

# PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT IN MALTA - THE POSITION OF THE UHM\*

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## Introduction

Malta has the lowest level of participation rate of women in the labour market. A recent labour force survey published shows a figure of 32.6%. This figure is worrying not only because it is so low compared to the rest of the European Union, but also because it is the first time that the figure has gone down, albeit by a tiny percentage, when compared to the previous labour force surveys. Reaching the Lisbon targets, as far as the participation rate of women goes, seems to be an objective which needs energy and initiative from all the social partners.

In the past 20 years the gap between the male and female segment of the population has narrowed slightly; from 51.5 per cent of the population being women in 1982, to 50.5 per cent in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Although more boys than girls are born, women live longer and therefore the percentage rate of women who live more than 65 years is greater than that of men. In fact the life expectancy for women in 2002 stood at nearly 81 years whilst that for men stood at 76.<sup>2</sup>

## Causes

The low participation rate of women in the labour market is attributable to various causes. There are many obstacles hindering the entry of women into the labour market. These obstacles are also present throughout her working life and are increased in cases of marriage and/or family responsibilities.

There are hardly any support structures available and atypical work is still an innovative term. Only 17.4 per cent of working-women worked full time in 2003, while 3.9 per cent worked part-time and 1.1 per cent were in full-time employment but with reduced hours<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office (NSO) News Release 8<sup>th</sup> March 2004

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

The latter is available for public service employees but very few private companies offer this possibility. It is hardly surprising that where there is the possibility of working full-time with reduced hours, very few men take this option. This is still seen as a diminution in virility for men. Being the bread-winner is still the man's responsibility in our country.

Very often, women work part-time in order to contribute financially to their family, particularly to the costs of the upbringing of children. Working part-time very often reduces a person's career prospects. Part-time workers are also ineligible for certain social benefits unless they work beyond the minimum threshold, which in Malta stands at 20 hours per week. Part-timers must also pay a relatively high national insurance contribution even if the hours worked are minimal.

Malta has quite a high percentage of inactive persons.<sup>4</sup> Inactivity refers to that section of society who are neither employed nor unemployed. The percentage rate of inactive men is much lower than that of women, who make up 70.9% of the inactive population. The main reason for inactivity is attributable to personal or family responsibilities. This means that very often women stay out of the labour market due to child-care and family commitments. The percentage of inactive women is highest for married women (65%<sup>5</sup>), and therefore in the age bracket of mothers with young children.

Very often, women also care *for sick or elderly relatives* - another factor alienating women from the labour market.

On the other hand, our fertility rate is going down and Maltese women are having their children later on in life. In fact the average age of mothers of first born children in Malta is the highest in the European Union at 25.8 years.<sup>6</sup>

*Child-care and day-care centers* may provide a remedy for women who have these responsibilities. However, when one looks at what is available in our country, one is in for disappointment. Schools would provide a remedy if school hour patterns were more in line with working hours patterns. However this is not the case. In fact in Malta, schools finish very early.

The few child-care centres available in Malta are still not regulated and very expensive. A document for consultation was issued recently for public debate. No licences are available and although many carers are undergoing training, there are many who do this work without any form of qualifications. This has been possible since no inspections are held. In this light, parents may find it difficult to leave their children in the trust of these centres. So, parents very often rely on grandparents to take care of their children. However, this solution will not last for long since there may be more cases of both grandparents working.

Another major obstacle is our *traditional values*, which is in itself a very positive aspect of Maltese society. However, there is a stigma surrounding working mothers. The prospect of a working mother and a househusband is hard to come by. Those men who venture into the

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<sup>4</sup> Inactivity means that a person is neither employed nor unemployed.

<sup>5</sup> Labour Force Survey 2003

<sup>6</sup> Fertility and family issues in an enlarged Europe, 2004. European Commission.

realms of atypical work such as reduced hours in order to share family responsibilities, usually bear the brunt of interminable jokes about a reduction in virility. The concept of sharing both financial and family responsibilities should be promoted and praised. It would reduce tension in many families and ease the burdens on both parents. The Maltese Church should play a pivotal role on this issue.

Very often, women tend to opt for part-time work in order to reconcile work with family life. The way our *taxation system* functions, it is not financially viable for these women to work since they end up paying all that they earn to the Commissioner of Inland Revenue. Time and again, suggestions have been put forward to the Government to change tax burdens on the second wage earner. However, to-date, this has fallen on deaf ears. The system is such that even in marriages governed by the community of acquests, pension cheques are received only by the husband. This is so even though the wife is legally entitled to half the earnings - even if she has never worked outside the home.

