

LABOUR MARKET BARRIERS TO IMPROVING THE EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF MALTESE WOMEN

by KAREN KOZIARA

THE term disadvantaged refers to a group of workers readily identifiable on the basis of a demographic characteristic such as age, sex, or race, which, in comparison to the labour force as a whole, has, on an average, lower wages, less desirable occupations, and higher unemployment rates. Given this definition, women may be classified as a disadvantaged group in the Maltese labour force on the basis of wages, and occupational distribution. (No effort will be made to compare unemployment data for Maltese men and women. The data do not include a good indication of how many people actually want jobs, and therefore they are not very useful for analytical purposes).

Women make up about one-third of the Maltese labour force. They are concentrated in relatively low-paying jobs in light manufacturing, particularly textiles and electrical components, the domestic service occupations, and wholesale and retail trade. There are few women in the higher paying occupations, and they rarely hold executive or professional positions.¹

Maltese wages are higher for men than for women, both on an average and when occupation is held constant. In 1972 the mean hourly wage in private industry was 26c1 for men, and 15c5 for women. In only one occupation, bus conductor, was the mean wage for men, 14c4 an hour, lower than the mean hourly wage for all women.² Differences between male and female wage rates appear even when occupation is held constant.

Economists specify four major types of barriers which restrict employment opportunities and create disadvantaged groups within a

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¹Unpublished statistics, Central Bank of Malta, November 1973.

²Central Office of Statistics, Malta Government, *Annual Abstract of Statistics*, 1972 (Malta, 1973), p. 106.

given labour market. These barriers are unequal access to training and education, restrictions to labour market entrance, unequal treatment within the labour market, and lack of access to capital markets. This paper discusses these barriers, and analyses their validity in explaining the role of Maltese women in the labour force. It ends with a discussion about the prospects for future change.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Employment opportunities are closely related to the nature and extent of education or training an individual receives. In Malta, men and women generally have equal access to educational opportunities, including entrance to the Royal University of Malta, and to the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology.

Although equality of access exists formally, women do not take advantage of these opportunities in the same percentages that do men. Although the number of women between the ages of 14 and 18 attending school has increased in recent years, it is still below the number of young men of the same ages attending school. Both R.U.M. and M.C.A.S.T. have recently had an increasing proportion of their student body made up of women, but the number of men at each institution far out-numbers the number of women. In addition, many women seem to concentrate in areas which do not provide specific occupational training, such as the Arts.

One reason for these differences in enrollment and course choice is that Maltese men and women have been conditioned very differently from early childhood. Malta is a traditional society, and emphasizes the need for men to equip themselves to find and hold a job and for women to equip themselves to care for a family. As a result, boys are encouraged to be active and aggressive while girls are trained to be quiet, passive, and helpful. There are many examples of how pre-school children are socialized into historical sex-roles-sentiment such as 'He's all boy', meaning he is lively and active, and 'She's more like a boy than a girl' meaning she is lively and active, are commonly heard. The message is clear, even to a small child. Boys should be active; girls should be quiet.

This conditioning continues when children enter school. Small children sing the song, 'May I Help you, Mother Dear?' How do they help their mothers? By sweeping, washing dishes and ironing. Do they help their fathers that way? Of course not; those things

are not fathers' work. Children are asked to describe their fathers' occupations in class and on school application forms. Their fathers may be dentists, accountants, waiters or merchants. They are not asked their mothers' occupations. It would be redundant to ask a mother's occupation. Being a mother is an occupation, being a father is not. Men need to work outside the home; women are not supposed to work outside the home.

Later in their school life, young adults find this message repeated. In schools for young women, homemaking skills are taught. In schools for young men, mechanics and engineering are available.

