

GENDER EQUALITY IN MALTA: A SOUTHERN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

This article looks at current gender equality measures, within wider social policy formation, in the smallest EU member state of Malta. The theoretical approach combines discussion of the effect of past histories on present measures, of the State and the 'power resources' of trade unions, of supranational actors such as the EU and of Roman Catholic discourses. This is especially relevant regarding the contest between the recent state promotion of employment for married females and mothers, and the Church's continued antipathy to such practices¹. The impact of the EU on Maltese policy is evident not only in the local legislative compliance with Directives and Recommendations, and in the setting up of national equality machinery, but

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¹ In his message during the annual Lenten Pilgrimage on the Sunday known as 'People's Sunday' the Archbishop referred yet again to women's natural vocation as mothers, whilst on the same day, the Minister of the Family and Social Solidarity had appealed to the Church for support for state campaigns to increase the female participation rate. (*The Sunday Times*, 6 March 2006).

also in 'soft law' measures such as through the running of projects with EU funds under the ESF and other frameworks. Will the dominance of EU employment policies in equality discourses and practices increase or restrict Maltese women's freedoms, leading to the loss of a valued 'maternalist' culture?

PLACING MALTA ON THE EQUALITY MAP

Malta is the smallest EU member (316 km sq.) with a population of 402,668 persons (NSO 2005). In preparation for accession to the European Union in 2004, the **Acquis Communautaire** (2001) set a 'road map' for Maltese economic and social policy making². Of concern was Malta's low overall employment rate (54.5%) and the correspondingly low female employment rate (34.5%). It was held that a 'broad-based and co-ordinated effort will be needed for Malta to reach employment targets set by the EU for member states'³. Currently (NSO 2006), the activity rate for females is 37%, which is far below the Lisbon Agenda target of 60%, whilst for males it is 77.9%. The unemployment rate of females, at 9.1%, is higher than that of males at 6.5%, whilst the actual employment rate of females is 33.7% (45,990 females). Unemployment stood at 7.3% in the survey period. The most recent EU report on equality between men and women (COM 2006) ranks Malta at the bottom of the EU 25 in a number of gender indicators such as employment rates, members of parliament, managers, educational attainment for persons aged 20-24, and full professors. It is also in 23rd place for life-long learning, doing better only in being closer to the EU average in the indicator of being at risk of poverty after social transfers, and the gender pay gap. The Maltese economy has been characterised by a growing structural deficit in public finances for the last decade (MLP 2001). A number of economic sectors are contracting and jobs are being lost.

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malta 2001, *Malta: National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis*.

³ Media Release, May 2003, *Employment and Training Corporation, JAP In-Depth Review*.

A HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL INTERRUPTION

Most scholars within the welfare regime typology speak of a 'southern model of welfare' (Matsaganis et al 2003, p.642) or a 'Latin Rim' (Abrahamson 1999) by which it is usually understood that state provision is marginal, whilst the family is essential for meeting social needs. The extent to which persons are dependent on families for provisioning, and especially on women for care, is known as 'familialism'. The correspondence between southern 'familialism' and low female activity rates is strong, and related also to the particular history of Roman Catholic discourses in these countries. For example, whilst Matsaganis et al (2003) group Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain together, Orloff (2002) places Greece, Italy and Spain together with Ireland (a 'northern', but mainly Catholic, country), in the cluster of countries with the lowest female participation rates. Unlike these nations, Malta's past as a British ex-colony is significant in combining 'familialism' with the development of a strong welfare state (now being rolled back). The 'male breadwinner model' (Cammilleri-Cassar 2005) derived from both Catholic discourses as well as from the relative strength of the male dominated trade unions, originally of workers in the Defence Department.

EARLY DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES

The 'modern' form of welfare dates to the 1920s and the introduction of self-government in 1921. Welfare provision became coupled with work as the criterion for benefit, underpinning what is now known as the male breadwinner model of welfare provision (Lewis 1992). Alongside the system of social security for mainly male workers and their families, a system of social assistance was developed. During the 1940s, the formation of the General Workers' Union and the growing popularity of the Malta Labour Party led to the setting up of the Labour Front and the campaign to repeal the 1939 Voting Ordinance (with male-only plural voting) to extend the franchise to both males and females over 18 years of age (Pirotta 1987, pp.65 passim), which after considerable opposition from the conservative parties and the Catholic Church (in the case of women) passed in 1947. This led to the granting of the vote to 63,997 women (54.4% of the whole electorate) and a Labour landslide electoral result in 1947, as well as the restoration of responsible government and the first Labour administration, contributing to the formation of a social democratic welfare state.

