



The role of public policy in promoting gender equality in Malta: A diachronic approach

Maria Francesca Cassar¹
JosAnn Cutajar²
Anne Marie Thake^{3*}

¹Department of Public Policy,
University of Malta, Msida, Malta.

Email: maria.f.cassar.14@um.edu.mt

²Department of Gender and Sexualities,
University of Malta, Msida, Malta.

Email: josann.cutajar@um.edu.mt

³Department of Public Policy,
University of Malta, Msida, Malta.

Email: anne.thake@um.edu.mt

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(* Corresponding Author)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the major policy and regulatory framework of gender equality policies enacted in Malta between 1921-2021. A diachronic approach was adopted. A historical analysis of the development of gender equality policies was carried out by analyzing official documents. The data was consolidated with the findings which emerged from the twelve in-depth interviews held with key institutional actors. They were involved in the design and implementation of gender equality policies, procedures, and measures. Since Malta does not have an umbrella policy on gender equality, this is an important public policy field. Gender equality laws and policies have evolved over the years, often in a piecemeal manner, due to pressure from international bodies. Efforts have been made to eliminate gender discrimination in the public sector and service with the aim of establishing a standard for the private sector. Malta's gender equality laws and policies have brought about change in some areas, but others need to be further developed. The Gender Equality Index devised by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shows that Malta has improved in some domains but not in others.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is a global phenomenon and is often mitigated by means of laws and policies which aim to address gender-based discrimination. Gender discrimination is defined as the "prejudicial treatment of an individual or group due to gender" (Parziale, 2008). This article focuses on the public policies introduced in post-World War II Malta to address gender inequality, with an emphasis on those enacted from the early 1990s onwards. It also examines the public service institutions that were set up to oversee the implementation of gender equality. The focus will be on the Maltese public service which has implemented gender policies through a system of regulatory measures and courses of action. Some effort has gone into making the public service less gender discriminatory. This is derived from the overarching intention of establishing this sector as a standard to be emulated by the private sector. Diverse States share familiar challenges but respond differently to gender inequality matters.

2. Literature Review

History in public policy helps in refining and ameliorating the quality of policy ideas, policies at large and the measures policymakers choose to adopt. It allows policymakers to understand the context, why certain choices were made and why not others, and with what effect. Van Engen, Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn (2016) explain how certain public professionals prefer to study new policies in isolation, however, when doing so they are assuming that policies appear suddenly, in a vacuum (2016). This implies that these policy makers would be disregarding the history linked to that policy area and neglect to take into consideration the experience of previous policy makers and hence the traditions/ethos which up to a certain extent impacted on the new policy they created without these being aware of this. This may be referred to as policy alienation. On the other hand,

when previous political experience is considered in policymaking, one would be exploring policy accumulation (2016).

Pierson's contribution to the field of policy and history demonstrates that there is an inherent need to understand the background to understand the policy itself (2000). The crux of policy accumulation is that history carries significant value when it comes to helping policy makers discern the way policies come to exist. The merits of history in the study of policy and policymaking should not be overlooked. [Hogwood and Peters \(1982\)](#) argue that new policies rarely start afresh but are often built on the foundations of existing laws and policies. [Van Engen et al. \(2016\)](#) pertain to this theoretical disposition and believe that neglecting to acknowledge the consequences of a policy's history, will ultimately fail to convey the complete picture (2016). Moreover, [Van Gunsteren \(1976\)](#) and [Wildavsky \(1979\)](#) sustain this argument by stating that new policies are established by means of their interplay with pre-existing policies, and they are introduced to enhance, replace or complement as per circumstantial political needs at a particular point in time.

Historical engagement in the context of policy and policymaking aims to identify and explain "the language, concepts, and assumptions embedded in the policymaking moment" in time ([Green, 2016](#)). This historical understanding and backward outlook may not necessarily be the main goal in policymaking; however, it will enable the policy maker with the formation of new/ reinvented policy. [Green \(2016\)](#) suggests that dismantling existing policy configurations may help create new policy alignments that may produce more effective results at a given moment in time. This may be one way of tackling existing policy problems. [Green \(2016\)](#) contribution suggests that fresh configurations of policy frameworks help provide a new platform for understanding the development of policy. This implies that policy history will ultimately result in the formation of something new or reimagined policy (2016).

A historical and evidence-based approach to the study of gender equality enables researchers to note how institutional and cultural patterns in society are linked to the evolution of policymaking processes. Moreover, diachronic and synchronic approaches carry substantial value in research, and it is for this reason that these were adopted in this study. Diachronic strategies carry significant value in research as they help assess how phenomena change over a period. [Widdersheim \(2018\)](#) explains that studies founded on such strategies are indispensable because they aim to address "research questions related to continuity, discontinuity, development, and evolution." Therefore, diachronic studies aim to explore the 'why' and the 'how' of something occurring and taking place in history ([Gerring, 2007](#)). This is contrary to a synchronic strategy which tends to investigate a phenomenon at any point in time.

Diachronic perspectives in research not only make it possible to understand the processes and political systems of the country, but also help in bringing out contrasts over time where a particular phenomenon is concerned. Diachronic analysis is essential in the field of politics and public policy since policies and policy agendas change over time ([Baumgartner & Jones, 1993](#)). [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) note that changes in policy normally take place incrementally over periods of time. However, this does not mean that changes may not necessarily take place haphazardly. In fact, Baumgartner and Jones explain that this normally happens when drastic changes occur because of external shocks. By resorting to the diachronic approach, this paper tracks the evolution of public policy in Malta where gender equality is concerned, focusing on the factors that influenced policy makers over time, while analyzing in depth certain issues and proposed policies related to this topic. A diachronic approach involves a deep analysis of how policy arrangements evolved over the years, resulting in further insights on why they take the shape they do at a given point in time. In essence, this is valuable to be able to differentiate between sustainable policies, and others that may be deemed as less viable. ([Pierson, 2005](#)).

Political processes are characterized by stability and incrementalism, but occasionally they produce large-scale departures from the past. "Incremental change is often followed by very sudden and dramatic changes" ([Baumgartner & Jones, 1993](#)). This might be because public policies are influenced by external factors, as well as social sentiments and realities, economic conditions, scientific breakthroughs, non-governmental organizations, radical interest groups, political and commercial lobbying ([Gittell, Magnusson, & Merenda, 2012](#)). These factors, all together, tend to convulse policies in different directions. These pressures can also shift the conservative mind set of policymakers and persuade them to focus on more contested issues ([Baumgartner & Jones, 2005](#)). Pressure enables policymakers to be more open to non-conventional solutions ([Cairney, 2013](#)). Influencing agents may also block innovative ideas from being turned into policy.

There are also contextual factors which impact the shape and process of policy making and the efficacy of its implementation. These include political, cultural, and social factors ([Brynard, 2009](#)). For policies promoting gender equality to be successful, they depend on the approach and attitude and commitment of those in power. They also depend on the cooperation, coordination, effective planning and resourcing, stakeholder interest, strong networks, personal values, beliefs, and training of those involved ([Brynard, 2009](#)). Other important variables include "institutional context, climate and motivations, persistence and time, clarity and consistency of communication [...] the public service system and bureaucratic environments" ([Brynard, 2009](#)).

