarious employment: $X^2(2, N = 384) = 4.39, p > 0.05$. On the other hand, employees with a lower level of education are significantly more likely to believe to be in precarious employment than those with a higher level of education: $X^2(1, N = 384) = 7.63, p < 0.05$. Employees working full-time or part-time experience relatively similar levels of precariousness: $X^2(1, N = 384) = 1.54, p > 0.05$. However, employees on fixed-term contracts are significantly more likely to believe to be in precarious employment than those on permanent contracts: $X^2(1, N = 377) = 4.09, p < 0.05$. Finally, whether one works in the public or private sector is not significantly related to perceptions of being in precarious employment: $X^2(1, N = 384) = 0.89, p > 0.05$.

Table No. 2 - Whether respondents believe to be in precarious employment

		Yes		No		N	χ^2 - value	p-value
		Count	%*	Count	%*			
Gender	Male	35	13.8	219	86.2	384	1.12	0.29
	Female	13	10.0	117	90.0			
	Total	48	12.5	336	87.5			
Age bracket of employees	16-24	8	18.6	35	81.4	384	4.39	0.11
	25-44	15	8.8	156	91.2			
	45-65	25	14.7	145	85.3			
Level of education of employees	Primary/Secondary	40	15.9	212	84.1	384	7.63	0.01
	Post-Secondary/Tertiary	8	6.1	124	93.9			
Type of contract	Full-time	43	13.4	277	86.6	384	1.54	0.21
	Part-time	5	7.8	59	92.2			
	Permanent	34	11.1	273	88.9	377	4.09	0.04
	Fixed-term	14	20.0	56	80.0			
Sector	Public	13	10.2	114	89.8	384	0.89	0.35
	Private	35	13.6	222	86.4			

*N=Number of participants; P=Pearson Chi-Square; * Percentage within the same*

Out of the respondents who stated to be working in precarious conditions, at some point in their career, two thirds filed a report about their precarious conditions to their manager (See Table No. 3). On the other hand, a sizable third did not do so. Half of the latter were afraid of having their job terminated.

Table No. 3 - Whether respondents ever filed a report about their precarious conditions to their manager

	Count	%
No	16	33.3
Yes	32	66.7
Total	48	100
<i>Reasons for not filing report</i>		
<i>Fear of job termination</i>	8	50.0
<i>Too much hassle</i>	2	12.5
<i>Other (not specified)</i>	6	37.5
<i>Total</i>	16	100

6. Discussion

This study indicates that a significant minority consisting of 12.5% of Maltese employees believe to be working in precarious employment. This figure is considerably higher than the ratio of persons employed in part-time work of less than 10 hours a week, on very short fixed-term contracts, or at risk of poverty as reported in the above review of literature. This indicates that the general feeling of employees during the data gathering exercise was considerably worse than what transpires from more objective criteria that can be associated with precariousness. Before the 2013 general election, employees were constantly bombarded with news about precariousness in Malta's places of work. As was indicated in the introduction of this study, the number of references to the concept of precariousness in the local media increased steadily over the years leading to 2013. This period of time marked the final months of the Nationalist party in government, and the then party in opposition placed the topic high in its political discourse. In a way, precariousness might have started symbolising many employees' unhappiness with the previous government, which, by the end of its term was marred by controversy. The heightened awareness and increased sensibility of the general public towards precariousness could have been artificially inflated to some extent. This leads to the first point arising in this study, namely that perceived and objective precariousness do not necessarily tally.

Such discrepancy might be accentuated by the lack of a commonly agreed definition of precariousness in Malta. While one may argue that different Maltese workers will inevitably have somewhat different perceptions of what constitutes precariousness, the subjective opinions of more than one in every ten Maltese employees should not be brushed off and merit

further attention. Their perceptions and feelings are important as they translate into overt action. The complex links between attitudes and behaviour are well documented and have been researched for the past 50 years.⁶¹ Ajzen and Madden's theory of reasoned action shows how attitudes together with perceived social pressure predict intentions, which in turn determine behaviour.⁶² Indeed, two thirds of the respondents in the current study who felt to have precarious working conditions took action about their situation by filing a report to their manager. They felt sufficiently aggrieved to take risks in order to rectify their situation. The risks most probably included the fear of losing their jobs, since this was the most common fear reported by the employees who decided not to take action about their perceived precarious employment. As indicated earlier, vulnerable workers tend not to be unionised, thus making it harder for them to defend their rights.