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The first achievements were the 1956 National Assistance Act and National Insurance Act (NIA). The NIA was an extensive scheme of social insurance, financed through contributions paid by the employee, 'his' employer and the State which covered benefits, allowances and pensions. Contributions were compulsory, and primarily the scheme encouraged employment. Working men and women were covered by the scheme. However, since it was premised on a model of the family in which the main breadwinner was the male, employed females would lose benefits if they were married. Moreover, in the post-second-world-war contraction of demand for labour, protective legislation was put in place which restricted female access to the labour market (Pirota 1987, p.120). The slow post-war economic recovery and the rundown of the military base made emigration seem a sensible solution to the problem of surplus labour. Regulations were in place to restrict female employment, by the introduction of a marriage bar, dating to a 1948 Cabinet decision (Pirota 1991, p.213) which has had lasting negative effects on both the public service and individual women. Leighton (2001) reports that in 2001, there were no women in Grades 1 and 2 (the top grades) of the Maltese public service and only one woman (3.5% of the total) in grade 3. A further restriction on female employment was enacted, also under a Labour government, in 1974, when women were prohibited from filling a vacancy for a post previously held by a man⁴. When the marriage bar was finally removed in 1979, returning women were not permitted to return to their previous grade, but had to start at the bottom grade of the service, thereby losing years of seniority and working in posts that were below their level of competency⁵.

During the 1960s, the Nationalist Party in government planned for secondary education for all, raised the school leaving age to 16 and abolished university fees, all measures aiding the emancipation of women, who however remained inactive in the labour market on marriage, partly due to continuing marriage bars, but also as a result of female preferences (Hakim 1996, 2002, 2004). Camilleri (1997) gives an account of the Church's 'exclusive mothering' discourses during this period, finding that these remain powerful in the construction of female identity to date (Cammilleri-Cassar 2005). Other

⁴ Section 26A, Act XLVI of 1974. It appears that this section has escaped the amendments made to civil law to conform to equality legislation. It is still in vigore, though not applied.

⁵ MPO Circular no 18/96 –Service prior to resignation not reckonable for assimilation.

research reviewed in Darmanin (2006) suggests that these discourses have become normative and have been supported by state family policy (see below) but may be about to shift due to EU pressure on mothers to be active in the labour market.

CONSOLIDATION OF THE MALE BREADWINNER MODEL AND 'MATERNALIST' POLICIES

The post 1970s Labour government introduced further measures to aid families, which served to develop a 'maternalist' state discourse (Orloff 2004), which has had questionable benefits for women, given that support for 'maternalism' has also led to economic dependency for 'inactive' women, with repercussions such as poverty in old age, as well as particular vulnerability for those whose marriages have broken down. In 1973 a Child Allowance paid to families on the basis of the number of children in a family was introduced, possibly making it more viable for mothers to be inactive. Interestingly, whilst the post-1981 Labour Party was becoming more gender-equality conscious, having not only removed some protective legislation but also introduced paid maternity leave for thirteen weeks for all females in employment in the public service, it did this within a 'maternalist' approach. Thus, home-making mothers also received maternity benefit (as distinct from maternity leave) for 13 weeks. In 1986, Social Assistance was extended to single or widowed females who were taking care (with unpaid labour) of an elderly or disabled relative. On the one hand, this demonstrates a value being attached to care, but, on the other, couples care-work with females. Both Catholic discourses and social policy provision served to create enough of a 'comfort zone' that would discourage women from participation in the labour market, and exclude them from entitlement to benefits in their own right. Even in the 1990s, women have been encouraged to care for elderly or disabled relatives at home, by the enticement of a 'Carer's Pension' (1992), pegged at about half the minimum wage. Since the 1987 election of the Nationalist Party, previous universal entitlements to provision became increasingly subject to means testing. The Children's Allowance became dependent, in 1996, on a means test, and saw a substantial drop in beneficiaries. In 1989 a Family Bonus, also pegged to the Children's Allowance, was introduced whilst Emergency Assistance was available for 'home-driven destitute females' (Department of Social Security 2002, p.11). Given the growing poverty in Malta, especially amongst female lone parents, in 1996 a Supplementary Allowance was introduced for all those whose total