To facilitate such an analysis, a feminist post-colonial approach was used. This theoretical approach incorporates diachronic and synchronic analyzes while taking into consideration a country's geo-political location, and how this location helps to shape public policies. As [Sisson \(2019\)](#) underlines, states are located in an international system. This location shapes the behavior of states, including Malta. A state's location in the

global hierarchy at a particular moment in time has an impact on the conceptual systems it adopts since institutionalized practices are historically specific while contingent on their location. Postcolonial theory examines the relations of domination between and within nations (Sherry, 2007). It is a useful conceptual tool which can be used to examine the specific economic, ideological, institutional, political and gender dynamics in a particular society.

Barker (2010) adds that postcolonial theory is used to study the historical, socio-economic, cultural legacies of European colonialism in previously colonized nations. This paper focuses on Malta, a British colony until 1964, which joined the European Union in 2004. States which in the past depended on others economically, culturally and politically, remained dependent on the North metropole for ideas, even where public policy is concerned. Islam and Hossain (2016) underline that all states are implicated in a global structure characterized by interdependence, competitiveness, as well as global bilateral and regional agreements all of which tend to shape states policies, as in the case of Malta. Certain countries in the Global North still retain the power to create and promote certain public policies over others. In this global configuration, the North retains the power to develop ideas and policies in public policy, and often stipulates that countries located in the Global South take them on McEwan (2019). To a certain extent, these powerful countries dictate what and how it should be done and find countries which do not adopt such public policies as wanting.

States located at the periphery – Southern European states might be perceived to be located in the Global North, but they still occupy a liminal position within this sphere (Santos, 2016) and have to operate within an international or regional framework often not of their own making. This is shown in this paper on gender equality policies. Key policy makers in neo-colonized countries have no option but to mediate policies which have been conceptualized elsewhere. In this case, states located in the Global South or in the periphery of the Global North act within the parameters dictated by others. When it comes to public policies, they only mediate the policies which have been created by those with access to and control over the symbolic and material resources in the Global North. McEwan (2019) maintains that postcolonial theory recognizes the connections between the past and the present and acknowledges how they shape contemporary economies, public policies, cultures, and power relations leading to neo-colonialism.

Feminist postcolonial theory maintains that economically, ethnically, racially, and geopolitically privileged men control decision making on a global and national level (Sisson, 2019). Although Southern European men might be powerful at a national level, their power is undermined when their geo-political location is taken into consideration (Santos, 2016). To reclaim their masculine authority within the national setting, they often subordinate women and other men. This feminist postcolonial framework which incorporates intersectional theory within it, consists of theories that will be used to explore conflicting, competing, co-opting intersections of identity nexus formations which help oppressive, hierarchical and discriminatory practices and policies, transparent (Parekh, 2008) in this particular location. This approach will be used to trace the genealogies of institutions that create and promote gender equality policies, what format they took along the years, why they took this format, and whether they effectively promoted gender equality. Feminist postcolonial theory in collaboration with intersectionality will be used to analyze neo-colonialist systems and operations of power at the intersection of gender in this case.

3. The Context

Malta is one of the smallest nation states within the European Union. The Regional Statistics Malta 2021 notes that in 2019, 480 134 persons were living within an area of approximately of 315 kilometers squared (National Statistics Office, 2021). Until 1964, Malta was a British colony (Frendo, 1988). Despite pressure from women groups to promote their interests, the British government did not intervene on this issue (Sammut, 2017). Women's political, economic, and social freedom were directly linked to the economic emancipation of Malta's fortress economy. Sammut (2017) states that "one cannot discuss political and economic development in Malta without due consideration to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church." Roman Catholic religion had and still has a bearing on the policies enacted to promote gender equality. As Montebello (2009) pointed out that civil and human rights discourse is undermining the hold the Roman Catholic church had on civil society and state institutions.

In view of political rights, the only notable legislation which took place was when the universal franchise was enacted in 1947 (Callus, 1992). This was granted to the Maltese by the British to compensate them for the part they had played in the second world war (Darmanin, 1992). Changes made to the Maltese Constitution in 1991, removed any legal impediments on the participation of women in politics. Chapter IV of the Constitution of Malta delineates the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual under Maltese law. Article 45(3) guarantees equality between women and men and protects against discrimination of gender (Government of Malta, 2021a). These changes were enacted when Malta ratified the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) in 1991. Although there are no political impediments to women's participation in politics [now], Malta has one of the lowest participation rates of women in Parliament (Cutajar, 2014). A corrective gender mechanism was introduced to improve the ratio of female to male representatives in Parliament in 2021 (Meilak, 2021). Through this mechanism, changes made

to the Constitution of Malta provide additional seats when women account for less than 40% of elected members of parliament. Up to 12 seats may be added, if this 40% threshold is not reached (Galea, 2022).

With reference to education in Malta, the first girls' schools were opened in 1838 (Callus, 1992). These schools were set up initially to help disenfranchised girls find a husband or work as maids. In 1924, school attendance was made compulsory, but this was hard to implement especially where girls were concerned (Zammit Ciantar, 1993). Parents tended to retain their daughters at home to help with the housework and farm chores (Cutajar, 2017). When in 1956, primary and secondary schools were made free of charge, the attendance rate increased since parents did not need to fork out money for their daughters' education. Free universal secondary education was introduced in 1970 (Callus, 1992). In 1970s, the pupil and student worker schemes (replaced by the stipend system in the 1990s) were introduced (Mayo, 2012). These schemes facilitated girls' and women's access to post-secondary and tertiary education. These measures had a bearing on the number of female students who graduated from university. From the mid-1990s onwards, the number of female graduates who graduated from university began surpassing their male cohorts (Cutajar, 1999).

Maltese women have worked in the formal and informal economy for ages (Callus, 1992). In 1948, following the second world war, a law had been passed which decreed that woman had resigned from their government on marriage (Darmanin, 1992). In 1981, this law was revoked when the economy led to labor shortages within the feminized sectors (Darmanin, 1992). In 1991, changes to the Maltese Constitution included the revocation of the 1974 law which stated that women had to give up their government jobs if it was previously occupied by men who had gone to war.

Malta's first industrialization phase occurred between the mid-1950s and 1980 when the British relinquished Malta as a colony. Women played a key role as workers in the textile industry (Darmanin, 1992). The second industrialization phase commenced in the 1990s (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2006b) when economic and fiscal policies were implemented to facilitate EU accession in 2004 and the Eurozone in 2008. The Maltese economy began growing and focusing on market services rather than on direct production.

With advent of the millennium, policies were introduced to facilitate the entry and retention of more women in the labor market. For example, mothers returning to the labor market after a 5-year absence could benefit from an exemption on a year's worth of income tax for every child aged 16 and under. Working mothers and those mothers returning to work within 5 years from childbirth, would also benefit from a one-year income tax exemption for all children born after 1 January 2007 onwards (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2010). During the 2010s, Malta had the highest increase in female employment of all the EU states (European Commission, 2019).

