Gender Mainstreaming in the Public Employment Service

Statements and Comments

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1 Background

The socio-cultural background in Malta is very specific, having developed over the centuries as a result of our historical and geographical position\(^1\). The Maltese archipelago lies in the middle of the Mediterranean, where east meets west and north meets south, and has had a long history of colonialism due to this politically strategic position. Malta is extremely small in comparison to other European countries, has one of the highest population densities in the world, is an island group (with resultant insularity), is strongly Catholic, displays strong primacy of the ‘family’, and as found by Abela (1994), is rather traditional and quite resistant to divergent value systems.

Notwithstanding some prevailing sexist attitudes within the general population, the legal structures have been changing over the last 50 years (since women won the right to vote) to acknowledge, and enhance, the equal status of women. During this period, the ‘breadwinner’s wage’\(^2\) was abolished, the public sector removed its ban on employment of married women, and more recently, a government Commission and Secretariat (which was later given the higher status of Department) were set up to work on addressing gender issues. In 1991 amendments to the Constitution were passed that allowed redress against discrimination based on sex, and further allowed for the possibility of special temporary measures to be introduced which are aimed at accelerating the de facto equality between the sexes. This was followed two years later with amendments to the Family Law, which gave men and women equal rights and responsibilities in marriage, and legalised the joint administration of property acquired after marriage (Naudi 1996). This year the above-mentioned Commission and Department have been incorporated into the newly set up National Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women set up as a result of the Equality for Men and Women Act (2003). This Commission will identify and monitor national policies with a view to preventing and addressing discrimination and promoting gender equality. The recent Employment and Industrial Relations Act (2003) also clearly lays out the illegality of harassment on the grounds of gender, as well as introducing and regulating conditions of employment that are ‘family friendly’. Although this list is not fully inclusive, it reflects public acknowledgement and awareness in the public consciousness, of issues concerning gender and employment.

Nevertheless, women’s participation in the labour market remains low as compared to other European countries with a female activity rate of 34.5% as opposed to a male activity rate of 80.7%\(^3\)\(^4\). The gap in employment between women and men remains quite large at 39.6%

\(^1\) See attached appendix for more detailed socio-cultural background in relation to topic.
\(^2\) Men would receive this (also known as ‘family wage’) whilst women would receive two thirds of this amount for identical work.
\(^3\) Percentage of women and men respectively active in the labour market, out of the 15-65 year old section of the population.
\(^4\) Labour Force Survey April-June 2004
(m=73.3%; f=33.7%)\(^5\) as per the National Action Plan for Employment (2004), and growing (43.4% as per Labour Force Survey April-June 2004). It is interesting to note that the gap in employment is lowest in the 15 to 24 year age range (3.3%) before women, on average, start child rearing\(^6\). A look at the gender/age distribution of total employed persons\(^7\) shows that the largest numbers of women in employment are in the 15-24 and 25-34 age ranges, and that this number then decreases as the age range increases. By contrast, the male number is lower in the 15-24 age range and increases more or less steadily, with the largest group being in the 45-54 age range.

**Self-employed** women are also few (8% of all employed women as per NAPemp; down to 5.5% as per LFS Apr-Jun 2004) constituting just 17.5% of all self-employed (13% as per LFS Apr-Jun 2004).

The top five economic activities of employed women are, in descending order: Education; Manufacturing; Wholesale and retail trade, repairs; Health and Social Work; and Hotels and restaurants\(^8\). Although these overlap in places with the top five economic activities of employed men, (Manufacturing; Wholesale and retail trade, repairs; Public admin and defence; Construction; and Transport, storage and communication) one can easily observe the traditional male/ female occupation segregation.

