

## A Family-Friendly Parliament

The importance of a gender-balanced participation in the political field has been a theme addressed by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality on several occasions in both the traditional and non-traditional media.

The opinion of the Maltese was documented in the 2017 Eurobarometer survey where 80% of the Maltese respondents thought that Malta should have more women in politics, making Malta the top European country with people having this opinion. Moreover, 78% of the Maltese respondents stated that they are “totally in favour” of legal measures to ensure parity between women and men in politics.

Therefore, there is consensus that there is an urgent need to take actions to address this challenge.

From research it transpires that in Malta there is a dearth of women candidates who are willing to contest elections and this for various reasons, among them the lack of family-friendly measures for all stakeholders working in the political field. This is the reality for both women and men Members of Parliament with family responsibilities. However, it is even more so with regard to women who, stereotypically, are still considered as the main carers. We tend to forget that fathers not only have a responsibility to care actively for their children but also have a right to enjoy their family life on a daily basis.

NCPE submitted various recommendations for the attention of the different stakeholders among them the need for family friendly measures in Parliament. In fact, the Speaker of the House, way back in June 2017 stated that *“...I wish to convey the opinion expressed by a number of Members that Parliament should meet during family friendly hours so as to allow them more time with their loved ones..”*. To this end, both sides of the House agreed to the gradual introduction of family-friendly hours and this year Parliament started meeting at 4pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, instead of 6pm. Earlier meetings might be extended to Mondays in the near future. This change was implemented to enable all parents, mothers and fathers, to return home at a reasonable time in the evening to be with their family. Quality time with the family does not necessarily mean taxiing children around Malta. This can be shared between the parents or indeed done by other members of the family or friends. Quality time means engaging in activities such as dining together and sharing time before retiring in the evening.

Clearly, the introduction of family-friendlier hours for Parliamentary meetings is not enough. As long as women are expected to bear the larger part of family responsibilities, female MPs will always find it harder to reconcile their Parliamentary duties with their private life. We need to actively challenge gender roles and stereotypes, and encourage men to increase their participation in family life. This will free-up time for women to take on other commitments, such as political ones, and it will enable men to experience fulfilment from

taking an active part in their family. There's a long road ahead in this regard, and women should take a leading role in ushering this change.

Family-friendly hours for Parliament sittings are an important measure that enables MPs not only to reconcile work with family but also to enjoy quality time within the family, while empowering more women to enter politics. However, this needs to be complemented by a better sharing of family responsibilities between women and men as well as other measures, such as the provision of childcare within political institutions.