



Shattering women's glass ceiling

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The role of women in academia has always greatly interested me. Several years ago, when I was asked to become Gender Issues Committee chairperson at the University of Malta, I readily accepted. Apart from other tasks, the committee has just compiled a booklet about the profiles of senior female academics. Our objectives are twofold: one is to incentivise junior staff to aim higher and move forward in their career; the other, to help sensitise male colleagues to better appreciate the hurdles women face when pursuing an academic career together with raising a family.

Multitasking needs a number of skills. An individual has to prioritise various contending needs and to hone the skill of time management. It is definitely an advantage for children to be exposed to parents who practice such skills early on.

I am the first woman to be appointed full professor at the University of Malta. Without the support of both my parents, when they were still alive, and of my husband it would have been difficult for me to succeed here. My three children were born in a very short time span and unfortunately my father died when my youngest child was only one and a half years old. Now that my children are grown up, I feel that my example has been useful in enabling them to develop their skills to cope with the various commitments demanded by a modern lifestyle.

The booklet we are compiling has a prevailing recurrent theme: the need to support women. Many universities abroad provide mentors for their academic staff. I am sure that a similar scheme locally

would be a step in the right direction to empower female academics to achieve more. Unfortunately, our university does not have a structured unit to adequately cater for gender issues. The only help that the Gender Issues Committee receives is the provision of a part-time secretary. To promote gender equality, many foreign universities give financial awards.

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In recent years, child care facilities are one factor that has undoubtedly contributed greatly to help women achieve their career goals. Gladly, I have lately noticed that the number of these child care facilities has increased. University has its own nursery. However, this facility has its limitations. It is not large enough to match the ever increasing demand, it also does not open for long enough nor caters for a wide enough age range of children.

Overall, I am glad to have seen a great improvement in the proportion of female academics, but a glass ceiling still exists. The statistics still show low percentages for the top academic posts. The numbers at the top for women still fall short of their male counterparts. This ceiling needs to be broken. ●