Beyond the findings of the current study, a negative evaluation of one's employment situation may also lead to a more conservative approach towards spending, thus potentially resulting in reduced retail activity. Consumer confidence surveys carried out across the world (such as the European Commission's Consumer Confidence Indicator) are based on the assumed link between attitudes and behaviours. Unhappiness with work may also lead to unhappiness with life in general, through what is known as the 'spill-over effect'. It has been argued that one aspect of precarious employment, such as lack of control over working hours, may lead to greater work-life conflict.⁶³ It has also been shown that lack of paid sick leave may lead workers to participate less in preventive health care services such as cancer screening.⁶⁴ Feelings of precariousness may also lead to changes in voting patterns in a bid to improve the political and economic situation, as appears to have happened in Malta's 2013 general election. The second point arising in this study is that feelings of precariousness are important as they may lead to objective consequences.

⁶¹ R.H. Fazio, Multiple processes by which attitudes guide behavior: The MODE model as an integrative Framework, in *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 1990, vol. 23, 75–109.

⁶² I. Ajzen, M. Fishbein, *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behaviour*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980.

⁶³ M. McNamara, P. Bohle, M. Quinlan, Precarious Employment, Working Hours, Work-Life Conflict and health in Hotel Work, in *Applied Ergonomics*, 2010, vol. 42, 225–232.

⁶⁴ L. Peipins, A. Soman, Z. Berkowitz, M. White, The Lack of Paid Sick Leave as a Barrier to Cancer Screening and Medical Care-Seeking: Results from the National Health Interview Survey, in *BMC Public Health*, vol.12:520, 1-9.

As expected, employees in Malta with a lower level of education (primary or secondary) are significantly more likely to experience precarious employment than those with higher qualifications (post-secondary or tertiary). The latter tend to have higher status occupations such as managers, professionals and technical jobs. When compared to other occupations, these tend to provide better working conditions, such as greater security in terms of employment, career pathways, income, and health and safety. Despite the above, higher qualified employees are not totally immune from the phenomenon of precarious employment. While objectively, the working conditions of this group tend to be much better than those of lower qualified individuals, precariousness has an important subjective dimension which renders the phenomenon a relative one. Hence, the graduates' feelings of precariousness might derive from their assessment of their current job in comparison to their ideal work situation or to the work conditions of their peers. The latter is in line with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison processes which explains how self-evaluation is based on comparison with other persons.⁶⁵ The increasing underemployment of university graduates in Malta⁶⁶ may also accentuate feelings of relative insecurity. Thus, the third point to be stressed in this discussion is that due to its subjective nature, precariousness is a relative term.

Unlike what is reported in foreign literature,⁶⁷ Maltese male and female employees experience similar levels of precarious employment. This finding appears to be related to the fact that in Malta there is a low female activity rate (52.1% when compared to the EU 28 average of 66.5% in 2014). In general, older and less qualified women in Malta are likely to be inactive, whereas there is a high activity rate of younger and more qualified women. This translates into an imbalanced labour market in which on average, female employees are more qualified than their male peers. Consequently, while women in Malta, as in other countries in general, tend to experience more discrimination and other gender-related difficulties at work than males, their higher qualifications might be compensating for their disadvantages by for example, enabling them to get better jobs. In fact, the proportion of working women who are in professional occupations is nearly double that of males (21.4% and 12.8%

⁶⁵ L. Festinger, A Theory of Social Comparison Processes, in *Human Relations*, 1954, vol. 7, no. 2, 117–140.

