



SHOW ME THE MONEY

BRITISH WOMEN WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL 2067 FOR THE GENDER PAY GAP TO CLOSE COMPLETELY, A RECENT STUDY HAS SHOWN. NESTOR LAIVIERA WONDERS WHEN THAT WILL COME ABOUT IN MALTA

“Locally, the majority of men and women deny that a pay gap exists – at all levels, there is no awareness of the inequalities in wages that men and women earn all over the world,” says Anna Borg from the University of Malta’s Centre for Labour Studies.

How is it possible that women still earn consistently less than men? Surely those days are safely behind us. Figures, however, prove otherwise. Across the European Union, women earn on average 17.8 per cent less than male counterparts – purely due to gender. It is a trend that is showing no signs of slowing down. In 2007, the EU pay gap stood at 17.6 per cent, while 2006 saw a gap of 17.7 per cent.

The question of why women tend to earn less than men has its roots in the fundamental assumption that women belong in the family household while men belong in the workplace, bringing home the bacon, argues Ms Borg. However, she cautions that this is a complex issue with multiple causes that are inter-related.

“Faced with the tough decision on whether to dedicate more time and energy to her career or her family, it is assumed that a woman will opt for the family,” says Ms Borg. “Hand-in-hand with this ‘expectation’ is the idea that men will always be the main breadwinners while women’s income will be supplementary, and hence men’s income should be higher.”

She concedes that employers don’t consciously think along those lines, but the “values” inherent in our society that “devalue” women and the work they do, are built into the fabric of the employment industry and emerge in subtly divergent ways.

Indirect forms of discrimination are considerable factors behind the pay gap, although part of it is the result of direct and blatant discrimination manifested through unequal pay scales for women and men doing exactly the same job with the same skills, qualifications and experience. ►



Wages are also inexplicably lower in sectors that are predominated by women – a phenomenon called “segregation of the labour market”. According to the latest Labour Market figures, across the EU, more than 40 per cent of women work in health, education and public administration – twice the number of men – while only 29 per cent of scientists and engineers in the EU are women. “The difference in average pay for each sector is starkly apparent.”

The biggest stumbling block that women face is balancing work and private life. Ms Borg explains how due to unequal domestic/parental burden-sharing, women take career breaks more often than men, limiting their professional development which in turn results in less financially-rewarding careers.

Local studies have also shown that women workers spend far more time performing domestic duties than men – spending between one and three hours daily, with 10 per cent of women dedicating eight hours or more. The majority of male workers, by comparison, spends less than one hour on domestic duties, with three per cent contributing eight hours or more.

Add to this that Malta also lacks the necessary childcare facilities that enable more women to join the workforce. To date, around 40 childcare centres around Malta cater to the entirety of the 400,000-strong population – hardly enough, many argue. Maternity issues are compounded by low maternity leave entitlement. Private sector workers can only

take three months of unpaid leave, and do not have a legal right to ask to work on flexible or reduced hours when they return to work.

And yet, and yet, the National Statistics Office (NSO) figures suggest that, with a gender pay gap of 9.2 per cent in 2008, Malta is well below the EU average. Admittedly, the pay gap did rise from 7.6 per cent in 2007, but officially this was attributed to an EU-wide harmonisation process by which Malta’s methodology was brought in line with European ones. In 2006, the pay gap stood at 5.2 per cent.

THE LOW OVERALL FEMALE EMPLOYMENT RATE IN MALTA HAS A DIRECT INFLUENCE ON THE GENDER PAY GAP

The figures in fact present an inconsistent picture. Malta’s performance in terms of female employment is the lowest in the EU, at 37.7 per cent in 2010 – a far cry from the 60 per cent target set for this year by the Lisbon Treaty. Ranking 89th out of 134 countries in the 2010 Equality Index, Malta’s showing with regards to female employment is far from stellar.

So how can it follow that Malta finds itself among the top countries with the lowest gender pay gap? Figures seem to diverge: an independent study commissioned in 2006 by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) found that despite the

NSO’s pay gap figure for that year stood at only 5.2 per cent, the independent study’s own findings placed the figure at 23.25 per cent – going beyond the EU’s average by a generous margin.