The gender gap in unemployment in Malta is by contrast low, at 0.4% (m=7.8%; f=8.2%) in December 2003\(^9\), up to 1.1% (m=6.9%, f=8.0%), as per the Labour Force Survey (LFS), by March 2004\(^10\), and up again to 1.4% points in June 2004\(^11\). The overall low gap however reflects the large number of women who remain inactive in the labour market (70.4% of all women aged 15+; as compared to 28.8% men)\(^12\), with the female share constituting only 20% of all registered unemployment\(^13\). It is relevant to note that the gender gap in unemployment is reversed when one considers the Labour Statistics sourced through the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC). The figures for April 2004 show the male rate at 6.5% and the female rate at 4.0%\(^14\), and those for May show the male rate at 6.3% and the female rate at 3.7%\(^15\). The definition of ‘unemployed’ in the LFS includes all those who are actively seeking work, as opposed to just those who register with the ETC as unemployed and seeking work. Hence, it would appear that there are many more women seeking employment through means other than the ETC. This may suggest that the ETC need to look at why it is attracting so few of the female unemployed.

The gender pay gap in Malta is also lower than the EU15 average, at 10% in 2001\(^16\). The data produced in the Labour Force Survey Jan-March 2004 show however that in the five top economic activities of employed women the smallest pay gap is in Education, with women earning 90.7% of

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\(^{5}\) NAPemp.

\(^{6}\) Abela (2000:109) points out that when young, Maltese women are expected to take a temporary job in order to save money for their ‘eventual marriage and home-making’ (whilst their male counterparts are expected to pursue further training in view of a ‘secure and financially rewarding life-long employment’).

\(^{7}\) Labour Force Survey Jan-March 2004


\(^{9}\) NAPemp

\(^{10}\) Labour Force Survey Jan-March 2004

\(^{11}\) Labour Force Survey April-June 2004

\(^{12}\) Labour Force Survey Jan-March 2004


\(^{14}\) Labour Statistics, Registered Unemployed: August 2004

\(^{15}\) Labour Statistics, Gainfully Occupied Population: May 2004

\(^{16}\) NAPemp.
men’s average gross annual salary, with the gap increasing\textsuperscript{17} to women earning just 67.2% of men’s average in Hotels and Restaurants. This suggests that apart from horizontal gender division of labour, vertical segregation is also a relevant issue that requires tackling.

2 Relevance, Transferability and Issues

The most outstanding difference in the circumstances of the host country and Malta is the female participation rate in the Labour market, with Denmark having one of the highest rates, and Malta one of the lowest rates (31.6\%\textsuperscript{18}). One of the effects of this is that women constitute only 20\% of the ETC’s registered clients, as opposed to approximately 70\% female clients of the Danish PES. The main aims of the two countries must therefore differ. Whilst the PES in Denmark works to improve the services on offer to those who register as unemployed, the main aim in Malta must be to entice the inactive female population into the labour market in the first place\textsuperscript{19}. As women’s participation rate increases then the clearly stated goals of the Danish PES\textsuperscript{20} will increase in importance also for Malta. At the same time, if implemented in Malta, some of these same goals should go some way towards encouraging women to remain within, to join in the first place, or to return to the labour market after a family break.

The importance of having a clear picture of the current situation before attempting to create change, as emphasised by Karen Sjorup, is noted. Due to its long history of colonialism, Malta, at times, adopts measures that have proved successful elsewhere without fully considering the specific local situation and the ways that these may impinge on the success or otherwise of adopted measures. Methods of measurement also need to be appropriate and relevant in order to be able to monitor \textit{local} progress in these areas.

Two important points raised in the discussion paper are: the importance of placing the responsibility of gender mainstreaming with the management and the system of the PES rather than just seeing it as a project in a corner of the organisation; and the importance of the staff maintaining their commitment once the pilot projects have been completed. Both these points bear great relevance to the situation in Malta. Currently, there are a few women within the ETC who are ‘ildsjael’, to borrow a word from the Danish language. Their commitment is clear for all to see, however it is possible that their efforts are seen as ‘a project in a corner’, with the general management and the system not taking on full responsibility for gender mainstreaming. This is at times demonstrated by, for example, publicity images which go counter to the gender mainstreaming strategies. For responsibility to be devolved and accepted at all levels, however, appropriate gender awareness training and sensitisation needs to take place, followed by constant monitoring. Although training in Gender Mainstreaming techniques has been provided to all senior staff at ETC as part of the Gender Equality Action Plan, assimilation of a different way of seeing

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\textsuperscript{17} Health and social work=82\%; Wholesale and retail trade=78.9\%; Manufacturing=78.3\%.