income fell below a certain level. In a bid to encourage welfare beneficiaries back into the labour market, and to reduce pressure on benefit increase due to inflation, the 1996 Budget made it clear that in the case of one-parent families, they could both receive social assistance and also be in paid employment, as long as the total income did not exceed the minimum wage. With no state-provided child care for children⁶, many lone mothers of young children have not been able to work.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL RIGHTS

The Nationalist Party elected to government in 1987, and still in office (with an 18 month period of Labour administration 1996-98) today, brought a number of changes in the gender equality field. Since there was immediate interest in applying for EC membership (formal application was activated in 1990), and in honouring other international obligations, the government introduced a number of basic civil rights. The Constitution of Malta entrenches the Roman Catholic religion as the religion of Malta⁷. In 1987, endorsement of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 1991),⁸ was followed by constitutional amendments prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sex through Act XIV, now Chapter 319, of the Laws of Malta (Heywood 1995, p.115). Equal pay for women for the 'same work' (not of equal value) as men had been entrenched, as a principle, in the Constitution of Malta since 1964. OPM Circular 38/67⁹ had established limited parity with males for female employees in the public service since 1967. It was through the endeavours of the trade unions that this was extended to all female employees, irrespective of whether they worked in the state or the private sector (Legal Notice 42/76).

⁶ *Since the early 1980s children of age three and up can attend State kindergarten for six hours a day. About 90% of children in the age group attend.*

⁷ *With implications regarding marriage, divorce, abortion and sexual orientation which cannot be discussed here for reasons of length.*

⁸ *OPM Circular 66/91 advising government departments and parastatal companies to conform to CEDAW.*

⁹ *Office of the Prime Minister*

THE DEMANDS OF THE LOCAL AND THE PRESSURES OF THE SUPRANATIONAL EU

Two main strategies were developed after 1987. The first, in part responding to the effects of globalisation on the local economy and the need to cutback what had been a generous welfare state, as well as to involve civil society, especially the Church voluntary organisations, saw the growing involvement of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the provision of welfare and in social policy formulation. Where previously there was separation between the state and the Church or NGO provision, 'blended' forms of provision began to emerge. These include so-called 'public-private partnerships' with the heavy involvement of corporations and banks such as HSBC Malta (Darmanin 2002). This strategy was constructed within a 'decentralisation' or 'subsidiarity' discourse consonant with the EU requirements for accession (CAIMED no date) and could be seen to be leading to 'devolved governance' (Chaney and Fevre 2001).

The second strategy was to transfer EU Directives and Recommendations into Maltese law, often passing them quickly through the 'filter' of 'advisory' bodies or authorities which appeared to function as independent lobbies, yet had been appointed by government. Regarding gender, the only powerful and competent women's lobby has been the National Council of Women, with close links to the party in government. Small feminist groups were unable to muster enough power to have their agenda heard during the brief period allowed for discussion of the Equality White Paper. The European Women's Lobby has recently provided these smaller groups with occasion to unite, so that together with women's sections of trade unions, the Malta Confederation of Women's Organisations (MCWO) has now been established. The opposition Labour Party was also considerably weakened through not having any opportunity to co-opt members onto advisory boards or national commissions.

The ministerialisation of policy (Ball 1990) is evident in the composition of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (hereafter referred to as NCPE) since appointments are made by the Prime Minister on the advice of the Minister, of appointees 'best suited to deal with issues of equality'¹⁰. In

¹⁰ *Act 1 of 2003, Cap 456 of the Laws of Malta, An Act to Promote Equality for Men and Women, (Government Gazette, October 2002, no 17, 303)*

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the present set-up, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, established by Article 12 of Act 1 of 2003, is a 'restructured' version of the 1987 machinery¹¹. With the 2003 Act, the Department and Commission for the Advancement of Women were dissolved to be replaced by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality with a permanent secretariat. In the introduction to the White Paper on Equality between Men and Women (Ministry of Social Policy 2002, p.40) reference is made to external pressures:

This important issue has been recognised by the Maltese Government both in its electoral manifesto, as well as in its commitment to adopt the European Union *acquis communautaire* prior to membership in the EU. There are also obligations arising from Conventions signed by the Maltese Government in previous years.