While the seemingly contrasting figures can be explained by the independent study’s “definition” of what constitutes the “pay gap”, the precise reasons why the findings diverged so widely are murky.

Ms Borg remarked that “the methodology was different but the independent study could have taken a wider perspective on the situation than the NSO’s methods.” She added that further research is badly needed to answer the countless queries that plague the field.

However, Ms Borg suggests that Malta’s anomalously low gender pay gap could be attributed to the very low presence of women in the workforce. “With only 38.3 per cent of the workforce being women, females are sorely under-represented in many sectors.” She points out that in neighbouring Italy, where the female participation is low, the wage gap is similarly low; while in countries like Sweden and Denmark, where the female employment rate exceeds 70 per cent, the wage gap is over 17 per cent.

She theorises that an increase in female participation in the workforce could cause the pay gap figure to rise and eventually, when participation reaches that of other EU member states, a more accurate and comparative picture could eventually emerge.

NCPE Commissioner Dr Romina Bartolo agrees. “The low overall female employment rate in Malta has a direct influence on the gender pay gap.” She points out that while Malta has a high level of female graduates – 54 per cent of 2008/2009 university graduates were female – “the workforce then loses out when these hit the fertility bracket, between the ages of 25 and 35.”

She also highlights an incompatibility between work and school hours. Furthermore, the availability of more affordable quality childcare centres is fundamental. Recognising that there is still the widespread perception that the woman’s ►



MIND THE GAP

- According to EUROSTAT figures, the EU member state with the lowest gender pay gap in 2008 was Italy, with 4.9 per cent. The Czech Republic had the highest pay gap, with 26.2 per cent.
- According to Anna Borg from the University of Malta's Centre for Labour Studies, two out of three women work in the private sector.
- According to the latest Labour Market figures, women are best represented in education, composing 63 per cent of the sector. Men dominate the construction and manufacturing sectors, representing 97 per cent and 55 per cent respectively.

place is in the home, she affirms that "a change in mentality is direly needed."

She explains how the NCPE is working on an EU co-financed project entitled "Unlocking the Female Potential" aimed at encouraging equal work opportunities. "Through the project's campaign, companies can apply for an 'Equality Mark' – identifying companies proven gender-equal in opportunities offered." One of the criteria is based on ensuring that the employer respects the "equal pay for equal work" principle.

Emphasising that those who feel they are being discriminated against can lodge a complaint with the NCPE or other competent authorities, Dr Bartolo says that there have been no complaints to date. "This fact raises the concern of underreporting," she points out, which the NCPE is addressing through research carried out as part of a project.

A spokesperson for the Industrial Tribunal – the authority empowered with looking at cases of unfair dismissal and workplace discrimination – also confirms that to date no cases related to gender-based pay imbalances have been referred to it.

While the 2006 NCPE independent study was certainly an eye-opener in that it dispelled the false sense of security that previously existed, the reality check was not followed by decisive action, remarks Ms Borg.

"While a lot of awareness-raising and educational work is being done on an EU level in an effort to ultimately close the gap, locally this effort isn't being matched – there are no local campaigns aimed at effectively raising awareness of the pay gap," she affirms. Similarly, there is little to no enforcement or monitoring that she is aware of – the only figures that are requested and gathered are by the NSO purely for statistical purposes.

She emphasises the importance of increasing female employment rate and ensuring adequate representation across sectors. "Unless the work women perform is given its 'due' in terms of reward and recognition, promising female graduates will keep getting short-changed, their academic achievements devalued simply because of their gender."

And while research published last month suggests that UK working women will have to hold out for another 57 years before the gender pay gap closes, Maltese working women may have to wait longer still.

"The gap definitely won't be closed in my lifetime," says Ms Borg. Presently, no local studies can even hint towards any realistic timeframe. Similarly, NCPE Commissioner Dr Bartolo is unable to speculate.

"Only when domestic burdens are evenly shared can the gap begin closing," says Ms Borg. "Changes on a policy level are essential." Asked how realistic these are in a culture largely resistant to change, she admits that it's an uphill struggle. "We have a long way to go." **C**