\textsuperscript{18} Labour Force Survey April-June 2004

\textsuperscript{19} A study commissioned by the ETC and carried out in conjunction with the NSO in April 2004 looked at whether inactive women wish to work, and if so under which conditions. Just under half (44.8\%) of inactive women said yes, they would like to work. The reasons they gave for wishing to work were reasons of finance, learning and socialising. The conditions that would encourage them to work were given as family friendly conditions, further education and training opportunities and a fiscal system that provides incentives. This would suggest that if the appropriate measures were taken then, at least in theory, the female activity rate could be almost doubled.

\textsuperscript{20} Desegregate the gender segregated labour market; Equal treatment; Reduce the pay differentials between women and men; Reduce women’s extra unemployment; Reconcile family life and working life, as stated in the Danish paper.
things, attitudinal change, is more difficult to attain, and requires longer term strategies. Setting up 
an ongoing system of collegial supervision, as used in the Danish PES project, may prove helpful 
in this regard. As found in the Danish Project, this should have the benefit of combining existing 
extperience and knowledge among staff groups in general with gender equality knowledge and 
expertise. The Danish PES suggests that if discussions between colleagues about every day 
problems are organized and structured, allowing sufficient time for exchange of ideas and acquiring 
of new skills, then dialogue-based learning can occur and lead to better solutions to daily problems.

The second point, staff motivation, is related, and deserves even greater scrutiny in relation to the 
Maltese situation. As we have seen, notwithstanding several public measures having been taken 
within the last 50 years or so to improve the situation with regard to gender mainstreaming, the 
responsibility for the care and wellbeing of children (as well as elderly and other relatives with 
support needs) still tends to be taken on by women, who as a result leave the labour market, or do 
not join it in the first place. As Sjorup comments, this is often seen as 'natural', 'normal', and even 
'biological'. The role (and responsibility) of the 'breadwinner' tends to be taken on by the men. 
Abela's (2000: 109) study confirms that gender stereotypes on the respective roles of women and 
men, however much challenged, seem to be still alive in Maltese society. The dominant discourse 
in Malta, strongly influenced by our specific brand of Catholicism\(^\text{21}\), would 'allow' women to leave 
the home to seek paid employment mainly if it is financially necessary to do so, and on condition 
that the children's wellbeing is not affected. Public comments have been made on women going 
out to work and neglecting family responsibilities in order to be able to afford 'luxuries' as opposed 
to 'necessities'. 'Mother-blaming' when things go wrong, especially where the mother is in paid 
employment, is also still quite common within the general public. Since the staff of the ETC, the 
clients of ETC and the prospective employers all constitute part of the general public, it would be 
reasonable to assume that this Discourse will tend to be found amongst them as well. Change is 
occurring, but the dominant discourse has not yet changed sufficiently. As stated by Karen Sjorup 
in the Discussion Paper, the gender segregation in the labour market, and in our case, the gender 
take-up rate too, is 'a very profound element of the gendering of society'.

She suggests that the PES should consider broadening the scope of the policy to include dealing 
with the counselling of school leavers. The ETC in Malta, as part of the Gender Equality Action 
Plan 2003-2004, have started working in this direction. They have formalised cooperation with 
Guidance teachers and Personal and Social Development teachers in State, Church and 
Independent schools, drawn up an action plan together and provided training for them, both on the 
new laws and on gender equality in occupational guidance. A mentoring scheme is also being 
planned through the Gender Issues Committee of the University of Malta. Although the female 
share of post-obligatory education has risen to approximately half (49.8% in 2002\(^\text{22}\)) of the total, 
and women in tertiary education account for 56.9% of the students, they are still over-represented 
in the fields of Education, Healthcare, Arts and Communication. Similar to the situation in Denmark, 
gender desegregation has started to occur in the professional groups of Law, and Medicine and 
Surgery, where women constitute just over half of the students. Women still remain under-
represented in Architecture, Engineering, Computing, Science and Technology fields\(^\text{23}\). The effects 
of the efforts of the ETC in this regard, as delineated above, are not expected to be felt for a few 
years.