The Equality for Men and Women Act (2003) protects males and females of any age from discrimination. Discrimination in employment, banking and financial institutions, education, and advertising is unlawful. The Act also includes a section on sexual harassment. It gives the Commissioner the competence to receive complaints and initiate investigations 'on any matter involving an act or omission that is allegedly unlawful under the provisions of this Act'. However, section 20: 1c, allows for exemptions from the requirements of the law of some articles (including regarding discrimination in employment), which can be prescribed by the Minister after consultation with the Commission. This makes it even more urgent that the Commission should not be appointed by the government of the day, but by parliament.

¹¹ *The phases of development of the machinery include the 1987-96 Secretariat/Department of the Equal Status of Women (SESW/DESW) with a government appointed advisory body, the Commission for the Advancement of Women. The 1996-8 Labour Government set up a Department of Women's Rights (DWR) with a Parliamentary Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister.*

MALTA IN THE EU: POLICY BORROWING OR POLICY LEARNING?

The NCPE strategic policy directions¹² for 2004-2006 make it clear that EU accession 'has accelerated the need for legislation and policies to address particular issues'. The most pressing appear to be the very low participation rate of Maltese women in the labour market, with Malta 27th in the Lisbon Strategy league¹³ and the very low rate of women in decision-making¹⁴. The NCPE plans to focus on promoting gender equality in economic life, in representation and civil life. Some of its projects will be discussed below. In this second phase of equality policy making, there is a shift to action-research-type projects (funded mainly by the EU); to cultural approaches such as using the media or publicity campaigns through local councils to encourage the 'inactive' to enter the labour market; and to mainstreaming of gender equality at every level of Maltese life and especially with the involvement of civil society in a number of joint projects. A second organisational arm of the gender equality strategy is the establishment, since 2003, of a Gender Equality Unit in the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) which has run projects, sometimes in parallel, and at other times in hand, with the NCPE. Constructed within a remit derived from the European Employment Strategy, the Maltese National Action Plan for Gender Equality has been supported by the Structural Funds for six projects, making ETC the largest beneficiary of such funding in Malta¹⁵. ESF has funded other projects, of which more below. A comprehensive account of ETC gender equality practice can be found in ETC (2005).

¹² *National Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women: Strategic Policy Directions 2004-2006*, available online www.equality.gov.mt/ncge_strat_policies.pdf

¹³ *From a report by the Centre for European Reform, 8th March 2006, The Lisbon Scorecard V- Can Europe Compete?*, summary available on <http://www.euractiv.com>

¹⁴ *The Commissioner NCPE on Women's Day, 8th March 2006 in a statement published in The Times, 8th March 2006, 12, 'Women in Decision-Making'*,

¹⁵ *Details on the web site of ETC, Structural Funds Programme 2004-2006, <http://www.etc.gov.mt/site/page.aspx?pageid=2104>*

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE GENDER EQUALITY MACHINERY

Since the 1990s the core activities of the equality machinery have included preparatory work on new equality legislation, or the amending of existing laws ensuring that Malta is in conformity with her international obligations as signatory of UN, EU and other conventions; advising other bodies, including ministries and departments on policy directions and supporting the mainstreaming of gender equality in these entities; education and training; information giving and publicity campaigns; research and publications; decision-making, through representing the national machinery on other bodies; dealing with complaints; and dealing with other international or supranational commitments; responding to the requests of internal lobbies and private individual requests for support or information; representing Malta at local and international conferences, and other services. The NCPE is understaffed and under-funded. New forms of (inter)dependence (Dehousse 1997) have been created in the bid to utilise ESF funds, whilst policy borrowing can neglect 'local knowledge' as is happening in the case of the thrust toward increasing the female participation rate, ignoring the effect of this on sedimented forms of family practices and values, especially regarding the care of children and the elderly with implications for the future of family life. Examples from the national machinery's endeavours in the field of legislation and training, discussed below, demonstrate the conflating of equality policy with employment policy. This is also evident in the research interests of the national machinery, not discussed here.

