

The road to women's suffrage and beyond

Women's enfranchisement and the nation-building project in Malta



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UNIVERSAL suffrage opened the way for all women and many disenfranchised men, to exercise their right to vote and participate in elections for the first time in Malta's history.

The trajectory of women's emancipation is very often omitted from the prevailing narratives that reinforce our sense of nationhood. This commemoration attempts to redress the prevalent collective amnesia about women's place in history.

After World War I, an all-male National Assembly convened in Valletta in early 1919 to discuss self-government. It comprised a wide spectrum of Maltese civil society, but it failed to reflect the developments that had taken place in London in the post-war period, when in 1918, British women acquired the right to vote and the right to contest elections.

Prof Godfrey Pirota published records of correspondence between British suffragettes and the Colonial Office in London, which reveal that the British suffragettes had their eyes on Malta. Prior to the approval of the 1921 Constitution, the leading British feminist Eva Hubback, who headed the National Society for Equal Citizenship, fiercely protested the exclusion of Maltese women from the franchise, which it deemed to "a most retrograde step."

She was "anxious to have an amendment moved [in Parliament] to the effect that women in Malta are also enfranchised" but the Constitution was approved by Letters Patent (i.e. it was merely signed by the monarch) and she never had the opportunity to table amendments.

While women were excluded from discussions that led to the Amery-Milner Constitution, which granted Malta autonomy in internal affairs, the key political persona who was deeply sensitised to the advancement of women, was imprisoned in exile, in Egypt.

Manwel Dimech was a social gadfly who deemed education to be an agent of social mobility and progress and who was attuned to the demands of the suffragette movement in the UK and the rest of the continent. Dimech saw the struggle for self-determination as intrinsically linked with women's liberation. In the year that Emily Pankhurst put wind in the sails of the suffragettes in Manchester in 1903, Dimech had already appealed for women's liberation in his publication *Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin* (The Flag of the Maltese).

The arrival of the new Constitution of 1921 eventually led to sporadic calls for women's enfranchisement.

In the inter-war period demands for the vote for women were either embedded within mounting pressures towards social wel-

fare, that were inspired by socialist ideals, or in appeals that aimed to empower privileged women who already enjoyed status, a degree of education, property and social capital but were still not eligible to vote.

Mabel Strickland belonged to the latter category. Ten years after the granting of self-government, Strickland pleaded before a Royal Commission on Maltese Affairs proposing amendments to the Constitution of 1921 to "consider the equity of bringing the political status of the women of Malta more into line with that enjoyed by the women of English and other self-governing units of the British Commonwealth".

In 1931 she managed to persuade 428 women to sign a petition, which she sent to a Royal Commission. The petition stated: "We feel that the time has undoubtedly come for the recognition of the right of women in Malta to take part in the deliberations of the Parliament of the island, in view of their already active interest in public life... We sincerely believe that women's influence and increased participation in the public life of Malta will be conducive to the better government of these islands..."

One whole year later, the Royal Commission answered that the petition did not seem to have the support of any of the political parties and hence there was no evidence that the extension of the franchise would be acceptable.

The suffragette campaign in Malta never took to the streets. It was a struggle conducted mainly from behind the desk, through contributions to the press and driven by inter-personal networks.

Josephine Burns de Bono and Hélène Buhagiar

The Women of Malta Association entered the political scene in the late January 1944 in a meeting for women that aimed to enlist sympathy in securing for women in Malta equal political rights with men.

Burns de Bono was appointed President of the Women of Malta Association whereas Hélène Buhagiar became Secretary General. Hélène Buhagiar was a generation older than Josephine. She came from a family of adequate means and contacts. Since 1916 she had been the driving force of the Malta Art Association, where she invested most of her time and energy.

Both women used the press as their main vehicle to advocate for suffrage and obtain a place in the all-male National Assembly which convened to draft the new 1947 constitution.

These developments took place while it was clear that the war had brought a seismic political change.

The Nationalists were in a state of disarray with their leader Enrico Mizzi being tainted by his pronounced Italianate sympathies. The Labour Party emerged as a major new force, especially after it formed the Labour Front with the General Workers' Union. The National Assembly's first meeting took place on 20th January 1945 at the Palace, in Valletta. It included representatives of the press and Mabel Strickland was nominated on behalf of The Times of Malta.

In the second sitting, a delegate challenged the presence of "a woman in the Assembly" and stated that this constituted a precedent and might be construed as meaning that women had the right to vote in general elections. Although this man's views on women were ubiquitous in Malta in the 1940s, his motion to bar her on the grounds that she was a woman, found no one to second it.

Reggie Miller

The Labour Front was ready to push for universal suffrage. At the helm of the GWU, Reggie Miller was fully aware of trends that were slowly catching up in Europe, where equality had emerged as a new theme on the political and the trade union agendas.