\(^{21}\) See appendix. 
\(^{22}\) NAPemp. 
\(^{23}\) NAPemp
With regard to influencing the public, the ETC held an information meeting with key people in the advertising media mainly in relation to the gender related changes in the new laws affecting advertising. A campaign was also planned and launched in all media (printed, radio, television, billboards) attempting to pass on the positive message to Maltese society that the whole family will benefit through collaboration and sharing of family and professional responsibilities24.

Due to our specific situation, facilitating a work/life balance is also an important goal of the Malta ETC, clearly identified in the Gender Equality Action Plan. Apart from the campaign mentioned above, more work has already been done in this regard and continues to be done. This includes active participation in development of sufficient childcare centres, in training for current workers of childcare centres and in the preparation of National Standards on Child Day Care Standards and the Childcare Regulations. There are also plans to educate employers on work/life issues in collaboration with the Malta Employers Association and the National Family Commission.

3 Conclusion

Notwithstanding the major difference between the host country and Malta of female participation rates, certain common problems remain, as has been seen. Whilst the main focus for Malta has to be encouraging the inactive part of the female population to enter the labour market, several of the stated goals of the Danish PES, and actions taken to achieve them are relevant since they could work towards making employment more attractive to women. The main problem, which is also identified by Sjorup, remains that of changing the dominant discourse attitude regarding gender roles. In Malta in particular, the concept that women are to bear responsibility for the care of the family almost exclusively, still acts as very effective barrier against their entry into the labour market.

References


24 ‘Update on the Gender Equality Plan as at August 2004’, document provided by ETC.


Appendix

Socio-cultural Context

The Maltese Archipelago consists of three small, inhabited islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, and two uninhabited islets. The total area is 316 square kilometres. The largest island is Malta, at 246 square kilometres, with a population of just under 368,000. It is the cultural, administrative, industrial and commercial centre of the island group. The next bigger island is Gozo, with a population of just under 32,000 on 67 square kilometres. The longest distance in Malta, NE to SW is about 27 kilometres, and the greatest width is not quite 15 kilometres. The population density (1,257 per square kilometre) is one of the highest in the world, and ten times as high as the EU average.

Notwithstanding its relative barrenness and lack of natural resources, it has been coveted over the years by various powers due to its position in the middle of the Mediterranean, where North meets South and East meets West - a sensitive meeting place of cultures, religions and empires over the ages. The Maltese archipelago lies 90 kilometres south of European Sicily, 290 kilometres North and East of African Tunisia and Libya, and about equidistant from the Straits of Gibraltar and Alexandria, Egypt (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994).

It has been fought over and ruled over the ages by the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the various royal houses of Spain (who ‘gave’ the Islands to the Knights of the Order of St. John), the French and finally the British (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994). For almost half a millennium prior to independence (1964) however we only had two major ‘rulers’: the Knights of the Order of St John (often referred to as the Knights of Malta) (1530-1798) and the British (1800-1964) (except for a short French spell 1798-1800). It is therefore the effects of these that are mostly still felt.