Malta became part of the European Union in 2004 (European Union, 2022). Prior to European Union accession, there were legislative changes to reflect the gender equality ethos enshrined in EU directives, legislation, and policies. The principle of gender equality in the EU's legal and policy framework, has had a direct impact on Malta's own regulatory framework. The main changes included the enactment of the Equality for Men and Women Act, 2003 (Laws of Malta). The Equality Bill and Human Rights and Equality Commission Bill (Parliament of Malta, 2019) are in discussion. The Equality Commission Bill refers to the setting up of an independent national human rights institution which will incorporate the Paris Principles of the United Nations together with the European equality directives. This new Commission will be responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights. This also includes the right to non-discrimination and equal treatment in Malta. NCPE will be replaced by this independent Commission and will report to Parliament.

The Employment and Industrial Relations Act (2002) was enacted prior to Malta joining Europe. It "helped strengthen the position of women in the labor market" (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2012b). Discriminatory practices and treatment in the workplace were prohibited under this Act. This legislation also promoted equal pay for work of equal value which is essential to ensuring gender equality. Maltese governments had to respond to European Union (EU) directives, even when policy makers did not regard gender equality as a priority (Cutajar, 2014). The Malta Council of Women's Organizations felt that gender equality was promoted by politicians, policy makers and implementers when pressure from external institutions was exerted since the political will to ensure gender parity seemed to be missing (Piscopo, 2014). Callus (1992) agreed that external pressure – including the International Labor Organization – proved instrumental in addressing gender inequality in Malta.

Other legislation in the pipeline includes the controversial proposal to regularize sex work. This is being contested by the Coalition on Human Trafficking and Prostitution (Vella, 2022). The amendment to the Embryo Protection Act, 2018 will introduce altruistic surrogacy in Malta. These have caught women's organizations' attention. They are being promoted by vested interests and can have a reverse effect on women's rights in Malta.

Issues on control over reproductive rights and physical integrity arose by women's groups. In 2016, the morning after pill became legal after the government was forced to act on receiving a judicial protest by the Women's Rights Foundation (Calleja, 2019). Subsequently in 2021, an independent female member of Parliament tabled a bill to decriminalize abortion in Malta (Meilak, 2021). These two pieces of legislation together with the Equality bill, have led to adverse reactions from different sectors of society including the Roman Catholic Church.

Following a spate of femicides since 2018, non-governmental organizations have put pressure on the Government to implement measures to address gender-based violence. These included assigning a dedicated magistrate to hear domestic violence cases, the setting up of a domestic violence unit within the police force to handle domestic violence as well as the setting up of a free legal clinic for gender-based violence victims (Malta Independent, 2022b). The public outcry following the rape and murder of Paulina Dembska (Times of Malta, 2022) caused the Government to table the femicide bill on the eve of the 2022 national elections.

Table 1. Official documentation.

Document	Type	Publication year	No.
'Arguing for equality: between pragmatism and principle.' New visions for gender equality 2019. European Union.	Article	2019	1
Commission for the Advancement of Women, Ministry of Social Policy	Report	1999	1
(Commission for the Advancement of Women, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001)	Reports	1996-2002	7
Demographic Review 2001	Statistics	2002	1
Equality bill no. 96 – Parliament of Malta	Legislation	2019	1
Equality for men and women act, chapter 456	Legislation	2003	1
Equality policy for the public service, public administration human resource office (PAHRO)	Policy	2013	1
Equality policy for the public service, people and standards division, OPM	Policy	2021	1
Employment and industrial relations act, chapter 452	Legislation	2002	1
Gender balanced representation in decision-making	Article	2015	1
Gender equality index, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021	Statistics	2013 - 2021	6
Gender equality action plan 2009/2010, employment and training cooperation	Plan	2007	1
Gender mainstreaming in practice: A step-by-step guide to gender impact assessment and a factsheet	Guide + Factsheet	2012	2
Gender mainstreaming in practice – office of the prime minister (OPM) 15/2012	Circular	2012	1
Human rights and equality commission bill 97 –Parliament of Malta	Bill	2019	1
Implementing gender mainstreaming - National public service and public sector initiatives and good practices	Report	2009	1
International women's day	Statistics	2020	1
Issue histories Malta: Series of timelines of policy debates	Article	2007	1
Labor force survey 2001, 2005, Q4 2010, Q4 2015, 2020	Statistics	2003	5
Manual on work-life balance measures, office of the principal permanent secretary; office of the prime minister (OPM)	Document	2021	1
(National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019)	Reports	2004-2020	16
<i>Nista'</i> - Sharing work life responsibilities - Thinking of going back to work? Employment and training cooperation	Article	2011	1
Public service management code, office of the principal permanent secretary, office of the prime minister	Code	2021	1
The equal status of women annual reports 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997	Reports	1993 -1998	5
The national employment policy, ministry for education and employment	Policy	2014	1
Women's enfranchisement and the nation-building project in Malta	Article	2017	1
Women and work: Findings from a study on the work aspirations of Maltese women, 2007, employment and training cooperation	Report	2007	1
Women's rights annual report 1998	Report	1999	1
Women in society annual reports 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002	Reports	1999-2003	4
Total			67

4. Methods

A historical analysis of the major gender policies, institutional and legal reforms which took place in Malta from 1921 to 2021 was carried out. This study considered the internal and external factors that catalyzed the evolution of gender policies which were enacted, and institutional changes made to ensure the successful implementation of the latter. Parliamentary debates, circulars, official reports, European Union and United Nations' reports, newspaper articles, European Union statistics, consultation papers and opinion pieces were textually analyzed as outlined in [Table 1](#).

The qualitative data derived from this textual analysis was used to design questions for relevant stakeholders. The interview guide consisted of questions related to (1) the historical progress (2) the design and implementation of gender related laws and policies (3) centralization and decentralization of policy implementation (5) political good will in those promoting and implementing public policy, and (4) an example of good practice where gender equality in Malta was concerned. These questions were posed during the semi-structured interviews held with stakeholders. The actors were purposively selected because they were or had played a strategic/elite role in the design, implementation and/or research on gender equality policies as listed in [Table 2](#). The data elicited from these stakeholders were used to interpret, corroborate, or expand on issues or facts derived from the grey material mentioned before.

Table 2. Interviews with participants.