THE NATIONAL MACHINERY AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF LEGISLATION

The family and marriage regimes

The unsuccessful attempt in 1985 to amend the Civil Code regarding marriage, and even to consider the introduction of divorce¹⁶, meant that until

¹⁶ *Civil marriage was introduced in 1975. There is no divorce law in Malta though there is the possibility of a civil annulment in certain cases. A concordat with the Vatican leading to the Marriage Act Amendment by Act I of 1995 gave the Ecclesiastical Tribunal exclusive jurisdiction over canonical marriages (with civil effect). This means that in case of an appeal for nullity of marriage conducted by the*

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1993 husbands' specific rights over the community of acquests, the family home, and children (*pater potestas*) continued unchallenged. The amendment to the Civil Code, Act XXI of 1993 'Equal Partners in Marriage', did establish some basic equality principles especially regarding the rights of mothers over their children, in married women's financial rights (to submit their own income tax return) and others. It also established that where the marriage was regulated by the community of acquests, husbands could not dispose of any part of the acquests without the agreement of the wife. However, there remain two major weaknesses in the law as it now stands. Many notaries, bankers and others are not demanding, as they should by law, that the wife be co-signatory to any transfer of the acquests to third parties. Many prospective husbands are now persuading their future wives to opt for a different regime, based on a separation of the spouses' property and earnings, leaving women, in cases of separation where the husband has been the sole breadwinner, with little financial protection. It is also likely that, drawing on the principle of subsidiarity, the Maltese parliament will reject the EU draft document on divorce, which the EU Commission is due to adopt in July 2006¹⁷. The Domestic Violence Act 2005¹⁸ set up a Commission on Domestic Violence and amended some sections of the existing Criminal Code (Cap. 9) and the Civil Code (Cap. 16). This Act is disappointing because it has left the onus of prosecution on the victim. Previously, before the Police could act, a victim had to make a written (legal) complaint. Now the police can act without the written complaint, but section 20 of the Act allowed for an alleged victim to stop proceedings once they were underway.

Employment

The national machinery was instrumental in amendments to the Social Security Act and the Income Tax Act whereby the former recognises women as head of household in specific cases, and the latter (through Act XX of 1996) gave married women the right to sign their income tax return jointly with their husband, and also to be (with consent from the spouse) the spouse

Church, even if one partner objects, or is not a Catholic, the case is to be heard by the Ecclesiastical Tribunal only. This denies these persons their civil rights.

¹⁷ *Conference of Community and European Affairs Committee of Parliaments, COSAC, Vienna, February 20th 2006, the Maltese Parliament requested, on the principle of subsidiarity, to examine the EU divorce draft document.*

¹⁸ *Which came into force on 28th February 2006,*

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responsible for the tax on chargeable income. Since 1990 husbands and wives can submit separate income tax returns. Since then, an incentive to increase the female participation rate has seen subsidiary legislation in the form of a tax credit for women who return to employment who have been 'absent for at least five years'¹⁹. Consonant with EU equal treatment directives, subsidiary legislation on equal treatment in occupational social security schemes has also been introduced recently²⁰. Better working conditions for part-time workers had also been obtained, though employers are employing people below the twenty hours a week that would give protection. Legal Notice 61/96 classifies any part-time worker who works more than twenty hours a week as 'Full-time with Reduced Hours', on the basis of which they are eligible, on a *pro rata* basis, for sick leave and other benefits. About 8,000 women working part-time benefited from this regulation at the time. The number of female part-time employees is on the increase, with 18.1% of all employed females working part-time, accounting for 67% of the total (NSO 2006). Women's groups and trade unions have suggested that all part-time workers should receive benefits on a *pro rata* basis.

