

The 'Gender Balance Reform' for the Maltese Parliament: A historical sociological justification from a feminist perspective.

In my presentation I will discuss positive measures that were introduced to address the under-representation of women in Maltese politics, taking into consideration the historical backdrop and the islands' cultural traits.

Positive measures are aimed to extend the pool of diverse individuals who will contribute towards inclusive decision-making at the top levels of power.

It was Hillary Clinton, in her 1995 speech at the Beijing World Conference for Women who rendered famous the phrase: **'Women's rights are Human Rights'**.

We can go further to argue that without women's rights, we cannot achieve the key objectives of the United Nation declaration of Human Rights. Nor can we achieve the Sustainable Development Goals are intrinsically linked together. In fact, as observed by the Russian political scientist Shvedova Nadezhda – Xj/vedova' Nazjeda (2005) asserted that women's under-representation in most Parliaments, does not merely limit women's fundamental democratic rights but also the wider human rights of other politically marginalized individuals.

The dearth of women in policy and decision-making bodies reinforce **andro-centric** views; which implies that there is a **democratic deficit** because decision-making is skewed towards the interests of a specific social group. Androcracies, are not inclusive of all men since such political systems favour men who fit the traits of **"hegemony masculinities'** (Cynthia Enloe). As a result, political machoism is still very evident in public politics and it is extremely forceful in highly polarised contexts.

Some years ago, I recited a quote by the feminist author Rianne Voet (pronounced vote): **"We should suspect a system of representation that routinely restricts power to a particular group, usually middle-aged and older men"**.

The moment I dared utter those words, the whole room, became visibly startled and upset. It was then that I realized that I was speaking to elected representatives; almost all middle-aged and mature men!

That experience alerted me to the need of tactfulness. Lest we forget, while positive measures and gender-balance mechanisms are aimed to bring a qualitative shift in women's representation, they are always approved by male-dominated Parliaments.

It is men that approve reforms prompted by the pressures and lobbying from women's groups inside and outside the parties. Women (and their supporters) are inspired by international organizations and transnational women's networks.

From time to time we need to reflect and to compare and contrast with other counties.

We have long been aware that at a global level, Malta registers one of the lowest female representations in Parliament. We are in the 149th place in the rankings published by the Interparliamentary Union.

Malta's female representation has hardly changed in over 70 years; in fact it is stuck between 10 to 14 %. At some point we were even sliding down in international rankings simply because other countries were adopting positive measures and we did not. So the level of women's parliamentary

involvement did not mirror the advancement registered in the fields of education, employment, social wellbeing etc.

It is estimated that half of the countries of the world employs some type of positive measures, including electoral quotas for their parliament (Stockholm University, 2021). According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, there are **127 countries** that have introduced voluntary or mandatory positive measures to ensure that a given percentage of elected candidates are women.

My speech will be based on my academic readings as a lecturer in Gender and International Affairs, on my own lifelong activism as a writer and my recent role as Chair of the Technical Committee that put forward that proposals that were later approved, almost unanimous (only two votes against), by the Maltese Parliament.

My story started 40 years ago in this same building. There was then the so called “pupil-worker scheme” for those of us who entered what was known as the ‘New Lyceum’.

The New Lyceum population was about a third of the current student population and I was one of the few girl students.

At the time, the two-year course was equally split into two between a study phase and a work phase. My ambition was to enter the field of journalism even when there were only two female journalists in Malta, most news organisations refused to employ women and my career guidance teacher did her best to dissuade me from such a career path.

When I entered the New Lyceum, I was already contributing an overly idealistic feminist column to the left-wing publication **Il-Hsieb**. So, I enthusiastically applied to spend my work phase at Union Press, which published **Il-Hsieb** and daily trade union-owned newspapers, one in English and another in the Maltese language. Then the General Workers’ Union had some 40,000 members and its mainstream newspapers had a very wide and strong distribution.

But I soon faced crushing disappointment. The Chairman of the Board, an influential but paternalistic gentleman, took it upon himself to protect me! He fretted that it was not appropriate to allow a naïve 17-year-old girl, a minor, to work alongside an all-male newsroom. I was shattered when instead of the newsroom, I was relegated to the Cash Office, where the union processed membership fees. Not only did I feel cheated out of an opportunity to gain experience, I also felt betrayed being forced to take a feminine role, that of a pen pusher within an organisation that advocated workers’ rights. And as a rather rebellious teenager, I did not take it lightly.

In the finance office I gained access to data. I soon found that whereas a third of the union members were female, there were no women in the top echelons of this long-established organisation. The union was set up in 1943 and this was 1983. Women’s issues that were at the forefront of international trade unionism were not on the agenda in Malta: sexual harassment, flexible hours, child care facilities, sexual and reproductive health rights were not deemed a priority.