No	Level	Year	Role	Institution
1	European Union	2019 - to date	European Union Commissioner	Equality
2	Political	2003 - 2004 2004 - 2008	Parliamentary Secretary Minister	Social housing Gender equality for family and social solidarity
3	Political	2019 - 2020 2020 - to date	Minister	Minister for European affairs and equality Ministry for justice and governance
4	Public institution	1994 - 1997	Executive Director	Department for the equal status of women
5	Public institution	1997 - 2009 2009 - to date	Commissioner and Acting Director	National commission for the promotion of equality
6	Public institution	2019 - to date	Senior Manager	Ministry for justice, equality and governance gender mainstreaming unit, human rights directorate
7	Public institution	2017 - to date	Permanent Secretary	People and standards division, office of the prime minister
8	Public institution	Anonymous	Lawyer	
9	Public institution	Anonymous	Advisor	
10	Public institution	Anonymous	Public Officer	
11	Higher education institution	2005-2008	CEO	Employment and training corporation (Now jobsplus)
12	Higher education institution	2002-2008	Senior Executive	Gender equality unit, employment and training corporation (Now jobsplus)

Twelve one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and eventually transcribed. Interviews were conducted on the participants' consent. Care was taken to protect the participants' identity since some of them were in politically sensitive positions. Each participant was allocated a code and any identifying information removed from transcripts and reports. Research was conducted once ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC).

All data was thematically analyzed. The results were divided into sections. These included (1) the context and the evolution of the structures responsible for promoting gender equality; (2) the role of gender equality national machinery; (3) factors facilitating/preventing gender equality; (4) the public sector and gender equality; (5) gender equality and Malta's progress together with the synchronic analysis.

A principal limitation in this research was the fact that gender equality policies in Malta's legal and political history are relatively novel. There are few experts in the field who could contribute to this study. This reduced the sample size of potential participants. Party politics in Malta plays a crucial role. Participants'

personal political affiliation had a bearing on how they interpreted policies enacted by their preferred political party. It proved difficult to conduct interviews online with people who were not IT literate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. The Evolution of the Structures Responsible for Promoting Gender Equality

Reference by the participants was made to the government mechanisms set up to promote gender equality. In 1989, the two entities were formed namely the Commission for the Advancement of Women and the Secretariat for the Equality of Women. The Commission's role was to raise awareness on gender issues and give policy direction to policymakers and the public ([Secretariat for Equal Status of Women, 1993](#)). "The Secretariat [for the Equality of Women] was created to assist the Commission in the implementation of its aims and objectives" stated Interviewee 2. Both these entities were part of the Ministry for Social Policy at the time. The latter was responsible for overlooking and ensuring that gender equality matters were being addressed. In 1991, Malta had ratified CEDAW. All public departments were responsible for the implementation of the CEDAW articles and answerable to this entity (OPM circular 66/91).

This structure changed name but retained its format for several years. There were subsequent changes that took place before Malta joined the European Union in 2004, according to Interviewees 9 and 10. In 1996, a Parliamentary Secretariat for Women's Rights within the OPM was set up but this was short-lived, stated Interviewees 10, 11, 12. Interviewee 8 claimed that both government and public service entities were more responsive to the suggestions/demands made by the Parliamentary Secretariat for Women's Rights when they were placed at the center of power at the time.

In 1994, the Secretariat became the Department for the Equality of Women and in 1999, it was renamed the Department for Women in Society. Its aim was to promote the equality for women and address issues such as discrimination. This was Malta's first ever national machinery addressing gender equality (Interviewee 10). The Department's remit was to monitor Government policy and ensure that these were being executed effectively by respective ministries and departments. Any laws and practices related to discrimination were to be identified and changes were to be proposed, stated Interviewees 1,2,3.

In 2004, the Commission for the Advancement of Women changed to the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE). In 2007, its remit was to safeguard "equality on the grounds of gender and family responsibilities, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, racial or ethnic origin, and gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics in employment, education as well as in banks and financial institutions" ([National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2022](#)). It was also responsible for enhancing equality between genders in access to and supply of goods and services. The participants, however, pointed out that the NCPE is not autonomous and has limited power to act. Its role is limited to mediation in cases of workplace harassment and discrimination.

In 2013, the Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties was responsible for gender equality. It set up the Human Rights and Equality Directorate in 2015, which morphed into the Human Rights Directorate ([Human Rights Directorate, 2022](#)). In 2017, the Directorate formed part of the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality (MEAE)'s portfolio. In 2020, the Directorate was placed in the Ministry for Justice, Equality and in 2021, it became part of Ministry for Equality, Innovation and Research. In 2019, the Gender Mainstreaming Unit was established ([Gender Mainstreaming Unit, 2022](#)). It is responsible for gender mainstreaming policy and the promotion of gender equality. NCPE was previously responsible for this. According to Interviewee 12, the Gender Mainstreaming Unit was to liaise "with various entities, provide information and 'feed' the gender perspective to ongoing processes" (Interviewee 12).

In 2017, the Ministry for European Affairs and Equality set up the Consultative Council for Women's Rights. This Council consisted of registered voluntary organizations focusing on women's rights and issues. The Council was to advise government on issues affecting women and, in consultation with the ministry, recommend policy and legislative proposals to promote gender equality in Malta ([Humanrights.gov.mt, 2022](#)).

With the creation of these bodies, NCPE lost some of its functions. It retained its advisory role to government and monitoring of the implementation of national policies related to the promotion of equality ([National Commission for the Promotion of Equality, 2022](#)). It liaises with government departments and other agencies to ensure that measures, services, and initiatives are being implemented. The participants stated that the NCPE also assists victims of discrimination and investigates complaints to ensure compliance with the law. The NCPE and Gender Mainstreaming Unit's roles were not always clearly defined causing issues between the two entities.

5.2. The Role of Gender Equality Machinery

Between 1989 and 2002, the Commission for the Advancement of Women and the Department for Women in Society proposed legislation and policies. They also helped draft laws and review any legislation, policies and/or measures to ensure that a gender perspective was incorporated in government policies (Interviewees 1,2,3,10).

All the interviewees claimed that both entities contributed to Malta's European Union accession process. The Department for Women in Society addressed public policy issues, related to education, childcare, income, tax, and social security. It worked with ministries, governmental departments, and agencies to ensure that proposed strategies and their implementation related to gender equality were compliant with European Union directives. Synergy and coordination between the different public services entities were key components in reaching this target.

During this timeframe, the Department for Women in Society's remit was to gender mainstream legislation, policies, and practices. In 1991, focal points were appointed in all public institutions. This became obligatory (OPM circular No 66/91). Ninety-five gender focal points were appointed at that time (Department for Women's Rights, 1998). Their role was to assist in the implementation of content of this circular, suggest areas for improvement, delineate which aspects of the law, policies and practices were discriminatory and report on any progress (Interviewees 1,2,3,4,10).

In subsequent years, efforts were made to strengthen the gender focal points through briefings, workshops, and training sessions, some of which were conducted with the assistance of European Union funds. The Commission, with the Department's assistance, organized training sessions delivered by experts in the field (Interviewees 2 and 10). These were essential in gender mainstreaming. Public Officers would effect change since they know the workings of a public entity. They also know when, where and how to implement change, stated Interviewee 3.

According to the interviewees, focal points only proved effective when the person assigned the role had the power and tenacity to effect change in the area where they worked. Change was more likely to take place when the public officer in question was committed to gender equality and had the seniority to be able to effect change. Some ministries undermined the whole exercise when they appointed junior public officers who did not have the power and/or were not interested in promoting gender equality, stated Interviewee 8.