⁶⁶ M. Debono, A. Debono, N. Caruana, *Career Outcomes of Graduates 2004*, Euroguidance Malta, Malta, 2005.

⁶⁷ T. Kidder, K. Raworth, *op. cit.*

respectively).⁶⁸ Conscious of their disadvantages and despite the fact that trade unions tend not to be sufficiently geared towards women, working women in Malta are as likely as men to join trade unions.⁶⁹

Employees also feel relatively similar levels of precariousness whether they work in the public or the private sectors. This finding would have been surprising up to decade ago, when a public sector job was normally viewed as ‘a job for life’. However, subsequent governments have embarked on policies meant to reduce the size of the public sector, through liberalisation, privatisation, subcontracting and other initiatives. These changes might have somewhat eroded the traditional feelings of security relating to jobs in the public sector. Having said that, it has been noted that some industries in the private sector, such as the seasonal agriculture and hospitality, tend to be more insecure than others.⁷⁰ A more detailed focus on specific industries might shed more light on such aspect. Feelings of precariousness exist across different age groups and no significant differences were found in the three age categories under consideration. Objectively, younger individuals (16-24 years old) tend to have lower paid and less secure jobs. For example, in 2014, the median income of 16 to 24 year olds was 5.4% lower than that of persons aged between 16 and 64 years.⁷¹ Besides, in 2014, 19% of the 15 to 24 year old employees were in fixed-term contracts when compared to a much lower 7.7% among all workers (aged 15 to 64 years).⁷² However, this group of workers might feel less the burden of the lower working conditions than older workers who tend to have greater life responsibilities relating to their family, house loans and so on. As mentioned earlier in the review of literature, Maltese workers in the middle age bracket are objectively more likely to be at risk of poverty than the oldest or youngest workers. While the oldest category of workers (45-65 years old) would normally be less financially burdened than those in the 25-44 age group, they still experience feelings of precariousness. These might stem from a variety of reasons such as unfulfilled employment expectations, accentuated fears of unemployment (considering that older workers experience greater

⁶⁸ Eurostat website, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ M. Debono, *A National Survey on Trade Unions in Malta – November 2015*, The President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the Centre for Labour Studies, Malta, 2015.

⁷⁰ M. McNamara et al., *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Eurostat website, *op. cit.*

⁷² Eurostat website, *op. cit.*

difficulties to be re-employed) and insufficient financial security vis-à-vis their approaching pensions.

Since fixed-term contracts by their very nature do not provide employment security, it comes as no surprise that employees on fixed-term contracts are significantly more likely to experience feelings of precarious employment than those on permanent contracts. It is only in a minority of occupations which are high in demand, such as computer programmers, engineers and accountants, that fixed-term contracts tend to be viewed as gateways to higher level jobs with better remuneration and working conditions. Against expectations, employees in part-time occupations do not feel to be in a precarious situation like those in fixed-term contracts. Local⁷³ and foreign research⁷⁴ indicates that part-time workers have fewer long-term career opportunities. There are indications that many women in Malta choose part-time work in order to be able to balance their work and family responsibilities.⁷⁵ These workers might view less their current occupation as part of a long-term career. Thus, one might hypothesise that a significant number of part-time workers have relatively low employment expectations based on a short-term perspective, which would explain why they do not complain about precarious employment more than full-timers. In support of this proposition, one should note that part-timers are also significantly less likely to be unionised than full-time workers.⁷⁶ The above discussion leads to the fourth point arising from this study, namely that the link between precariousness and socio-demographic data is not straightforward. Indeed, this study confirms the links between precariousness and level of education and fixed-term/permanent employment. However, some of the social and employment categories that previous research associates with greater risk of precariousness, such as women, middle aged workers, part-timers and workers in private sector, might not feel to be significantly more in precarious employment than other workers.

⁷³ Employment and Training Corporation, *Women and Work: Findings From a Study on the Work Aspirations of Maltese Women*, 2007, <https://jobsplus.gov.mt/resources/publication-statistics-mt-mt-en-gb/publications/fileprovider.aspx?fileId=1240> (accessed August 14, 2016).

