

A sepia-toned photograph of a woman, likely a female mechanic or pilot, working on the engine of a vintage airplane. She is standing on a wooden ladder, leaning against the engine cowling. She is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. The background is a bright, hazy sky. The overall mood is one of industriousness and historical significance.

# Unforgetting Women

Author: **Sarah Schembri**

*Women have been historically overlooked, undermined and ignored, but that does not mean that they weren't doing anything! **Coryse Borg** feels it's her duty to bring impressive women's names to light.*

Imagine believing that millions of intelligent, resourceful, dynamic, ambitious, and caring people, who collectively had every imaginable human characteristic, never did anything of note. Imagine thinking that societal expectations and pressures were so comprehensive that none managed to find a way through or around the system to do something interesting or important in their lives. It beggars belief that so many humans could exist and never do anything impressive or intriguing. Yet, from the way that we are taught about history, maybe without even realising, this is precisely the conclusion that many of us reach. We learn about men making decisions, going to wars, writing poetry, loving and killing, and shaping the world around them, and we are led to assume that while men did all this, women were just making dinner for the men.

When thinking about it, it seems far more realistic that women have always been active participants in their society, beyond the domestic sphere, and that the travails and achievements of women were simply dismissed and forgotten with time. Indeed, if we just have a look around our current society, we can see a myriad of characters

and personalities living their lives in all imaginable and unimaginable ways. Thinking that this mishmash of humanity was not present in the past, even in the subjugated classes of people like women and the poor, is a disservice to the people of history. Unearthing their stories requires some digging, and luckily, people have been increasingly more willing to roll up their sleeves. One of these intrepid investigators is the broadcaster Coryse Borg.

## **DIGGING FOR WOMEN**

Borg was helping her son prepare for his Maltese ordinary level oral exam and noticed that of the eight Maltese personages that he was asked to study about, none were women. This got her thinking, who are the women from Maltese history that we should know about? And come to think of it, who are the leaders, activists, inventors, artists, or otherwise notable women from world history who have made a name for themselves? As someone who considers herself to be constantly on the lookout for women's stories, Borg realised that she could not think of many women from history off the top of her head. Her common sense told her



Coryse Borg  
Photo by Andrea Darmanin

that there must be many out there, and her sense of justice drove her to start doing her part in digging them out.

Borg has worked in media throughout her career, starting with Bay Radio, where she landed a job on the station by taking the initiative and submitting a voice audition on cassette. But even before that, as a child, Borg had an interest in journalism and writing. At some point or another, she has worked on pretty much every radio station in Malta, as well as at the Times of Malta, in theatre, and she is also currently a freelancer. This gave her the liberty and the experience to deliver something interesting and surprising to her audience with a unique touch.

Not long after her son's exam, Borg came across Katharine Wright Haskell – sister to the famed aviators, the Wright brothers. She was surprised that she had never heard of Katharine, despite her competence in business and promotional matters, which was essential to her brothers' success. This pushed Borg to use her experience and create a radio show to bring forgotten women back to the surface. The show was appropriately called, *Nisa Minsija* (Forgotten Women).

## THE RADIO SHOWS

The difficulty Borg encountered was in picking the women to make episodes about rather than in finding enough of them. She spent at least six hours on each of the 13 episodes doing research and writing scripts. Even the opening theme music of the show is by a forgotten woman – the composer Fanny Mendelssohn, who had frequently published music under her brother's name. On each episode, Borg invited a guest with a similar background to the historical figure or topic of the episode. When asked whether it was difficult to find female guests with the appropriate background, Borg was emphatic – 'absolutely not!' Just like in our history, we have women around us who are experts in many fields, and they have a lot of interesting things to say!

Following the success of her first show, Borg wanted to continue singing women's achievements to the skies. She quickly started a second show, *Ghamlitha!* (She Made It!), where she interviewed women at the top of their game who had overcome seemingly insurmountable difficulties. This programme adopted a more relaxed, conversational tone and delved into what these high flyers truly feel. Both programmes go a long way to dispel common tropes like labelling assertive women as aggressive. In effect, they encourage the listener to recognise internal, ingrained biases and deconstruct them.

## FORGOTTEN OR OBSCURED?

Borg is amazed by the number of times that women's achievements were credited to men. Maybe you've heard how Rosalind Franklin's essential work on deciphering the molecular structure of DNA was buried by her colleagues when they used her work without permission and did not include her as a co-author in their historic paper. However, the taking of credit is not limited to science. Margaret Keane was an extremely commercially and critically successful artist whose husband stole her credit. She had to prove herself in a 'paint-off' in court, where it was revealed that all the acclaim and money given to her (by then ex-) husband, should have been directed to her.

There are also women whose contributions were simply forgotten about. Katharine Wright Haskell was awarded a medal alongside her brothers because her work was recognised as equally important towards the achievement of flight. However, this was largely forgotten with time, alongside her later work on women's suffrage. Closer to home, there are the forgotten female Maltese wartime heroes who practically ran the country during the Second World War. One that stands out is Mary Ellul,



A handful of guests who featured on the radio show. In order of appearance: Lorella Castillo, Kim Dalli, Dr Simone Azzopardi and Dr Maria Brown.

*Photos courtesy of Coryse Borg*

also known as Mary Man – a physically strong woman who pulled people out of the rubble and received the same rations as men because of the demanding work she did. Mary Man’s renown remained after the war, still the efforts of Mary and the other women heroes are not as celebrated as they deserve. Today, the University of Malta has launched its open-access Women’s Archive to preserve, celebrate, and share the legacies and contributions of Maltese women in history, ensuring their stories remain part of common knowledge.

## **THIS IS FOR MEN, TOO**

Borg is sometimes hesitant about calling herself a feminist, purely because the association made by many between ‘feminist’ and ‘man-hater’ is too strong and more often than not, grossly incorrect. However, feminism, with its many definitions and particularities, is ultimately about the liberation of people of all genders from subjugation and from the confinement of socially expected gender roles. It

is about the belief that there should be social, political, and economic equality for people of all genders. The patriarchal society we live in is limiting men as well. It limits what masculinity can be and limits men from selecting stable and rewarding careers in fields that are seen to be predominantly feminine. Patriarchy often disconnects men from their emotions and even, sometimes, from their own children. This is why impressive women should be role models for men as well as for other genders. Borg was, in fact, thrilled to hear that men were not only listening to *Nisa Minsija* but discussing it and recommending it to others. It is antithetical to the spirit of the show to assume that just because a programme is about women, it is exclusively for women. **T**

*As we wait in anticipation for a second season, **Nisa Minsija** will be aired again on Campus 103.7 on Wednesdays at 14:00 with a repeat on Sundays at 12:00 until the end of September. You can also download the episodes of **Nisa Minsija** and **Ghamlitha!** and listen to them at your leisure.*