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Introduction: Work-family balance in Malta

Maltese society is facing a major challenge in the struggle to balance family and work responsibilities. Until only a short while ago, Malta's long history of families that make a strong contribution to the creation and preservation of a happy, healthy society was founded on strict gender based roles. A number of significant legislative landmarks have gone a long way towards introducing changes: the 2000 Equal Opportunities Act¹, the 2002 Employment and Industrial Relations Act (EIRA)², and the 2003 Equality for Men and Women Act³ are all having a slow but conspicuous effect on Maltese society.

Recent trends have shown some support for a number of initiatives to consider and further discuss concrete measures aimed at improving work-family balance. The Public service has introduced a set of processes to improve family friendly policies for employees, although these are still in their infancy.⁴

However, legislation is not enough as practice shows that there is still a great cultural and mental change, which must be undertaken. In practice, for example, despite these developments, the official female employment rate is still one of the lowest in comparison to European standards (at 32.7%)⁵, and women's employment is concentrated in specific sectors and levels of occupation with many women better academically qualified than their male counterparts⁶. Population growth remains low at 0.6 % per year and longevity in old age is resulting in an aging population (dependency ration 45.8 and aging index 59)⁷ with a gradual decline in total fertility rate towards below replacement level (TFR 1.5).⁸

The conventional model of work often refers to the traditional male breadwinner model that implies that the ideal employee will work full time with limited family involvement. On the other hand, family life is still generally defined as

1 Chapter 413, Laws of Malta

2 Chapter 452, Laws of Malta

3 Chapter 456, Laws of Malta

4 Such as reduced hours, responsibility leave, career breaks have only been introduced within the Public Service sector while Legal Notice 225.2003 entitled Parental Leave Entitlement regulations, which lays down minimum requirements for the reconciliation of work and parental responsibilities applies to all workers in terms of the Employment and Industrial Relations Act

5 National Statistics Office, Labour Force Survey, 2002

6 Labour Force Survey 2001-2003

7 Data from NSO 2003 where life expectancy at birth for men is 75.8 and 80.5 for women

8 In 2002



women's domain and gender adjustment is proving to be a slow process.⁹ Although the gender pay gap in Malta is gradually contracting (from 82% in 2002 to 85% in 2003) while the adjusted gender pay gap stood at 10% in 2001 (EU 15, 16% in 2001)¹⁰

The challenges of organising caring responsibilities and paid employment are all too often a source of stress for dual earner families. Many couples resolve this conflict by relinquishing a second income and moving to a single breadwinner model. This means that on the birth of the first or second child, the majority of Maltese women, either by choice or through lack of it, have to quit their jobs to take on caring responsibilities. This traditional arrangement constrains women in terms of job satisfaction and financial independence¹¹. It also keeps men from a more active involvement and emotional connection with their children and from helping with the upkeep of the home.

This problem is further compounded because of the scarcity and standards of child care. Although schooling provision from age 3 and over is freely available to all, childcare provision in the 0-3 age group remains a cause for concern. Child care centres are in short supply and good quality care is expensive to provide. This is acknowledged as creating a significant imbalance between the cost of childcare provision, the fees charged for the service and the amount which families are ready to pay. It is a matter of concern that children hailing from lower socio-economic backgrounds income who would benefit most from accessing stimulating care are the most disadvantaged in this respect.¹²

In the 3+ age range, problems also persist in the lack of provision for after school care which is significant through its absence. Care during hours when children are not in school is a key issue and includes before school, after school and during holidays. Most services on offer do not match parents' working schedules aggravating the care deficit.

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)¹³ has started to play its part and a number of organisations are, on a voluntary basis, increasingly de-

9 Amendments of the Civil Code (Chapter 16, Laws of Malta) in 1993 clearly apportioning equal roles in Parental Authority and in acknowledging the contribution of the home maker are slow to make their mark culturally.

10 Eurostat estimate

11 ETC Report 2004

12 National Family Commission document on Helping Families to Balance Work and Home, 2004

13 The commitment of business to contribute to sustainable development to improve quality of life of stakeholders



veloping their own corporate principles, codes of conduct or similar internal management guides¹⁴ towards a more equitable work family balance. It has however been shown that many options on offer are only availed of by female staff as the predominant work culture, particularly in the private sector, continues to consider the ideal worker as free from any attachment and committed solely to work.¹⁵

Part 1.

1.1. Relevance of the policy/measure to Malta

Three main priorities were identified to prevent the risk of exclusion within the National Action Plan 2004-2006:

- A. enhancement of rights and safeguarding of equal opportunities in a scenario of both spouses participating in working life, through further support stemming from gender-based policies
- B. Improvement of the preventive aspect of the current and future programmes ensuring the alleviation of risks of poverty and social exclusion occurring from early/school age through an early identification of children and youth at risk
- C. The setting up of educational activities programmes and projects offering guidance on issues such as allocation of family responsibilities, prioritisation of means among all family members.

In response to these key issues, a number of policy instruments and measures have been initiated which include:

- i. Empowerment Skills Programme organised by the Employment and training Corporation which helps women who wish to rejoin the labour market.
- ii. Part-time Employment register providing assistance to individuals (particularly women) who wish to take up part-time employment.

14 The larger banks have been in the forefront of a number of measures which they advocate both for the benefit of their staff but equally for the benefit of their organisation. Ex Clearwater for people introduced by HSBC where returning mothers number 95% attributed to special provisions of leave and conditions of work

15 This has led Borg A. in her study in 2004 to conclude that recourse to family friendly measures may mean forgoing promotion and is less popular among men.