For means of comparison, the Netherlands, which is known to have a relatively high population density, in 2000, had a population density of 366, and Russia of 9.
One such effect of colonialism could be said to be the strong position of the Roman Catholic Church in Malta. Proudly tracing its presence in the Maltese Islands to St. Paul's Shipwreck in 60 A.D., it was during the period when Malta was administered by the Knights of St John, who were a religious Order, that the powers and privileges of the Church in Malta proliferated. The Church had 250 years to grow in wealth, importance and power. When the British took over, they were interested in the national affairs and left the local affairs to the Church. This further consolidated the Church’s influence over the people, enabling it to become established as an important referent to practically all social, including secular, events not falling within the national ambit (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994). As a result, the Church also developed a close and protective relationship with the people and often acted as their spokesperson through the ages. Fox (1991) notes that it was long the guardian of morals, manners and learning in Malta, a position that occasionally brought it into conflict with the British and then the Maltese Governments. It could be said that it was the Church that gave Malta its identity and constructed much of its culture, such that the boundary between the religious and the social is often unclear (Tabone 1994).

Although nowadays the influence of the Church is somewhat reduced, it is still a powerful and influential force and it remains a potent social agent. Abela (1996) found in his study in the nineties that Maltese society, when compared to other European societies, was found to have retained its traditionality and religiosity. He also found that the practice of religion is much stronger in Malta than in other European countries. The self-reported importance attached to religion is also substantially higher in Malta, as stated in another study by Abela (2000:49).

The Church schools, run by nuns, priests and ecclesiastics, also educate a substantial proportion (one third) of the Maltese population from kindergarten to pre-university level (Baldacchino 2002). In fact, access to Church schools is very keenly contested since they are popularly considered to provide a better education than state schools27. One outcome of this is that the most educationally motivated are groomed within a religious ethos that inculcates an ongoing intergenerational loyalty to an often unquestioned hegemonic dominance of the Catholic establishment in contemporary Maltese social life (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994: 13). It is these people, furthermore, that tend to end up in positions of power. Abela (2000: 177) further found that in Malta, unlike Europe, the majority agree that ‘it would be better if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office’ and quite a few others agree or strongly agree that ‘politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office’.

And whilst the general belief tends to be that the Church is slowly losing its grip on Maltese society, Abela (2000: 185) concludes that:

‘In fact at the beginning of the new millennium, there seems to be a reversal of the decline of religious identity manifest in previous waves of the Values Study. This is accompanied by a regained confidence in the Church and an improved relevance of its ministry. The trend towards relativistic ethics, manifest in the mid-nineties, has also been contained’.

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26 In the U.K., for example, part of the ‘social’ would be going to the local pub, or working men's clubs. In Malta, traditionally, men would go to the local band clubs in their village or town, which are dedicated or affiliated to a particular patron saint of the locale.

27 The MATSEC Examination Board’s statistical report on the Summer 2001 examinations confirmed this, finding that boys’ Church schools outperformed state schools in Maltese, English and Mathematics (considered as the three most important subjects). Girls’ Church schools outperformed their state counterparts in Maths and English, but not in Maltese.
Gender and the Primacy of Family

One of the effects often attributed to the Church is the strong emphasis on ‘family’ and ‘family values’. Abela (1994a) points out that Malta remains one of the most family oriented countries in Europe, with the family still being very much at the heart of personal and social life. He claims that the durability of the family in Malta is impressive: ‘... irrespective of strong secularizing western European tendencies that impinge on Maltese culture, family values have, in the main, retained their traditional character’ (p.1).

This argument is affirmed by Tabone (1995:39) who states that although the Maltese family has ‘changed its attire according to present trends, it fundamentally remains what it was’. He goes on to describe the Maltese family as a ‘modified extended family’. Whilst parents and their married children with their offspring no longer live under the same roof, the unity in the nuclear family extends to the family of origin – parents, brothers and sisters and in-laws. The strong relationship that they sustain is similar to the extended family, which is made feasible by the small size of the island. In fact, the lack of distance can be said to be not only physical but psychological as well. The nuclear family receives support from the extended family, especially the family of origin, with parents continuing to show interest and concern towards their married children and their families, and vice versa. The down side of this is that sometimes this interest can become a form of interference (Tabone 1995). They impose sanctions on each other, and exert influence and social control on each other, in order to protect the family honour.

Having said all of the above, the Maltese family has undergone some obvious changes, the main one being that families today are generally smaller. This means that there are fewer years spent in child rearing, although the children are still considered a ‘family value’, and the fulcrum of the family (Tabone 1994). Less child bearing and rearing years theoretically frees women up for the labour market.