As Interviewee 4 pointed out, "Ministries and government departments are giving gender equality and mainstreaming policies and practices different levels of importance. There does not seem to be uniformity". The interviewee also claimed that "officials were not even aware that their actions might discriminate; they claimed that they are gender neutral". This may stem from their lack of knowledge and understanding of what gender equality and gender mainstreaming are. Most interviewees felt that "all public officers should be trained in gender mainstreaming policies and practices so that they can be included in the day-to-day running of the departments" (Interviewees 1,2,3,10,11,12). The participants added that "it is difficult to find employees, trained to conduct gender analysis or gender mainstreaming." Training such employees takes time, and unfortunately once departments/entities train such personnel, they may be deployed to other entities.

According to Interviewee 10, the effective adoption and implementation of the gender mainstreaming principle depends on the member states' commitment. They did not feel that the Maltese government was fully committed. Interviewees claimed that they were in favor of different ministries and governmental entities enacting their own gender mainstreaming principles. They insisted that a public entity should coordinate the whole process. On the other hand, some of the participants claimed that this would be impossible since Malta does not have a national gender equality and/or gender mainstreaming strategy, framework and/or plan (Interviewees 4,6,7,8,9).

In 2019, the Gender Mainstreaming Unit within the Human Rights Directorate, in coordination with the Consultative Council for Women's Rights, designed an umbrella policy entitled Towards a Gender Equality Mainstreaming Framework. The aim of this policy was to "address those gender gaps and structural barriers that keep limiting women's opportunities to reach their full potential, which is still negatively impacted, triggered by gender stereotypes" (Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, 2019). The policy focused on "the right to equal treatment and equal access to opportunity in terms of employment, education, healthcare, and positions of authority, financial independence, combatting Malta's gender pay gap, sharing of responsibility and balance in public and private family life, and intersectionality" (Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, 2019). Some of the participants also disclosed that the policy was intended to have all ministries and departments assign an officer as a focal point (Interviewees 4 and 7). The Human Rights Directorate would function as a reference point by exercising a supervisory role that provides direction and shares its knowledge, while retaining an executive role, overseeing the strategy's implementation by ministries and departments. This strategy has been launched in 2022 (Malta Independent, 2022a). Some participants stated that this was another manifestation of the national lack of incentive to promote gender equality.

5.3. Factors Facilitating/Preventing Gender Equality

As previously stated, gender equality was facilitated when Malta ratified and subsequently implemented UN treaties and other conventions. Malta's accession to the European Union meant that policy makers needed to take gender equality more seriously. It is enshrined in the Treaty of Rome, which helped establish the European Economic Community. Interviewees 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 stated that international and supranational powers have influenced the drafting of local legislation, policies and policy reform related to gender.

Interviewee 6 pointed out that if Malta had not joined the European Union, policymakers would not have worked as hard to achieve such targets. This interviewee added that Malta had a low female employment rate.

This emerged from gender equality assessments, analysis, and reports. This caused the European Union to cause Malta to improve its female employment rate resulting in productivity and equality. Figure 1 shows the female employment rate which increased exponentially following Malta's accession to the European Union. The percentage of women in employment from the total working population increased by 14.8% in 1995 to 24.1% in 2020. There was a decrease in employed men from the total working population from 39% to 35.4%.

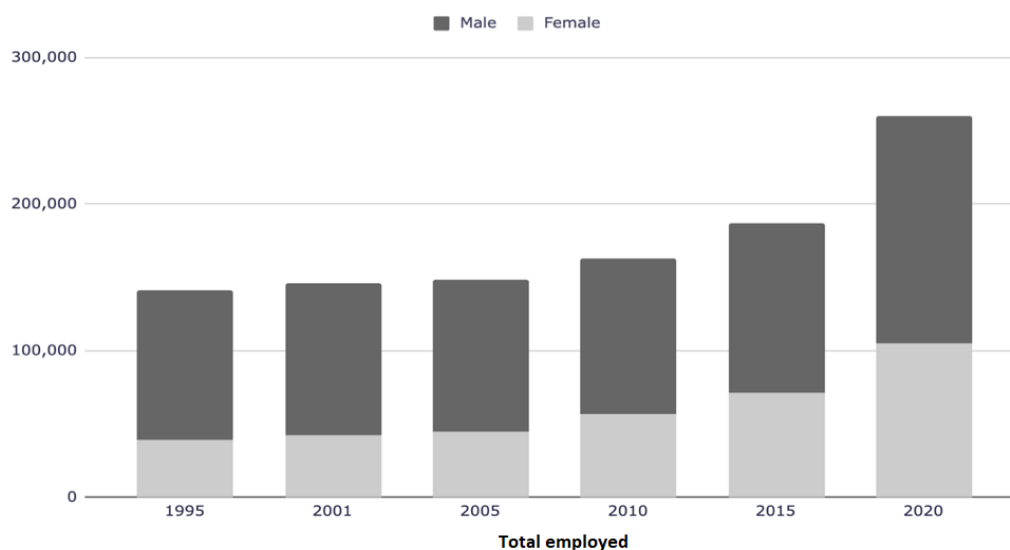


Figure 1. Total population by gender (1995-2020).

Interviewees 2, 4, 7, 10 emphasized that if Malta did not have to report to the United Nations and European Union on its actions and outcomes where gender equality is concerned, there would be limited progress. This consistent reporting to international bodies including the Council of Europe, International Labor Organization and the Commonwealth ensures that Malta is compliant with international laws, directives, and targets goals on gender equality. As Interviewee 7 noted, European Union entities mention Member States' progress in public speeches, while Eurostat and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) assess their progress. The fact that countries need to report their efforts is an effective tool to help motivate member states like Malta, stated Interviewee 11.

Political will emerged from the interview as a common theme. As Interviewee 4 remarked, enacting laws, introducing policies and measures were pivotal in Malta's advancements on gender equality. Interview 9 noted that laws and policies can only be reformed if thorough consultation is conducted beforehand. Changes in the law cannot be solely based on social and political engineering. Any legislative and policy changes need to be guided by evidence-based research and practice (Interviewees 6, 9).

Four fifths of the interviewees also referred to the lack of political will which is somehow related to a patriarchal cultural mentality. Change is an evolution that takes time and the biggest obstacle to change is mentality and ignorance, claimed Interviewee 5. The collective mentality prevents policies from being implemented effectively, added Interviewee 2. There needs to be a shift in the way we speak of equality and eliminate the idea that gender equality only concerns women. It also concerns the family, stated Interviewee 4. Effective change can only be triggered when, according to the participants, amendments to laws, policies, changes in mentality and attitudes occur in tandem.

It was agreed that a macho mentality and patriarchy exist and that participants felt that gender discrimination occurs unintentionally. For this reason, training and awareness are essential (all interviewees). The mentality may change from one generation to another. A few confessed though that sometimes gender discrimination occurs intentionally and discretely.