- iii. Gender Equality Action Plan including initiatives to encourage increased female participation through childcare services at the workplace
- iv. Technical Committee Proposals on Child Day Care
- v. ETC project “Empowerment of disadvantaged groups” including facilitation of disadvantaged into the labour market also targeting women and reconciling work and family life.
- vi. Introduction of measures related to improving gender equality co-ordinated by the Commission for Equality between men and women including research into family friendly measures at the workplace.
- vii. Lone Parents Pilot Project coordinating services for single mothers to train and work

1.2. Before examining the relevance of the policy, it is noteworthy, in this context, to point out that the measures outlined in the host country report respond to a “sustainable family policy” which is the leitmotif for Malta’s response but has still not been spelt out as such. Such a clearly defined policy would be beneficial to the coordination and channelling of measures related to this area.

1.3. The setting up of an Alliance for the Family would probably garner great support at the grass roots level where a large number of actors with varying degrees of interest determine issues of concern and receive support to address them. In Malta it would probably be advisable to focus such an alliance on support for families in achieving a work family balance. Unless such focus is clear, there might be a mixed reception to this initiative. With continued influence of the Catholic Church, society continues to perceive women as primarily responsible for the caring role and work commitments are expected to make way for the needs of the persons requiring care.

Notwithstanding legislation, policy and accompanying incentives, it may well be precipitate to presume a gender neutral environment where men and women have interchangeable family roles, although younger generations seem more inclined to entertain this prospect.

1.4. The notion of a career and family audit has been suggested and has been carried out on a voluntary basis by a few organisations locally. Placing the procedure on a more formalised footing might have one of two results

- a. it might, with the correct emphasis and publicity, achieve a desirable profile and enlist a larger number of interested applicants; or



b. it might scare off many of the smaller companies who perceive any introduction as an imposition causing burdens to their productivity. The involvement of the unions in promoting the introduction of the measure might be one way of encouraging effectiveness.

The notion might also stand a better chance of adoption if it were to be demonstrated as having been fruitful on the European level following past experience. The award of a certificate within a wider context of family friendliness and competitiveness might promote the advisability of forming part of a group of organisations all accorded such certification.

It is hard to envisage what social inclusion problems these measures could solve. They could certainly address issues related to policy definition and identification and encourage better research programmes in the field. This would have a positive outcome on the formulation of policy measures tailored to the needs of the target recipient.

It would fit in with the policy and legislative system of Malta according to the terms already described.

Part 2.

It is envisaged that the Family Alliance measure could easily be implemented in a country such as Malta. Initiatives involving state, local councils, church, voluntary organisations, unions and private enterprise have already been encouraged to collaborate in order to address this common issue of concern. One area which would require special attention in the local context would be the review of provisions applicable to the gap between private and public sectors. The combination of family friendly policies may often be impossible for one parent because of the employer's commitment (or lack) towards the introduction of such measures. Incentives should be encouraged in order to support any initiatives taken by the private sector acknowledging and providing quality child care and flexibility for employees who have family commitments.

The Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD) is seriously involved in the drafting of policy and the co-ordination of measures at a number



of levels. More recent committees at parliamentary and cabinet level have fortified the coordination process but this still leaves room for initiatives at the council and local levels, such as those described by the host country.

Unions need to be encouraged to actively support the process of reconciliation of work and family. In negotiations, measures towards this goal should form a salient element of their collective bargaining process. Due acknowledgment of such an approach should be echoed by unions in as many EU countries as possible and highlighted by examples of good practice. Eventually a Directive relating to the advisability of the introduction of family friendly work practices could well become part of community legislation.

Part 3.

The debate on work family balance has formed an issue for detailed examination over the past eighteen months. The whole country has been encouraged to review its work practices and to measure them within the context of their impact on the family and family life. A recent campaign launched by the National Family Commission asks "Have you had time for your family today?" However this has been received within an atmosphere of considerable conflicting measures.

Unemployment stands at 7.2 % with 6.9 % males and 8% females¹⁶ and employment remains a government priority. Consumer expenditure is on the increase and often requires multiple employment to satisfy the demand. The Church has intervened to encourage reflection as to values and priorities, highlighting the function of traditional roles and the consequences of their discard, particularly on children.

Women are constantly enticed to enter the labour market, encouraged by the state in trying to achieve the Lisbon target¹⁷ and a national preoccupation with a growing welfare gap and an aging population. They are achieving high academic levels and expertise only to give them up because of family commitments perceived as solely their responsibility.

16 Labour Force Survey, National Statistics Office and Eurostat Jan-Mar 2004.

17 60% female employment by 2010 when the present rate is only 32.7%



Conclusion

Unless measures are taken to shift some of the care burden through adequate and accessible child care provision, it is unlikely that matters will change much. Parents and carers need to be given the choice to make specific decisions in the best interest of their family. The work ethic of being a full time worker first and a family member last needs to be supplanted by loyalty and commitment to family needs and family life. The dilemma that all carers face when called to make choices of work over family could become a thing of the past where employers genuinely believe that family friendly measures are commendable¹⁸. Fathers need to be convinced that their contribution is equally important for the wellbeing of their children¹⁹ and to be reassured by effective measures that their absence from the work place will not incur penalties. The change in culture might take time but measures such as those proposed by the host country could make a valuable contribution to speeding the process to the benefit of all the family

18 It has been shown that employers who offer flexible work arrangements and family support measures benefit through increased candidates for recruitment, better customer service and a consequent edge over competitors – Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

19 Research shows that father's share in child rearing is associated with increased affection between the father and young adult, greater social integration on the part of the child etc. Amato and Booth(1997) in Russell and Bowman (2000)