Instead, this union and other unions in Malta, were more prone to engage in hard politics and macho militancy. And I began to research and write about it. As a result I ended up as the token woman on the Union’s Council, the first woman in 40 years of union history, the only woman and at 17 years of age, the youngest member of the Council.

At some point I penned a motion calling for co-education to ensure equal educational rights for girls probably because in school I had been forced to take home economics and needlework, which I despised. The motion was shot down and derided by union members.

I may have been the most naïve council member, but I soon realised that I could not push any of the issues that mattered to women on the union's agenda before more of us gained a greater role at the helm. It was at this stage that I first heard statements like: **“there are no women at the helm because women are not interested”**, **“We have always encouraged women, but they simply do not commit”** and then in politics, it was claimed that the gap in Parliament was women's fault because **“women do not vote for women”**.

All these were VERY convenient replies that did not threaten the position of incumbents and reinforced the status quo. In a few words. the biggest lessons I learnt during my stay at the New Lyceum was that I had steeper challenges ahead of me and that if I wanted change I needed to persevere and to work for it.

I began with a personal anecdote and now I wish to move on to a historical narrative.

This year the Maltese parliament turns 100 years. I will briefly resort to a historical narrative to provide a context that explains why women remained politically invisible in the highest echelons of power.

Let us zap through some historical events that through some light on present-day realities.

One of the points that I would like to make is that we are still in the process of redressing the prevalent collective amnesia about women's place in history. HerStory is still being written and there are still very wide gaps.

International solidarity and networking was always important for women. International organizations have always inspired other women elsewhere, providing them with a well of moral and practical support.

Some men became important allies in favour of women's rights.

A article published by W. B. Johnson and D. G. Smith in the 'Harvard Business review' (2018) claimed that when men deliberately engage in gender inclusion programs, 96% of organizations see progress —compared to only 30% of organizations where men are not engaged. So organizations must invite men to participate in inclusion initiatives and even in events designed for women. They also point out aht men can face penalties for supporting women's advancement and for failing to conform to masculine norms.

At times women's initiatives and petitions fall on deaf ears because they do not have the political clout to push their agenda.

Civil society and women are frequently empowered in conflict situations and later registered advancement and they have an important role in post-conflict situations.

One must clinch the moment to push for change. Society is not always equally receptive for a liberal agenda and at times progress is followed by a backlash so we really need to seize the day.

Passing reforms requires strategizing and forming coalitions – and one is more likely to succeed.

R Miller: encouraged Burns to form the association. They clinched the moment and the participation of the Women of Malta Association in the National Assembly was passed almost by stealth when most of the conservatives members were absent.

The supply of women candidates was low from the outset.

But women participated in the election with enthusiasm.

A mere 28 women were elected to parliament in a history of 74 years. In spite degrees of Europeanisation, until 2017 women's representation in the national Parliament remained stuck at around 13% and so we have been running on the spot for $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century.

It must be noted that the situation in Parliament and in cabinet did not change much even though within party structures, soft measures were introduced in the late 1990s when the Labour Party introduced a one-third quota for women in its Executive Committee. A voluntary quota of 20% for women on its electoral list was introduced but until the election of 2017 it still struggled to meet this target. The Nationalist Party initially adopted other measures to ensure that four out of the thirteen members from the General Council on the Executive Council had to be female. Since 2014, nine women and nine men were elected on the Executive Committee from two separate lists. The same exercise, which boosted female representation within the party structures, was extended to local sectional committees. At that time the party decided to stop short from a similar practice when it comes to the selection of candidates because it deemed that internal reforms would lead to a gender balanced candidature. This did not happen.

1. Political Economic influences on the supply of women candidates and hence the chances of women of being elected.

The Consultation Document on the Gender Balance Reform that we published in 2019, observed that the electoral system (PR-STV) exacerbates intra-party divisions, where one's worse enemies are same-party candidates, which renders rivalry toxic and it is very hard to usurp the seat of established incumbents; 88% of which are now men. So PR-STV may not discriminate women candidates but the level of pressures and polarisation that it encourages, combined with cultural traits, ensure that the supply of female candidates remains low.

Ingrid Vella observed that other political factors include: voter choices, the perspectives of party leaders, lack of confidence arising from socialisation patterns and occupational segregation.

In contrast to the ballot sheet, we must point put that the participation of Maltese women in grassroots engagement was always high. In the 1980s Bestler found a strong female presence in the membership in the main Maltese parties but, with exceptions, their engagement was mostly limited to community mobilization and fund raising. Until the 90s women were structurally segregated in women's sections (Ghaqda Nisa Laburisti and MNPN). Party structures revolved around traditional male lifestyle patterns and the occupational needs of men (*esp: l-avukati*), so meetings are held late in the evenings when it is close to impossible for women with families to participate on a regular basis. Throughout the years women gained little knowledge on how the political system works unless they had close mentors within their family or friend support networks. Moreover, women did not have money to spend on campaigns. This is especially the case for those who hail from low socio-economic groups and all those women who were financially dependent on husbands.