All through their formative pre-school and school years, boys and girls are conditioned differently. In addition most schools in Malta are single-sex, rather than coeducational. It is generally believed that schools which involuntarily separate people on the basis of a demographic characteristic, such as race, or sex, are inherently unequal on the basis of facilities, staff and overall quality. After all, why bother to separate people if they are to be treated equally? The act of separation shows that society feels the separated groups can not, or should not, be treated the same. And usually it is the members of the group assigned to the inferior school who later find themselves to be part of a disadvantaged labour force group.

Finally Maltese women have few successful professional women to serve as role models. Most of the people in powerful and prestigious positions are men; there are few examples of women handling important positions and, among the few examples that exist there are almost no married women. These provide young women with only limited incentives to get advanced training and education.

In summary, Maltese men and women enjoy equality of access to Malta's institutions of higher learning. However, men and women do not avail themselves equally of this opportunity. This disparity reflects the impact of socially defined sex-roles and goals, which are reinforced by families, schools, peers, the church and the mass media, on individual decision-making. Perhaps the question is not why do not women take more advantage of the opportunities around them, but why, given the social forces surrounding them, so many do take advantage of available educational opportunities.

ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Restrictions to labour market access can be either formal or informal. Formal restrictions include codified government or employer rules which prevent a specific group from having access to certain jobs. Informal restrictions refer to traditions which prevent job access to a given group of people. Informal restrictions are not written down. However, their existence is well known and closely adhered to.

Many of the governments' historical restrictions on the occupations which women can fill are disappearing. For example, the government recently made it possible for women with the necessary qualifications to hold the position of Notary Public.

However, a law enacted in November, 1974, makes it illegal to fill a post vacated by a man with a woman. The implications of this law with respect to occupational distribution are enormous. It reinforces existing male and female occupations, and prevents women from moving into any new jobs, and particularly the higher paying jobs, now held by men. It does not require that posts vacated by a woman be filled by a woman, so it is very likely that in the long run it may narrow the range of occupations now open to women.

Employers use both formal and informal restrictions on the jobs women may hold. Formal restrictions are clearly visible in newspaper advertisements, where it is very common for an employer to state that only male or only female applicants are wanted for certain positions. Informal restrictions are also very common. Many employers feel that women are good at repetitions, delicate work, but they are not good at supervisory or physical demanding work. It is easier to judge people on the basis of stereotypes of what you think they are like than on their real ability, and employers often hire people on their concept of what is 'men's work' and 'women's work'.

The Constitution says that, 'The State will aim at ensuring that women workers enjoy the same rights ... as males'.³ However, there is no law that effectuates this provision by requiring employers to hire men and women equally, on the basis of ability

³'Declaration of Principles', 1947 Constitution, Malta Government, (Valletta: Government Printing Office, 1947).

rather than sex. In fact, rather than requiring that employers treat men and women equally, government policy makes it almost impossible for them to be treated equally in the employment process, and it prevents women from having access to many occupations.

EQUALITY OF TREATMENT WITHIN THE LABOUR MARKET

Treatment within the labour market refers to how an employee fares in all aspects of the employment relationship once hired. Included in the employment relationship are wages, promotion, job security and termination.

As noted earlier, there is a large gap between the average wages of Maltese men and women. As of 1975 the Government will require that men and women are paid equally for equal work. This is a useful approach to guaranteeing equality of treatment within the labour market. However, Maltese women are concentrated in different occupations than are men, and the gap between male and female wages will persist until the occupational structure changes. This will be difficult because of the law requiring that a man leaving a job be replaced by another man. In addition, some women fear that if employers are required to pay men and women equal wages, they will prefer to hire men rather than women.

It is very difficult to prove that a given group of workers is discriminated against in the promotion and job termination process on any basis other than ability. Employers rarely admit discrimination on any other basis, and ability itself is difficult to define and measure. Nevertheless, occupational data show few women in any industry at job levels usually reached by promotion.⁴ This does not prove that women are discriminated against, although it creates a strong suspicion that discrimination may take place in the promotion process.