It is important to keep in mind that traditionally, as Tabone (1995) points out, married women working outside the home were considered as creating a threat to family stability in terms of marriage fidelity, and the overall welfare of the family, particularly regarding small children. He found that this general attitude could still be said to be strong (61.4% hold it strongly), though declining (79.8% in 1983). Abela (2000: 67) confirms part of this by stating that Maltese men and women hold stronger views on traditional motherhood than their European counterparts do. Thus in Malta many men, though fewer women, hold that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay, and that preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother goes out to work. The implication is that if the woman works in paid employment then the domestic sphere is going to be neglected, since in the main the woman still bears sole responsibility for it. He further adds gender stereotypes on the respective roles of women and men, however much challenged, seem to be still alive in Maltese society.

Small Island Life

The other major factor influencing Maltese society is the small size of the islands. Both O’Reilly Mizzi (1994) and Boissevain (1974) comment emphatically on the resulting lack of anonymity in the Maltese islands, which tends to engender a pervasive atmosphere of familiarity. In Malta everyone tends to know everyone else (see Dench above). The high degree of social visibility results in knowledge that elsewhere would normally be private or unavailable, quickly being obtained, even inadvertently, and rapidly being transformed into a public consumer good via the exchange of information and gossip. In
other words, it becomes public knowledge. Consequently the Maltese learn to be careful in what they say and do, because once their reputation is tarnished there is nowhere to hide; they cannot simply move to another part of the community and start again. Within this context, gossip becomes a means of social control. Self-behaviour is measured and assessed against the potential for gossip. Part of the effect of the above is due to the Mediterranean code of honour and shame. According to the code, a man's honour is determined largely by the behaviour of the women of his family. Thus, most women try to follow the social and legal rules of the society as closely as they can (O'Reilly Mizzi 1994) with the family imposing a certain amount of pressure to keep within the set moral standards of society, since the reputation of the whole family could be at risk. Tabone (1995) found that many of his respondents were sensitive to this and claimed to care about what others say about them. They are continuously on their guard not to fall prey to idle gossip.

O'Reilly Mizzi (1994) goes on to emphasize that the social and cultural rules in Malta have been formulated by the Catholic Church and are widely preached throughout the community. Due to the almost complete unanimity of religious belief and the important economic and political role played by the Church through time in Malta, the models of proper Catholic behaviour are extremely well defined and promulgated in every corner of society. Baldacchino (2002) remarks that Malta's long years as a Catholic fiefdom facilitated the emergence of a local ecclesiastical hierarchy that exercised strong political and cultural influence. This, in turn bred a national mind frame strongly determined by religious precepts of propriety and morality. Gossip therefore works at reinforcing the shared (dominant) values, planting in the Maltese an image of what a good or a bad person is and does. Abela (1994b) points out the possible effect of this. He tells us that a high religiosity, such as that found in Malta, is often associated with low permissiveness and an intolerance of deviant behaviour. A closely-knit community which is held together by shared religious values, again, such as that found in Malta, has little space for divergent value systems. He also confirms that the Mediterranean code of Honour and Shame still regulates relationships in Malta.

These are all powerful means of social control and tend to regulate the behaviour and keep it close to the prescribed rules. As Maltese society changes however, this is beginning to lose some of its force, although it still carries effective potency within the larger society.

Gadamer (1979) suggests that although we may accord a normative authority to our ‘tradition’ (which he defines as the particular socio-cultural and historical matrix within which we are placed and from which we speak) there is no guarantee that our tradition is intrinsically benign. It has been indicated that tradition may harbour all manner of ideological distortions and repressions and still claim authority over us (Turney 1999).

This may be considered to be part of the context affecting women and employment in Malta.
REFERENCES

Abela, A.M. 1994a Shifting Family values in Malta – A Western European Perspective.  Malta: Media Centre for DISCERN.