Therefore, some authors, including Fiona Buckley, concluded that female candidacy opportunities are not merely determined by the electoral systems and other political economic factors but also by cultural factors.

J.C. Lane (1995), who studied gender representation in Malta in the mid-1990s, He claimed that the Maltese electoral system PR-STV does not disadvantage women because it puts individual candidates over the party. For this reason, women have an equal chance of being elected as men; only if parties presented more female candidates on their ballot sheet. So he argued that the dearth of women candidates and parliamentarians had cultural roots. Lane observed that the Catholic Church had an important role to reproduce traditional values. It also reinforced segregated roles where women remain at the heart of the family where their primary roles are those of mother and wife. These arrangements did not merely impinge on voter perceptions but also on the supply of women candidates. This was clearly laid out since the 1940s where the bishops preached traditional gender relations and linked maternity with morality, where the mother was the queen of her home and responsible for both the physical as well as the spiritual well-being of her husband and offspring.

Some cultural traits are linked to the Code of Honour and Shame, which is deemed to be characteristic of gender relations in the Mediterranean. A successful politician like Agatha Barbara, acknowledged in her later years that while her male colleagues had families, she could not have it all in this all-male political world. Elizabeth Ebejer's biography of Barbara, recounts how as a woman who entered politics as an outsider and operated in masculinised institutions (with pre-established informal rules) until she had to change her behaviour to adapt and cope within these macho structures. Barbara recounted how in 1947 she felt compelled to give up her social life (*she had loved dancing*) and dating (we now know she had a boyfriend she liked). She gave up her personal life to turn into a veritable political animal. She feared her presence as 'the other' would impinge negatively on her married male colleagues and so she treaded carefully and was probably excluded from a lot of informal interpersonal interactions.

In spite of all advancement and change, today Tomasi de Lampedusa still comes to mind with his famous paradox "Everything must change so that everything can stay the same" remains a valid consideration.

Only last week, in 2021, a young friend confessed how she ended up in tears when a relatively young high-ranking public official told her how he avoids traveling overseas with female colleagues lest it disturbs his wife. This man happened to be her boss and so given this state of mind, there are going to be many limitations on her own opportunities to travel, network and advancement.

The technical committee was appointed to prepare a Document entitled "Gender Balance in Parliament Reform" that was published on March 26th 2019. The consultation period ended on June 8th.

During the consultation period, a two-pronged approach was used: Views were sought on: The notion of positive measures in principle, and on the technical details. Initially the committee discussed quotas.

Dahlerup (2005) identified two types of electoral gender quotas: **candidate quotas** and **reserved seats**. Candidate quotas specify *the minimum number of women that are required on ballot paper* and political parties are responsible to ensure that more female candidates are recruited. The *reserved seat system* sets aside a number of seats for women.

The Technical Committee found that in our electoral system both the candidate quota and the reserved seats would be met by resistance. Such a proposal was likely to be blocked because it was difficult to find support of 2/3 of the Parliamentary votes, which are required to change the Constitution, when many incumbents faced the possibility that they become unseated.

A Gender Corrective mechanism, where Parliament would have 12 additional seats for a limited time period, was proposed. This proposal was presented together with three other pillars of the reform.

The reform aims to advance the numeric representation along-side a process of sensitization to ensure that more parliamentarians improve their substantive contribution to gender equality. It was Sarah Childs' who aptly underscored that mere numeric (or descriptive) representation may not do much to improve the lives of women unless it also positively impacts substantive policy. "The assumption that women representatives are more likely to act for women than male representatives may seem reasonable.

This assumption is often understood in terms of the concept of critical mass; i.e. when there is a critical mass of women present ... politics will reflect to a much greater extent women's concerns". Yet, she argued that the concept is questioned in contexts where a higher percentage of women in political institutions did not translate into a better appreciation of women's needs and aspirations and whenever women in politics failed to act for women. This underscores the importance of a **gender mainstreaming** process that goes hand-in-hand with legal amendments.

The reform may have helped to sensitize political players and to assert the position of women. Contemporary political structures must reflect existing realities to preserve their legitimacy and relevance. It was the Irish academic Fiona Buckley (2013) who noted that positive measures are adopted during times of democratic innovation, transition or renewal and they can be seen as a means of establishing the legitimacy of a new political system.

It is now more evident that we need to move on with wider and deeper reforms towards a Second Republic. These may include electoral reforms and alternative ballot system, which will need to integrate the gender balance mechanism.

In a speech I delivered during the President's conference on National Unity in February of this year, I said that part of the current political malaise results from blinkered polarization and the awful incestuous relationship between politics and big business, which seems to have taken a life of its own. The time to break the vicious cycle is now because there are pressing needs to heal and to meet the massive challenges of the post-pandemic era.

After 100 years, I hope that women will now be visible and that they will have a strong voice in a process that leads to a 2nd Republic and to a Constitutional reform.