There is little doubt that women are discriminated against in the job termination process. The government, Malta's largest employer, requires its female employees to sign contracts in which they agree to leave their positions if they marry. Many private employers use these contracts as well. There is some possibility that this requirement will eventually extend to other employers, such as Bank of Valletta and Barclays Bank, because of nationalization.

These contracts obviously prevent married women from having

⁴ Central Bank of Malta, *op.cit.*

careers in either the civil service or government supported schools. A few married women have managed to continue working for the government because they have needed skills. They work part-time at salaries less than the part-time equivalent of their former full-time salaries, and they lose their civil service status.

The labour movement provides some protection for union women by requiring that termination be made on the basis of seniority. However, it has not pressured the government to alter its policies which discriminate against married women, and it is virtually unknown for collective bargaining contracts in Malta to contain clauses guaranteeing that there will be no discrimination in employment on the basis of sex.

In summary, Maltese women face discrimination within the labour market. Some of this discrimination results because employers are not legally prevented from discriminating on the basis of sex. Much of the discrimination women face, however, results not from the government's failure to take action against sex discrimination, but from its own policies which institutionalize sex discrimination. The labour movement has provided women with only protection against discrimination in the employment relationship.

ACCESS TO CAPITAL MARKETS

Access to capital markets is necessary for entrepreneurial ability to be translated into business activity. Lack of access to capital markets can result from legal restrictions on who can borrow funds. For example, the law in many countries prevents minors from borrowing money. Lack of access to capital markets also results from the standards the banking system sets up as to which potential borrowers are good risks, and which are poor risks. Low-income people, for example, are often classified as high-risk borrowers.

Maltese women face both types of barriers to access to investment capital. Malta law strictly limits the rights of married women to manage their own financial affairs, and although the law has been changed to give married women more financial rights, it is difficult for them to borrow large sums of money without their husbands' consent.

Single women do not face these legal restrictions in their quest for investment capital. They do, however, face the standards of the banking system, and they are more likely than men to be clas-

sified as poor risks. Single women are most likely to be granted loans when they have significant collateral, or when a responsible man will underwrite the loan.

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

A number of barriers stand in the way of Maltese women attaining a more favourable labour market position. Some of these barriers result from traditional views as to what a woman's role should be. Some of them result from laws which restrict their ability to compete in the labour market.

The Government is in the unenviable position of defending its decision to limit, rather than protect, women's rights in the labour market. Its policies are justified as resulting from economic necessity, rather than from discrimination against women per se. Scarce resources, high unemployment, and the resulting emigration, particularly of young men, are painfully real in Malta. The Government puts a high priority on stemming this unemployment and emigration.

It would be extremely difficult to assess the impact of these policies on the number of jobs available for men. It is presumed, by the government, however, without empirical evidence, that the social benefit outweighs the loss of choice to women.

It is interesting to note that Malta is not the only small country with high unemployment rates and resulting emigration. Most of the Caribbean nations face similar problems. Unlike Malta, they do not attempt to protect jobs for men by limiting the employment rights of women.

There are a number of factors which suggest that although employment barriers faced by Maltese women may be tenacious, they are not permanent. Educational levels are rising and birth rates are falling, and these trends will probably increase the interest women have in being active in the labour market. There are also indications that Maltese society is becoming more tolerant of married women working. This approval is related to age; younger women are more likely to approve of married women working than are older women.⁵

⁵Sibyl O'Reilly Mizzi, 'The Changing Status of Women in Malta', paper delivered to the American Anthropologic Association National Conference, New Orleans, December 1973.

Finally, the newly formed *Moviment Għall-Emanċipazzjoni tal-Mara*, or Women's Emancipation Movement, may be able to defeat the Maltese adage, *Hbieb kulhadd u ħbieb ħadd*, or 'Everyone friendly and no one friends'. If Maltese women see themselves as having common problems and goals, together they may be able to attack the barriers which now prevent them from moving out of their disadvantaged labour force status.