

Shifting Maltese Values

Anthony M. Abela. *Values of Women and Men in the Maltese Islands, a comparative European perspective*. Valletta: Commission for the Advancement of Women. Ministry for Social Policy, 2000. 328 pp.

Good quality sociological studies on contemporary issues in Maltese society are not easy to come across. Professor Abela's most recent work on values is one such book. It is a valuable text to students and lecturers in the social sciences, and a practical tool to researchers and policy makers.

Values of Women and Men in the Maltese Islands is written with policy makers in mind. One of the objectives of the book is to identify the values of women and men in the Maltese Islands in a comparative European perspective. Abela demonstrates how people in the Maltese Islands share basic value orientations with other European countries but have different value priorities on matters of religion, politics, work and the family. Differences over values can also be observed for distinct groups of women and men, with diverse social origin, regional belonging, age group, level of education and marital status.

The book reports Abela's analysis of data from four waves of the European Values Study, which were administered over the past fifteen years in Malta. It follows standard research methodology as in other participant European countries. In each country, data was collected through personal interviews to a randomly selected representative sample of at least one thousand people.

Abela compares and contrast results from this international survey, making use of cross tabulations, figures, statistical procedures and interpretation of findings. The book maps out a complicated and evolving picture of Maltese society, tracing shifting values over time.

The author gives evidence of social change by comparing findings from the most recent survey with results from his previous studies. Thus researchers and policy-makers are able to follow the trends and develop new programmes for the well being of society.

The book comes up with some interesting findings. The Maltese still value marriage and the family. Their high regard of this institution, however, means that when their expectations are not fulfilled, they are not as reluctant to resort to separation and annulment. Violence and unfaithfulness are the two main factors leading to marital break-up. Abela observes how generally, Maltese men have retained a traditional view of the role of women in society. Younger generations and women with a higher standard of education, however, do not adhere to this view. In fact, the latter believe that both women and men should have equal opportunity to participate in the labour market, and equally to share financial and child-rearing duties. The author observes, however, that relative to their European counterparts, the Maltese have a traditional outlook on family issues.

With regards to the participation of women and men in the labour market, Abela notes a more pronounced gender gap in Southern European countries than in Eastern and Western Europe. In Southern European countries, employed women are more likely to occupy unskilled jobs and middle-level non-manual jobs. Abela observes how women and men demand different things from their job. On the one hand, men seek good pay, more initiative and responsibility, achievement and chances for promotion. Women, on the other hand, demand job flexibility, generous hours, not much pressure, meeting people and feeling useful to society. Abela, however, remarks that attitudes to work depend on age, educational level and marital status. In fact, older and lower educated individuals in Europe and Malta adhere to a traditional work ethic, that is they regard work as a social duty, requiring dedication, and an activity which is a dignified way to earn a living. Higher educated Maltese respondents tend to disapprove of gender and racial discrimination, although they favour differential wages based on performance. On the whole, however, the Maltese are not much in favour of equality in job opportunities for women and foreign workers in the labour market.

Abela addressed leisure activities and voluntary work in the chapter on women and men at work. It is interesting to note how women and other minority groups like pensioners, part-time workers and the unemployed, are more likely to spend their free time with church members. Maltese men and separated people prefer to spend their free time with their friends, in clubs or with work colleagues. With regards to participation in social organizations, Maltese men are more likely to be members of sports clubs, trade unions, professional associations and political parties. Women, on the other hand, when they find the time, take part in religious associations, or groups concerned with welfare, health, the Third World and Women's Rights. On the whole, single never married respondents with a higher level of education report the highest participation rate in these organizations.

Abela observes how religiosity varies by gender, occupation, place of residence, standard of education and age. Religion, for some Maltese women, is the only opportunity to widen their horizon. Relative to other Europeans, the Maltese have the highest levels of religious affiliation. The author observes, however, that the Maltese are less likely to identify themselves as religious than their European counterparts, some of whom profess to be religious irrespective of their participation in religious services. Abela observes the predominance of cultural religion in Malta. Most Maltese are born into a religion where attendance at religious services is part of their cultural background. Still, relative to other European countries, there is a low level of secularisation and gender differences in religiosity do not seem to be very extensive in the Maltese Islands.

Abela's analysis of politics is not limited to participation within political structures. He also investigates attitudes towards other people of a different culture or religion and towards local residents with a diversity of social problems. He observes that the Maltese are more tolerant of individuals with homosexual tendencies, AIDS victims and unmarried mothers, while they tend to be more xenophobic than their European counterparts. On the whole, Abela notes that the Maltese are less accepting of difference than other European nations. It would be interesting to investigate the underlying implication of these attitudes.

In another section, the author identifies the social origins of Eurosceptics and Europhiles. Politicians will do well to note that those in favour of Malta's accession into the European Union tend to be young, are from upper income groups, have a professional or a managerial job, have a higher standard of education and are residents of the North and Outer Harbour regions. Eurosceptics, on the other hand, tend to be middle-aged, married, widowed, from lower income groups, are more likely to be dependent on welfare and have a lower level of education.

It is interesting to note that Maltese women seem to be less interested in politics, than men in general. Maltese women are in favour of collectivist social policies and state responsibility of social welfare. This is not surprising since women are more likely to be dependent on the beneficence of the state, especially where non-contributory benefits are involved.

Abela argues that the results elicited from this survey would be of interest to policy makers. Although the author observes that values professed by the respondents are related to behaviour, it would be useful to pursue the policy implication of these findings. Sociologists observe that it is not always the case that the values espoused by respondents inscribe people's actions. There is often a gap between what individuals say they believe in and their everyday behaviour. The greatest significance of this study is the author's delineation of how and why Maltese perceptions have changed over time. As with any other research projects, further studies need to be conducted – by ethnographic or other methods – to find out the values individuals draw upon in their day-to-day life, and the reasons to justify this action.

As the author observes in his final chapter, this study needs to be complemented by other research with a direct focus on institutions that offer services to women and men in society. To date, there has not been that many instances of published research on the delivery models of services. Future research projects would include research on the services offered by state and non-governmental agencies to find out which services are being offered, how these agencies are being used by different groups in society, especially by those in need. In this study under review, reference has been made to some of these institutions. It is now time to find out which services are being delivered by these institutions, who benefits from these

services, how the state institutions are managed, and their impact on specific groups.

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