As the participants noted, Malta operates in a context where policy makers, business owners, employers and religious leaders are mainly men and the majority tend to cling to a patriarchal mentality. This affects how gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming are implemented and managed.

5.4. The Public sector and Gender Equality

The Maltese public service serves as a family friendly employer when compared to the private sector (Cutajar, 2009). The Maltese government does not promote family friendly measures via legislation. This means that the public and private sectors would need to adopt these measures and promote them, leading by example. In 2013, the Equality Policy for the Public Service was designed to ensure that there were no discriminatory practices in vacancies, advertisements, job descriptions, and the selection procedure (Public Administration Human Resource Office, 2013). This policy was updated in May 2021. The participants acknowledged that the Public Service is at the forefront of several progressive family friendly measures and

work-life balance policies. Both paid and unpaid family friendly measures are listed in the Manual on Work-Life Balance Measures (Government of Malta, 2021a).

Paid family friendly measures included marriage/civil union leave, release to attend ante-natal examinations, maternity leave and breastfeeding facilities, parental leave, medically assisted procreation leave (in-vitro fertilization Leave), adoption, bereavement and urgent family leave as well as donation of vacation leave/time-off-in-lieu for humanitarian reasons. Unpaid leave included a career break, leave to accompany spouse/partner on government-sponsored courses or assignments, parental leave for biological and social parents, responsibility leave, leave for a special reason and reduced hours. Teleworking, flextime, and remote working enable public officers to juggle both work and family responsibilities without negatively affecting their pay or career progression (Government of Malta, 2021b).

These family-friendly measures in the public service were created to support employees who need to juggle family and work responsibilities. Employees who avail themselves of paid and/or unpaid leave for family reasons, can be negatively affected if promotional opportunities include the determination of a stipulated number of consecutive rather than cumulative years of experience (Consultative Council for Women's Rights, 2020). Family friendly measures can also impact salary (Budig & England, 2001), as well as access to professional development such as training courses, conferences, and study.

Consequently, those who accessed this type of leave would have lower pensions (The Pensions Working Group, 2005). Over the years, more women in the Public Service availed themselves of family friendly measures (Camilleri-Cassar, 2020).

As has been pointed out, the fact that women tend to avail themselves of family friendly measures, impacts their career progression. The participants lamented that there were fewer women in the higher levels of the public service, although, as they qualified, their numbers tended to be far less in the private sector. According to the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (2020) the average percentage of women occupying senior management posts (scales 1-5) was 29.5% while 66.3% occupied scales 7-10. Although women were under-represented in the top tiers within the public service, middle management tended to be more gender balanced. This imbalance confirms that vertical and horizontal segregation persist even in a family friendly sector.

Interviewee 5 stated that "the Public Service does not discriminate between the genders". In 2016, the gender pay gap in this sector stood at 5% which is low in comparison to the 14.3% attributed to the private sector (Magro, 2018). "The challenges women face in balancing family and work-life remain entrenched despite all the labor market policy efforts aimed at incentivizing more females to join the labor market" (Government of Malta Office of the Principal Permanent Secretary, 2021). Even though the Government is incentivizing women to join the labor market, the unpaid labor which Maltese society expects women to carry out, hinders them from participating on the same basis as men. Gender role expectations prevent women from receiving the same pay as men, and from progressing in their career, even within the Malta public service.

5.5. Gender Equality and Malta's Progress Across Time

The participants were constantly comparing Malta's progress in gender equality with that attained by other European Union countries. As Interviewee 6 stressed that "Malta gives a lot of importance to this Equality Index and compares it to its European Union counterparts." Reference was often made to Malta's progress in the European Institute for General Equality's (EIGE) gender equality index. This tool enabled participants and policy makers to adjudicate whether the implementation of policies is subduing gender inequality and in which areas.

Table 3 compares Malta's progression on gender equality with the European Union average. The EIGE's gender equality index measures gender equality's improvement in six domains namely work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health. This tool enables policy makers and their critiques to assess Malta's progress on gender equality. Table 3 compares Malta's percentage score to the European Union's average score across a span of 16 years (2005-2020) in these six domains.

Table 3 demonstrates that Malta has made improvements in the education (knowledge), employment, time, and power domains since 2010. The 2021 EIGE report stated that Malta had a lower score when compared to the European Union average in time (0.7% difference) and power (12.5% difference). The health domain decreased slightly over the years but remained above the European Union's average score. Malta ranked 13th in the EIGE's Gender Equality Index, with an average of 65 out of 100, three points below the average score. Although Malta's overall average was slightly below the European Union's average, EIGE acknowledged that the country was progressing faster than most European Union member states (EIGE, 2021d).

Table 3. Malta's equality index in six domains 2005-2021.

Gender equality index	2005 %	2010 %	2012 %	2013 %	2015 %	2017 %	2019 %	2020 %	2021 %	Progress %
Employment										
Malta	48.3	58.1	60.7	65.1	68.2	71	73.3	75.4	76.8	28.5
European Union	61.1	62.2	61.9	70.5	71	71.5	72	72.2	71.6	10.5
Money										
Malta	54.3	68.8	71.4	79.2	80.6	82.4	82.5	82.6	84.2	29.9
European Union	64.1	67	67.8	78.4	78.4	79.6	80.4	80.6	82.4	18.3
Knowledge										
Malta	33.6	35.6	36.3	65.4	66.3	65.2	65.8	67.1	65.2	31.6
European Union	52.1	49.1	49.1	61.8	62.8	63.4	63.5	63.6	62.7	10.6
Time										
Malta	47.3	36.7	36.7	54.3	58.7	64.2	64.2	64.2	64.2	16.9
European Union	41.5	37.6	37.6	66.3	68.9	65.7	65.7	65.7	64.9	23.4
Power										
Malta	27.2	18.8	28.3	20.9	25	27.4	32.2	32.8	37.5	10.3
European Union	31.4	37.9	39.7	41.9	43.5	48.5	51.9	53.5	55	23.6
Health										
Malta	94.1	93.4	95.6	90.6	91.6	91.8	92.1	92	92.3	-1.8
European Union	87.8	90	90	87.5	87.2	87.4	88.1	88	87.8	0
GE Index										
Average score	43.4	42.4	46.8	54.4	57.8	60.1	62.5	63.4	65	21.6
Malta	51.3	52.4	52.9	63.8	65.0	66.2	67.4	67.9	68	16.7
European Union										

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021); EIGE (2021a); EIGE (2021b); EIGE (2021c); EIGE (2021d).

5.6. Synchronic Analysis

In this section, data provided by the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021) was analyzed. Table 4 to 9 (2019) give a detailed, static picture of the sectors where Malta shows a good track record and which areas need more input.

Table 4 demonstrates that the full-time employment for Maltese women was better than the European Union average, although their duration in the labor market was slightly lower than their European counterparts in 2019. With reference to sectoral segregation, Maltese and European Union women were concentrated in education, human health, and social activities, more than their male counterparts. As this table indicates, Maltese women and men were in a better position than some of their European counterparts to take one or two hours leave to attend to personal or family matters. Career prospects was higher than the European Union average for both Maltese women and men.