The family friendly measures in employment that were promoted by both the Nationalist and the Labour parties were finally consolidated by Act XXII of the 2002 Employment and Industrial Relations Act (EIRA)²¹. The Act provides for more flexible maternity leave management, three months unpaid parental leave, reduced hours, and a minimum of ten hours of urgent leave (with pay) per year (Laiiviera 2002) for employees in the public sector. Since then Parental Leave Entitlement Regulations²² (2003) have been extended to all employees (including part-time workers working more than 20 hours a

¹⁹ *Tax Credit (Women Returning to Employment) Rules, Subsidiary Legislation 123.81, Legal Notice 110 of 2005.*

²⁰ *Equal Treatment in Occupational Social Security Schemes, Subsidiary Legislation 318.20, Legal Notice 317 of 2005*

²¹ *The front cover of the White Paper Employment Relations Act, designed by artist A. Calleja showed amongst others a topless woman. The Act consolidated, with amendments the Conditions of Employment (regulation) Act (Cap.135) and the Industrial Relations Act (Cap. 266)*

²² *Subsidiary Legislation 452.78, Parental Leave Entitlement Regulations, Legal Notice 225 of 2003.*

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week) and Urgent Family Leave Regulations²³ (2003) also extend the right to urgent leave to similar categories of employees. The 2002 EIRA Act was designed to ratify certain international instruments and to allow Malta to implement the EU *acquis* on labour legislation.

TRAINING AND MAINSTREAMING IN GENDER EQUALITY

Since 1991, the creation of a network of focal points on gender equality in other government departments became an integral part of the mainstreaming policy. In preparation for accession to the EU, two seminars for focal points were held in 2000. Work also focused on the implications of the family friendly measures introduced in the public service. As from January 2001 (OPM Circular 24/2000) the Performance Management Programme of Public Officials included as a performance indicator, the implementation of gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming. Gender equality committees have now been established in every Ministry and NCPE co-ordinates communication and runs on-going training (NCPE 2005a), for example, making it clear that it is unlawful to ask questions regarding marital status or family responsibilities in interview for employment. To launch the publication on **Sexual Harassment: Code of Practice** (NCPE 2005b), consonant with the EU Recommendation on the Dignity of the Protection of Men and Women at Work (92/131/EC), a seminar for Human Resource managers in both the private and the public sector was held in 2005. EU experts provided specialist support (NCPE 2005a, p.29). On establishment in 2003, the ETC Gender Equality Unit had also invested in training in gender mainstreaming for its staff. It has since trained advertising agents and trade union officials on the EIRA Act. From inception, the Unit worked with Guidance Teachers in state and private schools and by 2004 had developed a Manual for Gender Sensitive Vocational Guidance (ETC 2005) which was then launched in four training sessions for all Guidance and Personal and Social Development teachers in local schools. Other training has included a number of courses for women returnees, and an Employment Training Placement Scheme (ETPS) which will give women returnees 'an employment place phase to improve employment prospects' (ETC 2005, p.19).

²³ *Legal Notice 296 of 2003, Urgent Family Leave Regulations 2003, of Employment and Industrial Relations Act 2002*

DISCUSSION

How far is Malta able to face the challenges posed by decades of civil and social discrimination? How will it shift, if this is indeed the best option, the deeply embedded 'maternalist' cultures which have led mothers to discontinue employment after first maternity? How will it change organisational cultures and social attitudes in ways that would respond not only to local demands, but also to the external pressure, the 'creeping competence' and agenda – setting (Pollack 1994) of the supranational EU? Clearly, it has been the EU's 'soft law' measures of the European Social Fund (Szyszczak 2000), with programmes designed to support the four pillars of employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities, that has had most impact on the Maltese scene recently.

Currently, the NCPE (NCPE 2005a) is running a number of projects funded by ESF and EQUAL. Under the general title 'Gender Mainstreaming: the way forward' these include action research projects on family-friendly measures at the workplace; research on the gender pay gap; a graduate tracer study; and a tele-working pilot project²⁴. A publicity campaign to promote the NCPE has also been funded by ESF. The media is also being used to market the attractiveness of employment, in an 'empowerment' project based on role modelling, funded through the EQUAL programme. This project has over twelve local partners and is historic in bringing together the social partners, competing trade unions and women's organisations and other associations (NCPE 2005a, p.37). Moreover, under the Trans-National Cooperation Agreement, a number of European entities have become trans-national partners, and a spin-off project on gender and age discrimination named AGender (TCA I.D. Code 3795) has been developed²⁵. The cultural thrust is also evident in the project 'Gender News, Good News' with NCPE and ETC local partners, as well as Spain and France, working to move the media away from stereotypes toward a positive promotion of reconciliation between work

²⁴ A conference to present findings from the literature was held on the 15th February 2006 (details can be found on www.equality.gov.mt.)