⁷⁴ J. Wenger, *The Continuing Problems with Part-Time Jobs*, in *Economic Policy Institute Brief*, 2001. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, http://www.epi.org/publication/issuebriefs_ib155/ (accessed August 14, 2016).

⁷⁵ Employment and Training Corporation, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ M. Debono, 2015, *op. cit.*

7. Conclusion

Research tends to view precariousness as a set of external employment and institutional factors which exert stress on the individual. This perspective is reflected in mainstream definitions of precarious employment such as that of the European Parliament (2010) reviewed earlier. However, there aren't internationally agreed definitions or measurements of the phenomenon. "Claims regarding precarious employment are typically based on different and imprecise definitions and are quantitatively assessed with either proxies or non-integrated indicators that utilize a variety of dimensions".⁷⁷ Despite the salience of the topic, this perspective viewing precarious employment as an objective set of external stressors has to-date not brought about sufficient clarity to the concept of precariousness.

On the other hand, one could focus precarious employment research on "employment strain",⁷⁸ that is the subjective effects of precariousness felt by workers. Despite the ambiguity of the concept, the current study indicates that a subjective feeling of working in precarious employment is shared by a significant minority of employees in Malta. As argued in the previous section, precarious employment may result in the implementation of coping mechanisms and spill-over effects. The focus on the subjective strain is increasing in importance since "a feature of a growing number of precarious employment relationships in our labour market is that many of the stressors associated with employment such as ensuring more work and predicting future earnings are transferred to employees and moved outside of the day-to-day workings of a single workplace".⁷⁹ Indeed, medical and psychological research links work organisation to occupational health outcomes, though the mechanisms of such links remain poorly understood.⁸⁰

One could argue that an internationally-accepted measure of precarious employment based on objective criteria would reduce the salience of the subjective aspect of precariousness. However, the subjective element can

⁷⁷ M. Olsthoorn, Measuring Precarious Employment: A Proposal for Two Indicators of Precarious Employment Based on Set-Theory and Tested with Dutch Labor Market-Data, in *Social Indicators Research Journal*, 2014, vol. 119, 421-441.

⁷⁸ M. Clarke, W. Lewchuk, A. de Wolff, A. King, 'This Just Isn't Sustainable': Precarious Employment, Stress and Workers' Health, in *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 2007, vol. 30, 311-326.

⁷⁹ M. Clarke et al., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ M. McNamara et al., *op. cit.*

never be ignored, since the negative effects of objective external aspects of precariousness (such as low wages) may be felt differently by different individuals. In their qualitative research, Clarke et al. note that “individuals with high levels of employment uncertainty did not all live with the same levels of effort, stress and ill-health”.⁸¹ Indeed, workers appear to respond to precarious work in different ways, according to their expectations. Thus, when they view their situation as transitory and potentially leading to better career prospects, workers show more resilience than when they will remain in the same precarious situation. Besides, the latter group may also be divided according to whether or not employees have learned to accept their difficult situation.⁸² It is apparent that the relation between precarious work and its outcomes is a complex one, affected by the characteristics of the individual worker, social support, work culture, and other aspects.⁸³

This study provides a valuable contribution to the literature on precarious employment as it gauges the often-neglected perceptions of workers towards the important though not clearly understood phenomenon of precarious employment. It points towards a different conclusion than that implicitly endorsed by employers’ associations in Malta, namely that it is not only in the interest of employees but also in the interest of employers to have an agreed definition and measure of precarious employment. This should not only be based on objective aspects of the phenomenon but should also take into account the subjective aspects, thus enabling researchers to examine situations where the subjective and objective aspects of precariousness do not match, as appears to be the case highlighted in the study. An appropriate definition and measure should be general enough to accommodate the fact that the specific elements contributing to precarious employment are constantly in transformation across time and space.

⁸¹ M. Clarke et al., *op. cit.*

⁸² M. Clarke et al., *op. cit.*

⁸³ M. McNamara et al., *op. cit.*

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