Table 4. Gender equality with regards to work, 2019.

Participation							
Country	Full-time employment rate (%)			Duration of working life (years)			
	Women	Men	Women	Men			
Malta	45	67	32	41			
European Union	41	57	33	38			
Segregation and quality of work							
Country	Employed people in education, human health, and social work activities (%)		Ability to take one hour or two off during working hours to take care of personal or family matters (%)		Career prospects index (Points, 0-100)		
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Malta	30	11	37	38	69	67	
European Union	30	8	22	26	62	63	

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021).

The data in Table 5 shows that Maltese women's and men's mean monthly earnings were lower than the European Union average. It was also evident that Maltese women earned less than men. The mean equivalent

net income was higher than the European Union average for women and men, but lower than that earned by Maltese men. Maltese and European women were more exposed to the risk of poverty than their male counterparts. The percentage of Maltese women at risk of poverty was slightly higher than the female European Union average. **Table 5** also compares the difference in total income received by 20% of the population with the highest income with that received by the lowest paid 20% income. The difference between the highest and the lowest paid income quintiles seems to be higher in Malta.

Table 5. Gender equality with regards to money, 2019.

Financial resources				
Country	Mean monthly earnings (PPS)		Mean equivalized net income (PPS)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	2238	2660	20663	21426
European Union	2333	2819	19495	20420
Economic situation				
Country	At-risk-of-poverty (%)		Income distribution S20/80	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	18	15	24	24
European Union	17	15	20	20

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021).

Table 6 shows data related to education. In 2019, the rate of Maltese female graduates surpassed that of their male counterparts. Unfortunately, the portion of the population with a tertiary level of education fell short of the European Union average for both Maltese women and men. In 2019, Maltese women, including their European Union counterparts, were more likely to participate in formal or non-formal education. Maltese men did worse than women and their European Union counterparts. One of the main areas of concern was the fact that half the Maltese female tertiary students were concentrated in education, the humanities, arts, health, and welfare. These qualifications lead graduates into taking up careers in the feminized sectors. These sectors tend to pay less when considering the human capital, job-specific skill requirements and time investment involved (Murphy & Oesch, 2015). The segregation of female graduates in these areas of specialization was higher than the female European Union average, and that of Maltese men.

Table 6. Gender equality with regards to Knowledge, 2019.

Attainment and participation				
Country	Graduates of tertiary education (%)		People participating in formal or non-formal education (%)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	24	21	17	15
European Union	26	25	17	16
Segregation				
Country	Tertiary students in education, health and welfare, humanities, and arts (%)			
	Women	Men		
Malta	50	27		
European Union	43	21		

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021).

Table 7 gives data regarding time in 2019. Maltese women, like their European Union counterparts, on European Union average, were more likely to spend almost double the time men devoted to caring for and educating their children or grandchildren, taking care of the elderly or persons with disabilities daily. Maltese women spent more than double the time on household chores than their male counterparts. In 2019, the European Union average for women was slightly lower than that for Malta. Surprisingly, Maltese men were devoting more time to chores than their European Union counterparts, which meant that there were countries which were patriarchal than Malta. Both Maltese women and men had less time for sporting, cultural or leisure activities outside of their home than their European Union counterparts, with Maltese women spending less time than men. The fact that they devoted more time to care, and household chores meant that Maltese women lose out on sports and leisure activities, and so did Maltese men, to a lesser extent. Maltese women were also less likely to be involved in voluntary or charitable activities than Maltese men. The European Union average for the involvement of women in voluntary or charitable activities was higher than that for men and Maltese women.

Table 7. Gender equality with regards to Time, 2019.

Care activities				
Country	People caring for and educating their children or grandchildren, elderly or people with disabilities, every day (%)		People doing cooking and/or household, every day (%)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	42	25	81	37
European Union	37	25	78	32
Social activities				
Country	Workers doing sporting, cultural or leisure activities outside of their home, at least daily or several times a week (%)		Workers involved in voluntary or charitable activities, at least once a month (%)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	25	26	10	11
European Union	27	31	12	11

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021).

Table 8 gives data on women’s representation at decision making levels. This is the area where more work needs to be done in Malta. At the political level, the share of women in parliament stood at a dismal 13% of the legislature. The percentage of the share of female ministers stood at slightly higher than 15%. Maltese women’s representation at the political level was therefore dismal when compared to Maltese male, and the European Union average for male and female representation.

The percentage of women representation on boards of the largest quoted companies, supervisory boards or boards of directors decreased to 10%. The share of women on board the Central Bank of Malta was higher and stood at 25%, the same as the European Union average for women. Maltese women were more likely to be visible at board level in research funding organizations (45%). This percentage was higher than the European Union average for women, but lower than that of men. Maltese women were less visible as board members of publicly broadcasting organizations and even less so in the Olympic sports committee. Their presence in both fields was dismal when compared to the European Union average for women and men.

Table 8. Gender equality with regards to Power, 2019.

Political						
Country	Share of ministers (%)		Share of members of parliament (%)		Share of members of regional assemblies (%)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	15	85	13	87	26	74
European Union	34	66	33	67	30	70
Economic						
Country	Share of members of boards in largest quoted companies, supervisory board or board of directors (%)			Share of board members of central bank (%)		
	Women	Men		Women	Men	
Malta	10	90		25	75	
European Union	30	70		25	75	
Social						
Country	Share of board members of research funding organizations (%)		Share of board members of publicly owned broadcasting organizations (%)		Share of members of highest decision-making body of the national Olympic sport organizations (%)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	45	55	17	83	9	91
European Union	39	61	36	64	17	83

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021).

Malta’s has a good international record on the provision and access to health services. The World Population Review (2022) ranked Malta at 25 out of 167 countries. This standing is reflected in Malta’s life expectancy at birth which is higher than the European Union average for both Maltese women and men. Maltese women live four years longer than their male counterparts. In 2019, Maltese men and women scored

higher than the European Union average when it came to healthy years at birth, as well as self-perceived health. With regards to the latter, Maltese women’s self-perceived health was lower than that of Maltese men.

Longevity is linked to health care services access. The Maltese population did not register any unmet needs for medical examination but did for dental examinations. The latter was recorded at a lower level than the European Union average for both men and women. Maltese people also scored higher than the European Union average when carrying out physical activities and eating food and vegetables where Maltese men were more likely to score higher than women. Maltese women were slightly more likely to smoke and drink when compared to the European Union average for women, but less likely to do so when compared to men.

Table 9. Gender equality with regards to Health, 2019.

Status						
Country	Self-perceived health, good or very good (%)		Life expectancy at birth (years)		Healthy life years at birth (years)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Malta	72	76	85	81	74	73
European Union	66	71	84	79	65	64
Behaviour						
Country	People who do not smoke and are not involved in harmful drinking (%)			People doing physical activities and/or consuming fruits and vegetables (%)		
	Women	Men		Women	Men	
Malta	70	56		43	45	
European Union	72	52		35	40	
Access						
Country	Population with unmet needs for medical examination (%)			Population with unmet needs for dental examination (%)		
	Women	Men		Women	Men	
Malta	0	0		1	1	
European Union	3	3		4	4	

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021).

