

## **Make Equality Happen - Significant challenging achievements for Women in employment**

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Increasing the participation of women in the labour market has always been very challenging for Malta. The reason for this has its roots in our cultural backgrounds regarding traditional gender stereotypes and manner in which responsibilities such as child rearing, house-keeping, and breadwinning are distributed within the family unit. However, there is widespread consensus that the lack of effective support structures for working parents in our society also plays a part.

The trend has shifted, and in the last two years, a significant sharp rise has been registered in the number of women entering the workforce. Female employment rate reached 51.1% in the third quarter of 2014 from 44.0% in the same quarter in 2012. During this period, the amount of women working full-time increased by 4,800<sup>1</sup>.

What is bringing about this development? Although there may be various factors, one cannot help noting that change has coincided with the introduction of free childcare for parents in employment or education in beginning of 2013. This service was availed of by more than 3,800 children by end of last year. At practically the same time, Breakfast Clubs in schools, attended by 950 students daily, also became a reality. The Klabb 3-16 After School Programme was extended to other localities offering longer opening hours.

This holistic approach made work possible for those women who, for years, have been reporting their wish to work but also the difficulties they face to do so. Such family support structures are no longer regarded as a financial cost to the Government, but rather as a financial investment in its workforce that not only helps raise the productive economic output of the country, but also brings about positive and tangible changes in the lives of both women and men.

Equal opportunities in employment not only facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life, but as importantly make work pay, giving an actual choice to reach one's aspirations. With proper access to work, women are thus better able to make use of their talents, skills and qualifications. In its turn, Maltese society is appreciating a return on its investment in education that is now being more effectively translated in a stronger labour market reflected in the national economy.

Having said this, one needs to acknowledge that the availability of family-friendly measures and flexible working arrangements, such as maternity and paternity leave, reduced hours

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<sup>1</sup> During the third quarter of 2012, 45,310 women had a full time job (NSO, 2013. Labour Force Survey: Q3/2012) compared with 50,201 women in full time employment in the same quarter of 2014 (NSO, 2015. Labour Force Survey: Q3/2014).

and tele-work that promote equal opportunities and enhance work-life balance, also encourage more women to enter or remain in the labour market.

It is for this reason that the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) continues to award the Equality Mark to those companies that truly cultivate equality in their work practices to ensure that gender equality rights and responsibilities are fostered. Through the Equality Mark, NCPE also empowers employers and employees to abolish discriminatory practices and challenge stereotypical attitudes towards employees on the ground of their gender and family responsibilities.

Further support is being given to women aspiring to reach decision-making and leadership positions in employment to reflect the significant achievement Malta made in the political arena when four women out of six were elected members of the European Parliament in 2014. In this regard, NCPE is organising various initiatives, including a mentoring programme which is backed by two research studies for a more in-depth understanding of such issues.

The 'Directory of Maltese and Gozitan Professional Women' has been quite challenging work. With this database, the NCPE aims at giving visibility to professional women and their competences in various sectors, by highlighting their qualifications, experiences and skills. thus enhancing their opportunities to be considered for appointment on boards, committees and other decision-making positions.

NCPE deems that equality should be a reality for everyone and works to empower women and men, from all walks of life, to achieve their potential in all spheres of society, including employment. Women and men are encouraged to participate in areas where they are underrepresented; to believe in themselves and make better use of their skills; to challenge discriminatory and stereotypical beliefs on the roles of women and men in society; and thus to Make Equality Happen.

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