When one looks at the situation regarding *education* for women, it is immediately obvious that the participation of women in further education kept increasing throughout the years. In fact, even in 2001/2002, the female component of University students made up 56.9%<sup>6</sup>. A more detailed analysis of the situation shows that female participation was highest within the Faculty of Education at 75.2% of the total faculty students. The teaching profession is very much a women's domain. Very often, girls are enticed to take up this course with a future family in mind. The short working hours and long summer vacations, matching those of future children if any, are very tantalizing, aside from the teaching vocation pursued. The caring professions are next in line with 68.5% of the students of the Institute of Health Care being composed of girls. The Faculty of Arts has a representation of 66.7%, the Centre for Communication Technology 61.9%, the Faculty of Law 57.1%, Medicine and Surgery 56.1% and the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy 51.5% of the total faculty students. The upward trend in the number of female graduates at tertiary level began in 1999/2000 and has continued since.

I strongly believe that flexible hours and teleworking would go some way towards improving the situation and increasing the employment rate for women. Job-sharing and flexible hours may also be beneficial. However, we need the laws and the structures to protect those women who opt for these types of atypical jobs. There are laws governing part-time workers and workers on fixed-term contracts but there are no laws backing temping agencies and persons to use their services, for example. These types of jobs would not only entice women workers but would also increase the employment rate as a whole. More jobs would be created, thus helping entrepreneurs and the economy as a whole.

There are very few women in top-level and decision-making positions, although there has been a noticeable improvement over the last 16 years. In fact only 6 women held top level positions in the public service in 1987. This figure has increased to 89 in 2003 making up 15.7 per cent of the high level positions<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> NSO News Release 2004

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

Moreover, the annual salary for women is on average less than that for males in all occupations except for that in skilled agriculture and fisheries works. Statistics show that professionals earn Lm902.59 less annually than their male counterparts. Female clerks earn Lm618.62 less per annum than males while female Technicians and Associate Professionals earn Lm830.38 less than males per year.<sup>8</sup>

We hear a lot about family-friendly measures, and parental leave is a case in point. Parental leave is a very recent introduction for employees in the private sector other than those whose collective agreement provided for a stipulated period of parental leave. The new Employment and Industrial Relations Act introduced a 3-month parental leave for employees in the private sector although subject to exceptions. However, the situation pertaining in the public service has been different for quite some time. In fact employees in the public service may benefit from a career break of 3 years as well as a year for every child born to him or her.

A recent study commissioned by the Department of Women in Society within the Ministry for Social Policy studied the career progression of women and men and the impact of parental leave in the Maltese public service.<sup>9</sup> It transpired from the study that during the years 1997 to 2001, 98% of those employees who availed themselves of parental leave were women. The Ministry of Education had the highest record of officers who availed themselves of parental leave followed by the Ministry of Health.

Public Service employees may also avail themselves of responsibility breaks in order to look after a sick or disabled relative. The study shows that even in this case, it is women who take up this leave. In fact, 68% of those who avail themselves of this leave are women.

Various issues emerge from this study. The take-up of these options is substantial and is mainly due to take-up by women employees. Few officers who avail themselves actually leave the service. Another issue which emerges is that family friendly measures have facilitated the retention of jobs. Moreover, once women remain in the labour market at the crucial stage of childrearing, the probability that they will continue to do so is high. The study shows that for the public service to make optimum use of the retention of human resources, there is a need for “keep-in-touch” policies. In this way, officers who are on parental leave, on a career break or on responsibility leave, are kept up-to-date with developments in their workplace in order to facilitate their resumption of duties or their return, and address the possibility that their career advancement may be jeopardised by such absent periods. These include granting employees on leave access to Government circulars, to training courses offered by the Staff Development Organisation (SDO) and other occupational and training organisations as well as access to departmental meetings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The Career Progression of Women and Men: Equal Opportunities. The Impact of Parental Leave in the Maltese Public Service. Study. Department for Women in Society. Ministry for Social Policy 2003.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Conclusion**

Malta needs to adopt a policy of support structures for women who wish to enter or to remain in the labour market. This would benefit not only those availing themselves of such support structures but also our welfare state. It would help increase the participation rate of women overall, leading to a situation of value for money. Our education system is expensive and much goes towards the education of women. Permitting these women to give back something to the State would contribute towards the population as a whole.

The UHM has been striving on this issue and shall continue with its endeavours to ensure a structure which is more family friendly. Maybe time is ripe for a major change in the way politicians think about these issues. Some improvements seem to be underway but policies in place are of paramount importance. We still need to change the way we behave and a mentality shift is necessary.