

'LISBON' AND GENDER-GAPS IN EMPLOYMENT

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The Lisbon European Council of 2000 set, as a new strategic goal for the EU over the 2000 - 2010 decade, "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion."

The Lisbon overall employment target is 70% for the enlarged EU and that for women is 60%. This requires the creation of 22×10^6 jobs translating to a net employment creation of around 3×10^6 jobs per year. Increased employment will not only contribute to the desired economic growth but will also reinforce the sustainability of social protection systems. Despite the current weak economic growth, the female employment rate increased reaching 55.6% in EU in 2002.

Since 1995, a phenomenon that has become known as the *European paradox* is emerging. A slowdown in EU productivity growth still persists, despite strong employment growth for skilled people. The US experience points towards the importance of the development of new mathematical, scientific and computing technologies. The continual transformation of ICT forces old knowledge to become fast obsolete so that personnel need to create, adapt to, absorb and implement new knowledge at an unprecedented accelerated rate.

- The impact on wage flexibility, training and career prospects, flexible contractual arrangements, investment in knowledge and indicators to measure the improvement in the quality of work needs to be addressed.

Where does the Maltese Situation Figure against this Backdrop?

The *socio-cultural background* in Malta is very specific, having developed over the centuries as a result of our historical and geographical position. 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 lag in change and

resilience), 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.

Women work mostly in Education, Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail Trade, Repairs, Health and Social Work, Hotels and Restaurants, in this stated order. As for men, Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail Trade, Repairs, Public Administration & Defence, Construction, Transport, Storage and Communication are the most common economic activities. This clearly shows the traditional occupation sex-segregation, despite some overlapping.

Although the gender gap in Education, measured as a fraction of the male employee force, is low, that at the university is considerable. Moreover, because of various factors, that may not all stem from the unwillingness of management to show merited trust in competent and qualified women, female positions are predominant in the lower echelons of the vertical hierarchy of status posts, with at present only one full professor (appointed twenty years ago) and three associate professors (appointed during the past ten years). Even within the administrative sector, important positions are occupied by men.

A close look at the statistics reveals that for the pre-child-rearing age group (15-24) the gap in employment is just 3.3% whereas it is 43.4% overall. Only 8% of the female labour force are self-employed, equivalent to only 13% of all the self employed.

In spite of an overall overt and not so overt attitude against equality, 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 public sector removed its ban on employment of married women. In 1991, amendments to the Constitution were passed that allowed redress against discrimination based on sex. Amendments to the Family Law gave men and women equal rights and responsibilities in marriage, and legalised the joint administration of property acquired after marriage (Naudi 1996). In 2004, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women was 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. That same year saw the passing of the Employment and Industrial Relations Act (2003) which also clearly lays out the illegality of harassment on the grounds of gender, besides 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.

It is clear that owing to Malta's long history of colonialism and relative seclusion, strategies that have produced the desired effects in most countries were not as effective in Malta. Notwithstanding the apparently wide discussion at the top rungs of society such as in Parliament and other prestigious constituted bodies, traditional trends of low female employment have not been reversed.

The Labour Force survey of 2004, carried out by NSO, shows that, *women's participation in the labour market*, for the 15-65 age cohort, 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%.

The Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) carried out a survey independently of the National Statistics Office (NSO). The general trends were shown to be the same and divergences in the actual statistics were due to the different definitions of "*unemployed*" used. Whereas the NSO includes all those actively seeking work, the ETC considers only those who register as unemployed with the corporation. This difference becomes significant since women tend to seek work without seeing the need to register for it. In fact 70.4% of all women and 28.8% of all men are inactive but only 20% of the registered unemployed are women.

The *gender pay gap* in Malta is lower than the 10% registered as the 2001 EU-15 average. However, that in Education is 9.3% and as much as 33.8% in the hotel and restaurant industry, measured as a percentage of men's average wage in the respective activities.

There is a welcome emphasis now being shown in the media prompted by government statements on:

- The reconciliation of the family and professional life.
- The re-integration of women (and men) who have left the labour market.
- Increasing the female employment rate.

Suggested Solutions

- Comparative studies on the quality of work by equally qualified females and males in a horizontal dimension.
- Development of objective indicators enabling performance to be measured.
- Innovative Curricula for primary and secondary schools which challenge traditional gender roles including the interpretation of chemical and physical laws in terms of everyday process such as baking, cooking and ironing which tend to give importance to household chores.
- The development of a tool to measure the extent to which mainstreaming (the integration and implementation of the promotion of competent women into policy and practice, right from the planning stage) is being put into practice.

Suggested Mainstreaming Mechanisms

- Identifying factors leading to inequality and discrimination against women.
- Analysing potential impact by policies on female employment/promotion.
- Identifying and measuring the factors that lead to good practice, thus setting benchmarks.
- Transfer and dissemination of good practice.
- Training management at the university, government departments and industry in gender-equality mainstreaming.

- Ensuring that promotion-selection boards do not wear gender-biased glasses and acknowledge top quality achievements from men and women alike.

Suggested policy:

- Repeated “*note and praise good practice*” exercises.
- Reward top achievers (companies, education centres) who promote women that occupy decision-taking positions.
- Combine gender-equality friendly groups among government departments, NGOs and industrial companies into a federation that society looks up to and is wary to irritate.
- Responsibility of gender mainstreaming to be placed with the management.
- Government to set up a powerful watchdog body that monitors and measures its commitment to gender mainstreaming.
- Redress to be seen to be implemented by “name and shame list”.

Conclusion

Although there is a noted increase in female employment, the rate is too low. At present tendency, ruling out reversal of trends, an optimistic estimate of the time required to reach the desired Lisbon 2010 target is *several decades*. It is clear that the strategies have to go beyond that of persuasion that women can deliver as much and in some areas more than men. *Means to kick-start a non-trivial increase in female employment need to be used*. Training in gender-mainstreaming techniques has been provided to all senior staff at ETC and on a voluntary basis, to directors of government departments. It is the opinion of many, who have been active for years in advocating gender mainstreaming and who see so little return for their untiring efforts, that authorities should follow the same norms to implement equality as for their priority policies. They ensure compliance by enforcement, complemented with an aggressive persuasion campaign.

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