

Assessing Malta's equal opportunities

A STRATEGY of equal opportunities is one of the pillars of the European Union's employment policy as it is recognised that enhancing women's full participatory role in the job market leads to greater economic growth and well being. However, before embarking on an evaluation of equal opportunities in Malta, one should, first of all, be alerted to the definition of the concept. How would one define "equal opportunities"?

Strictly speaking, "equal opportunities" refer to a formal equality concept on "equal starting points" for women and men. More broadly, it may indicate the achievement of equal results. What does this all mean?

May I ask you to imagine that you are about to watch a five-kilometre race between an equal number of male and female athletes. All athletes are sufficiently trained and warmed up for the event. They are now standing on the same "Start" line and you are about to observe what happens along the way until they reach the "Finish". Never mind the discrepancy in the power and speed of the runners as long as the race runs smoothly and without obstacles. Or does it?

Why were many of the female competitors compelled to pull to the side before reaching the end of the race? Why were some other female runners expected to jump over unanticipated hurdles before getting to the "Finish"? The five-kilometre stretch is, otherwise, relatively easygoing and the male participants in particular reach the end in good time.

Our imaginary race may be transported to the real world of work. Do women and men have the same equal opportunities in the labour market? More precisely, do women tend to encounter more difficulties than their male counterparts, especially when reconciling work and family responsibilities? In the context of the EU's social policy, "equal opportunities" implies an equal distribution of market work, home duties and financial earnings. Indeed, how does Malta match up to such a broad definition of "equal opportunities"?

Selected indicators

The process of measuring equal opportunities is by tackling "gender gaps" and identifying discrepancies that exist as in employment and unemployment rates, occupational segregation that persists in the workforce and income differentials between women and men. To operationalise this approach, I shall focus on a few selected performance indicators that reveal the (in)equalities between the position of women and men in the Maltese labour market.

Employment rate of women compared to men's. This indicator measures the accessibility and unequal participation in standard full-time "year round" market work for women and men in Malta.

A simple head count of full-time equivalents provided in official statistics shows that in 1999 female labour supply totalled 41,000, compared to 105,000 men. This is equivalent to an employment rate of 25 per cent for women and 65 per cent for men aged 15 and over. (In Malta, employment rates are calculated on full-time employment. Atypical work is outside of the count).

Employment rate of mothers and fathers with young children. This indicator should be expressed in full-time equivalents as it provides information on whether there is equal labour market participation or rather a more specialised division of roles among young mothers and fathers.

Official statistics reveal an intermittent female employment profile represented by a sharp peak of full-time economic activity in the 20-24 age interval, followed by a trough during the years of childbearing and nurturing. More specifically, 63 per cent of all young women aged between 20 and 24 are economically active.

However, as women approach prime working age, labour market

FRANCES CAMILLERI on how Malta matches up to the Equal Opportunities Guidelines of the European Union and suggests what action needs to be taken to promote equal opportunities in Malta.



activity takes a downturn. In the 25-29 age bracket female labour market participation drops to 40 per cent compared to an 88 per cent male participation rate. Women's economic activity rate declines further as they age, standing at 16 per cent for those over 35 years compared to 89 per cent for men in the same age cohort.

Employment rate of women aged 50-60. This indicator focuses on a vulnerable group of potential workers and provides information on the (im)possibility of re-entering the labour market.

1995 census data reveal an employment rate of just 12 per cent for women in the 50-60 age bracket. By contrast, market participation by men in the same age group stands at 76 per cent.

By way of information, on the initiative of the Ministry for Social Policy a six-week Empowerment Programme for women "returnees" was launched by Dr Lawrence Gonzi on November 6, 2000. The programme is run by the Employment and Training Corporation and includes (but not only) training in personality development, time management and basic computer skills.

This venture is being carried out in collaboration with the Office of the Board of Co-operatives that has offered the participants a two-week intensive course on the operations of a co-operative. Incidentally, the initiative of the "returnees" programme conforms closely to the EU aim of facilitating the reintegration of women (and men) into the labour market after an absence from the paid workforce.

Relative concentration of women in higher positions compared to men. This indicator shows the extent of vertical segregation by calculating the proportion of women (and men) employed in the higher positions.

For example, in 1999 female employees in the Category A Government Service, i.e. in the salary scales 1 to 5, totalled a mere 48, or just 10 per cent. In parallel, women's share as nominated members on government boards and committees was 17 per cent. By contrast, women outnumber men in the unskilled manual jobs. The 1995 census shows there are over 1,000 more women than men employed as machine operators. In Malta the general rule is for women's participation to diminish as higher levels are reached.

Male-female wage gap. This indicator focuses on the pay differential between women and men based on education, job choice and duration of employment.

No relevant data is to date available. However, it is expected that findings in the Labour Force Survey conducted by the Central Office of Statistics will, in the very near future, shed some light on this performance indicator.

Gross annual income of women and men. This indicator gives information on the economic power of women and men.

Local studies on income groups suggest that whereas 81 per cent of male heads of household stand above the poverty line (just under Lm2,000

per annum), the majority of women heads of household (56 per cent) are situated below the line.

Male-female gap in unpaid time spent on tasks that benefit others. This indicator refers to the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and offers an insight into gender equality and equity.

A national study I have just concluded for the Commission for the Advancement of Women, due for publication within a few weeks, reveals that women in Malta dedicate an average of 11 hours a day to unpaid tasks and volunteering. Equal opportunities focus on the equal distribution and sharing of unpaid work with the ultimate objective of a truly emancipated society where every citizen can participate in a balanced manner within all spheres of life that include paid work, family responsibilities and leisure. I am tempted to argue that in this context Malta appears to stand a long way off.