²⁵ The Community initiative EQUAL in Malta is funded to the tune 1.241.163 Euros, providing 75% of the funds for projects on employability, entrepreneurship, the reconciliation of family and professional life, and on helping asylum seekers gain access to the labour market. Details can be found on http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment-social/eqaul/data/document/summpzmt_eu.pdf

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and family life. DG EMPL is funding a project [VP 2004/19] on facilitating equality through education. An ESF funded ETC Childcare Project which was set to provide incentives to SMEs to encourage them to start-up childcare services at the place of work has been scrapped for a variety of reasons. Another ETC project 'Modern Man in an Enlarged Europe', had difficulty finding enough men on parental leave to fulfil the research methodology criteria²⁶. A NCPE/UNESCO project is addressing the gender gap in Science and Technology. ETC launched a series of short surveys on women's work aspirations, and on lone mothers on social security benefits (ETC 2005). It has also published a report on Women and Men in the IT Labour Market²⁷. Other studies on gender occupational segregation (in collaboration with the Euro-guidance Unit and the Euro Mediterranean Institute for Education and Research), and on early school leaving, are due out in late 2006.

Though it has not been possible to explore at length in this article, the most interesting question is whether the EU/Lisbon agenda, especially regarding women and activity rates, will serve to reduce or increase equality for women. Pascall and Manning (2000) have developed a five-dimensional model which puts gender relations at the centre of welfare regimes, and which can be used to test equality. These include state policies regarding women as paid employees; as partners or wives; as mothers; as carer or providers and as policy makers or citizens. Where, in Malta, there had been strong support for women as mothers, means testing for benefits as well as new 'activation' policies, including the special protection afforded to those in paid employment, may lead to what Orloff (2004) has called a 'farewell to maternalism'. Pascall and Manning (2002, p.244) ask whether 'being a defamilialised woman is a good thing' and remark that context 'may be everything'. Gender equality is not in itself antithetical to mothering, since countries with higher gender equality (and good childcare provision) exhibit higher fertility rates (Daly 2004), as well as other 'goods'. However, Malta's falling fertility rate, now at 1.37, with a crude birth rate of 9.46 in 2004, from 12.44 in 1995 (NSO 2005) coupled with the still very low female participation rates, suggest that choices toward smaller families or even voluntary childlessness are being made. That the present equality discourse

²⁶ *The partners in the project are Malta, Lithuania, Iceland and Denmark. Details can be found in a joint report on <http://www.dadcomehome.org>*

²⁷ *Available as an online publication at www.etc.gov.mt*

has had some impact on Maltese values is evident in the results from a European value study reported in Hantrais (2004, p.6) where she finds that 'Malta and Spain are the only countries to combine low labour market integration with acceptance of women as working mothers'. The low participation and fertility rates suggest the 'acceptance' is limited. Whilst not wanting to incorrectly romanticise Maltese family policy, especially where women's rights were clearly denied, Daly's (2004) warning not to 'empty' the nuclear family of some of its caring and exchange activities should be considered by Maltese policy borrowers of the EU one-size-fits-all model. Her study of the risks and unmet needs of European families today, and her call for a closer relationship between EU family policy and employment policy, make it unthinkable to accept Lisbon Agenda targets uncritically, as many of the Maltese projects now do, even without consideration of historically normative local practices that have had considerable value for our society.

CONCLUSION

Whilst this article refers to a number of important initiatives in both civil and social equality in recent years, on the ground the feeling is that key local issues have failed to be mainstreamed. These include the poor level of education of over 50% of Maltese students (COM 2006) which has negative effects on the propensity of females to remain in employment after marriage (see Darmanin 2006 for a summary of the literature); of rising female unemployment; of female poverty in old age and in lone parenthood; of problems to do with male violence against women; of the rise in sexual trafficking; and of maintaining a balance between a family model of welfare provision whilst promoting autonomous working individuals, and retaining 'maternalist' preferences, which are all likely to limit the success of the projects which now occupy most of the space in the current 'Southern' approach to gender equality. Clearly, there is need for a Valletta, as well as a Lisbon, strategy.

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