6. Conclusion

The Malta Council of Women’s Organizations (2013) maintains that the real impetus behind the design and implementation of gender equality legislation and policies were not spearheaded by an ethos for social justice but derived from Malta’s need to be part of the global economy. This was epitomized in the country’s application to join the European Union, a journey which started in the 1970s. This and the ratification of international treaties, pushed successive Maltese governments to report, on progress regarding gender equality to the relevant international agencies. The entities that received these progress reports published them and used these to shame or praise Malta on the effort made. Peer scrutiny at times pushed certain issues on the public policy agenda.

Malta’s aspiration to become part of the European Union, meant that it was forced to do more to address gender inequality at the local level since it was found lacking and deficient on the European Union level. Maltese male elites were driven to implement Eurocentric ideas and policies. McEwan (2019) is suspicious of Eurocentric discourses, regarding them as the dominant, universalizing, and arrogant discourses. Malta, due to its history, has always looked to the Global North when it came to policy (Cutajar, 2008, 2021). The Global North was and is still the main source of ideas and conceptualization on public policy in Malta. Without this push or nudge from the Global North, political elites would have done little to promote gender equality in Malta. In conclusion, without the domineering presence of the Global North, Malta as a country in the periphery, would have promoted other issues rather than gender equality.

This same globalizing move which has led to Malta’s recolonization, has helped Maltese women break some patriarchal bonds. Changes in the Maltese educational system enacted in the 1980s and 90s enabled more women to further their education (Cutajar, 1999). This, added to the tertiarization of the economy and facilitated women’s access to employment (Cutajar, 2021). Further changes in public policy enabled them to remain in employment when women had children, as the data demonstrates. Changes in the economy lifted some of the barriers to greater gender equality, but this was not enough. Public policies that helped promote women’s entry and retention in employment, such as free childcare together with work life balance policies, helped increase Maltese women’s access to economic opportunities and empower them as economic agents.

The increase in the global flow of information in the last thirty decades thanks to changes in information

technology, has kept Maltese women keep up to date with gender equality policies happening in other countries in the Global North. As part of the European Union, Maltese women also became more aware of their rights, and what other nation states did to address gender issues. In the last six years, women's groups have become more organized. They have effectively mobilized and influenced the actions of elected policymakers in matters such as the government's attempt to introduce sex work, promoting the day after pill, and the push to include femicide in the criminal code. This in turn has led to the reconfiguration of public/private and production-reproduction dichotomies (Islam & Hossain, 2016).

When it comes to women's rights, the state is often perceived as the enemy or savior (Islam & Hossain, 2016). It is the state women and other disadvantaged groups turn to, to tackle discrimination. In countries where political elite pay lip service to equality, women also draw on resources beyond the state. Maltese women turn to the European Union and beyond to tackle gender inequality – although the latter sphere has not been touched upon in this paper. Data gathered by international, regional, and national bodies is constantly scrutinized by gender and policy experts within Malta and beyond to draw attention to the gaps that still need to be dealt with, while ensuring that the public policies in place are being effectively implemented. International peer pressure, together with the fear of being found wanting on a global basis where gender equality is concerned, has led countries to ratify treaties (The World Bank, 2011), implement European Union directives and/or change public policies to deal with gender inequality. Some of these are effected willingly, others reluctantly, or in a piecemeal fashion. Pressure needs to come from various sources to push reluctant policy makers to implement change on a local level – not only from the inside.

Although Malta's laws have been modified to address the realities of gender-based discrimination in public and private life, the country is still far from meeting above-average equality standards. "Women are still perceived as the caregivers even though they may have professional commitments", Interviewee 7 pointed out. The participants stated that although there have been legislative and policy adjustments to deal with gender inequality, this has not always led to a change in the pervasive patriarchal mind-set that percolates among the public and those, in decision making positions. Access to information and awareness of social mores in other countries have changed the perceptions of the younger and/or educated sectors of the population in Malta, leading to a more egalitarian mind set. This change in cultural mind set is not all pervasive and needs to be addressed, for real change to occur.

The participants also felt that change in public policy tended to be a knee jerk reaction to satisfy the demands made by European Union directives such as UN treaties or sustainable development goals. Others were enacted when public outrage was expressed after events took place. Some have been introduced through the initiatives taken by individual prime ministers. The lack of strategic planning was underlined by the participants. As they pointed out, to date, Malta has not had one single overall strategy which would help coordinate public policy where gender equality is concerned. There was a consultation on a gender equality strategy (Ministry for European Affairs and Equality, 2019) but the finalized version never saw the light of day. Without a strategy, change in this area will occur in a piecemeal manner.

All the participants stated that Malta began promoting gender equality relatively late compared to some European Union member states. It needs to do more to catch up. Several legislative, institutional and policy changes have been made as the data has demonstrated. For gender equality to be effectively promoted, a number of factors need to be taken into consideration. An evaluative exercise conducted by (Network on Development Evaluation of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, 2011) underlined that:

First, an organization's leadership must consistently lead and support the mainstreaming of gender equality and policy. This must start at the top. Second, systems of accountability and incentives must have enough "bite" so staff cannot evade responsibility for delivering gender equality results. Third, gender equality work must be properly funded and there must be sufficient trained senior staff to gain traction over an organization. A few junior gender staff is not enough. Fourth, new procedures and practices must be well designed, given a big push at the outset and the momentum maintained rather than allowed to diminish. [...] If gender equality is to become an integral part of the culture of an organization - part of what defines its mission, values and objectives - then consistent and sustained action is needed in all six of these areas.

Countries in the periphery might use the excuse that all this might deflect the country's attention from achieving an important goal, forgetting that without gender equality, half the population in a given country will suffer.

With the help of feminist postcolonial and intersectional theories, the researchers involved in this paper made sense of who and where Maltese women are, what to expect and how to proceed. The context in which we live in shapes lives. Postcolonial and intersectional theories reject ahistorical and essentialized categories since subject and object gain meaning according to their location in a system of meaning (Sisson, 2019). These theories draw attention to the economic, political, and socio-cultural forms of continuous recolonization – which might be seen in a negative perspective but can have positive impacts where gender equality is concerned.

Maltese women's increase in agency and their access to economic independence has led to changes in gender roles, a shift in the relative power in households and their agency. Large gaps remain in some areas – access to equal pay, for work of equal value, equitable sharing in household, family responsibilities and the need to increase of women's presence in decision making roles are some areas which need to be addressed.

Profeta (2020) sustains that having more women in decision making helps force and redirect the public policy agenda. As her research demonstrated, more women in decision making helps focus and redirect policy agenda on issues which reduce the gender pay gaps. Change will only take place if there are modifications in public policy. European Union directives help push reluctant countries to make public policy changes in some of these areas, and this helps women. So does public pressure. Public action is needed to promote gender equality, through public policy (The World Bank, 2011).

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