Ultimately, it is pertinent to suggest that reliable data sources are scarce, particularly in the fields of earnings, income and time use. Such limitations influence the selection of performance indicators that assess the extent of equal opportunities in Malta.

Precisely to redress this shortcoming, a project on sex-disaggregated statistics is being carried out by the Commission for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with the Central Office of Statistics. The Commission is aware that good quality statistical data and appropriate skills in communicating such data are essential for the effective monitoring of equal opportunities.

Working and family

A related dimension of concern in EU social policy is that of the "reconciliation of working and family". Cultural attitudes play a part in women's market participation as do the ways in which those attitudes are anchored into social organisation.

Social constraints are subtle but forceful and women tend to receive conflicting and confusing messages about what they should aim for in life with the result that many simply drift along with the dictates of society. I should like to mention a number of factors that contribute to shaping equal opportunities environments.

Attitudes towards women's employment

Studies seem to suggest that women's participation in employment and types of activity undertaken in market work are based on a constrained choice that is embedded in cultural beliefs.

One important aspect in Maltese cultural attitudes is that women have been made to believe that being a wife and a mother should take priority over any economic occupation outside of the home. Furthermore, there exists an associated belief that children of "working" parents suffer emotional damage due to the mother's absence from the home. While official labour market statistics will only tell us part of the story, it seems

evident that cultural attitudes favour men's employment over women's.

Tax systems

The structure of the fiscal system is often a reflection of underlying notions of equal opportunities in a society. The question of whether revenue from earnings should be geared to individuals or households is especially important for female employment.

Joint assessment of a married couple's income often means entering the top marginal rate of the income tax assessment scales. This is indeed a disincentive for secondary workers (mostly women) who would rather be economically active in the informal economy than watch their earnings end up in the State's coffers as tax revenue.

However, following the amendment in the Income Tax Act, married couples may now opt to have their income computed separately. This does not in any way suggest that all is well. From an equal opportunities perspective, discriminatory practices, that still seek redress, persist in our fiscal policy.

Hours of work

Equality of opportunity and equity in employment are not likely to achieve their goal if large numbers of women have to give up their jobs because of long and rigid working hours that are incompatible with family life. Indeed, the "caring" burden which women carry, very often alone, weighs heavily on their choice of economic activity, as revealed in the employment profile of the female workforce participation over the years.

Through its Working Time Directive the European Court lays down that the average working time for each seven-day period, including overtime, should not exceed 48 hours. Clearly, to date, access to full time employment is not an easy option for women.

Part-time work

National legislation provides for *pro rata* benefits of all leave which includes vacation, sick, birth, bereavement, marriage and injury leave calculated on the minimum leave entitlement applicable to whole-time employees on similar duties with the same employer.

These proportional benefits, however, apply only to those whose part-time job is their principal source of income and provided also that the number of hours worked are not less than 20 hours per week. (*Pro rata* benefits of all leave are granted to employees in the teaching profession, who are engaged part-time for not less than 14 hours in any week).

The European Court rules that part time workers should be given the same rights as full time workers, as differential treatment of workers on the grounds of hours, constitutes unlawful discrimination. The government would be obliged to remove the 20-hour work threshold and employment protection rights, from which part time workers are presently barred, would include among oth-

ers, the right to complain of unfair dismissal, the right to *pro rata* payment and the right to a written statement of employment particulars. The treatment of part-time workers would provide a clear example of the impact of Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome.

Child care facilities

The provision of child care is closely related to general cultural attitudes towards the family. Malta pursues a highly reserved policy on this issue as children are seen as the private responsibility of women (I wish I could have said parents instead of women!). Financial support is given through the children's allowance, but the actual care remains within the family.

Regulations in Malta are based on the assumption that there would always be a full-time female homemaker that follows a system of withdrawal from employment, at least during nurturing. For example, public officers are supported by maternity and parental leave, reduced hours of work and responsibility leave.

In Malta there is indeed a dearth of child care for children of all ages. At this point I should like to pose a question that will hopefully provide food for thought; to what extent are mothers prevented from working full-time as a result of the lack of child care facilities, and, to what extent is it perhaps the case that day care facilities are so limited because there is little demand for them?

Cultural attitudes die hard. While new standards assume that both women and men have responsibilities towards their children, local studies suggest that irrespective of their educational background, women tend to turn their backs on the labour market for as long as childbearing and nurturing last.

Leave arrangements

A directive of the European council obliges member states to introduce legislation on parental leave that will enable parents to care full-time for their child over a period of three months.

Clearly, the Malta public service beats this EU directive hands down. Women and men can avail themselves of four years' unpaid parental leave to care for children under five years. Also under Community law, pregnant women would be entitled to a continuous period of maternity leave of at least 14 weeks that must include the two weeks before and after birth.

Implications for EU integration

Worth noting is that the strategy of special treatment is undermined by the equal treatment provisions of the Treaty of Rome. For instance, provisions that allow women to return and receive pensions earlier than men - at 60 rather than 61 - are illegal under EU law; so is preferential treatment of women in recruitment, even when done to rectify a gender imbalance.

Cultural and sexual behaviours that persist in Malta are all practices which the EU law and its associated policies have the potential to tackle effectively. This brief assessment seems to imply that the current status of equal opportunities in Malta has far to go.

This article is a revised version of a paper that was presented by Ms Camilleri as a member of the Commission for the Advancement of Women during an Equal Opportunities Session at a National Conference on Malta and the European Union Employment Guidelines organised by the Employment and Training Corporation in collaboration with the Foundation for Human Resources Development and the Malta-EU Information Centre last October.