

Gender equality... myth or reality?

The **National Commission for the Promotion of Equality** describes cases that constitute discrimination on the basis of gender and highlights the continued need to safeguard equality in personal and professional situations.

When she was in her last year at secondary school, Sarah* wanted to choose maths and physics as her main areas of study at sixth form.

She got very satisfactory results in both subjects and her teachers encouraged her to pursue further her studies for a career related to these areas.

Sarah's dream was to become an engineer following a course at University.

However, her parents were not convinced this was the right choice and encouraged her to pursue a teaching course, telling her this profession would be more suited to her when she married and had children.

Sarah's parents were influenced by society's gender stereotypes, whereby engineering is seen as a man's job. However, this also meant that Sarah was not encouraged to do what she would have been best at.

Martha* was an administrative assistant. She liked her job, but her

manager used to pass comments about her appearance on a daily basis.

She had to endure meetings whereby sexual remarks and innuendos were the order of the day.

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One day, her manager told her he would give her a very positive evaluation on her work performance if she accepted to have dinner with him at his

apartment. When she refused, life at the office became unbearable until she decided to look for another job and handed in her notice.

Both cases and others similar to these constitute discrimination on the basis of gender and highlight the pertinent need for safeguarding further gender equality.

In most societies, being a man or a woman is not just a matter of different biological and physical characteristics.

Men and women face different expectations about how they should dress, behave or work, how they appear in advertising, what areas of study they choose and so on.

Relations between men and women, whether in the family, the workplace or the public sphere, also reflect understandings of the talents, characteristics and behaviour appropriate to either sex.

But the fact gender attributes are socially constructed means they are also amenable to change in ways that can make a society more just and equitable.

World bodies have defined gender equality in terms of human rights, especially women's rights and economic developments. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources.

Therefore a critical aspect of promoting gender equality is empowering women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving them more autonomy to manage their own lives, while encouraging men to participate further within their families and assume more caring responsibilities.

In Malta, gender equality is safeguarded by legislation.

In particular, the work for equality on the grounds of gender and family responsibilities in employment, banks and financial institutions, as well as education and vocational training, and equality on the basis of gender in the provision of goods and services and

their supply forms part of the remit covered by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE).

If someone feels discriminated against on the basis of gender, NCPE receives and investigates complaints that are submitted in writing.

Other remedies can also be sought from the Industrial Tribunal and the Civil Courts.

NCPE offers training sessions to individuals, schools and organisations, where awareness is raised on gender equality, the rights of individuals and the obligations of the employers.

To this effect, it gives an average of 100 hours of training per year to a variety of groups, public sector organisations and private companies.

The NCPE can be contacted on 2590 3850; equality@gov.mt; or visit www.equality.gov.mt.

** Names have been changed.*