However, segments of the union representatives feared that since women were paid less than men, their presence in the labour market threatened work conditions and undermined union demands to improve them. During the 1944 annual conference of the GWU, a certain Mr Cassano tabled a motion to exclude all female workers from membership.

Union minutes reveal that it was Reggie Miller who convincingly counter-argued that the motion was tantamount to denying women the right to unionise. "[Miller] deprecated the idea of a union which was fighting tooth and nail against all sorts of discrimination should itself admit in its organisation the principle of discrimination, this time – by sex. The union would no longer be General if it excluded any class or section of bona-fide workers." (AGM minutes 25 May 1944).

Miller was sympathetic with women's emancipation. It was through his guidance that the Women of Malta Association was quickly set up specifically to demand the right to female suffrage. Josephine Burns de Bono fitted within Miller's strategies because she did not divorce the situation of women from broader social and political processes.

While Burns de Bono worked to influence the direction of the Labour Front by building bridges with the GWU and Labour officials, Mabel Strickland was busy burning bridges with them.

A harsh critic of the Labour Front, Strickland remained loyal to the women's cause and had no sympathy with the ambivalence and the impasse faced by trade unionists in the face of the anxieties of jobless male workers.

It was in the third meeting of the Assembly, that two Labour Front delegates Guzé Cassar and Turu Colombo, moved a motion

in support of the Women of Malta Association's application to be represented in the National Assembly. "It is the opinion of this Assembly that the admission of the delegates of this Association will mean the acceptance of the principle of equal rights for women in the political life of the island including the right to vote in parliamentary elections". On that day the Association was admitted to the Assembly but the biggest gain was the agreement in the principle on the notion of equal political rights.

Both Burns de Bono and Buhagiar were allowed to participate on behalf of the Association. When the Association was formally approved on 16 March 1945, one of the most prolific opponents of female suffrage in the press, William E. Chetcuti, lamented in The Bulletin that it "would seem that by a bare majority of only 10 votes, in the absence of about 160 members and with the aid of the open vote, our small band of budding women politicians have, with the gallant half of several vote hunters, contrived to achieve what they call their emancipation".

His article was entitled: "Women Minding Men's Business" – just one illustration of the tone used by many opponents of female suffrage at that time.

Michael Gonzi

The most vociferous opposition to women's suffrage came from influential Church circles. Opposition was not merely through its influence on delegates in the Assembly but also from clerics within the community that were in a position to influence public opinion.

The newspaper of the Catholic Action Movement, *Lehen is-Sewwa* (Voice of Truth)



Archbishop Michael Gonzi



Women make policy, not coffee.. an activist at a recent feminist rally in Valletta sends a clear message

an ultimate homage to mothers."

When women's suffrage finally arrived with the MacMichael Constitution, the Church turned its attention to guiding women on how to exercise their newly acquired right.

MacMichael

Sir Harold MacMichael was a seasoned Cambridge-educated colonial administrator who had cut his teeth in Khartoum and as Governor of Tanganyika.

Two days after his arrival in Malta MacMichael addressed the population on Rediffusion (cable radio) where he acknowledged that his main challenge as Constitutional Commissioner was to reconcile Maltese aspirations for self-government with the imperial interests of Britain.

It was on the 17 July 1947 that the Chairman of the Assembly presented MacMichael with a draft Constitution, the result of two long years of intense and heated debates. Later that year MacMichael published his report, stating: "The most important [change] was the inclusion of the principle of female suffrage on a basis of equality between the sexes in all respects."

The electoral campaign for the first responsible government under the new constitution took place throughout the summer of 1947.

For the first time ever the parties needed to appeal to a wider electoral base. A total of 140,000 electors were entitled to go to the polls, 54.4% of which were women. They needed to elect 40 members to sit in the Legislative Assembly.

When a general election was announced between the 25-27 October 1947, there was no stampede by women to run for Parliament but all parties needed to canvass desperately to clinch the female vote. The five parties that contested only fielded a total of two female candidates.

Two women were conspicuous by their absence: Mabel Strickland did not contest because the Constitutional party was far too weak to make electoral inroads. Josephine Burns de Bono did not appear on the list of candidates and just one month before the election, she resigned from the Women of Malta Association, because she said that her mission was now accomplished.

The ballot list featured Hélène Buhagiar and a young new unknown candidate who contested with the Labour Party. Her name was Agatha Barbara.



Mabel Strickland, leader of the Constitutionalist Party

Two female candidates

Hélène Buhagiar contested with the Democratic Action Party, a party that had gained ground because of the vacuum left by the Constitutionals and because of the state of the Nationalist Party at that time. This was composed of traditional entitled elites that included landowners and respected professionals who wanted to preserve their privileges. They fiercely opposed social and economic reform, particularly the introduction of any form of taxation, and during this period they greatly feared prospects of nationalisation.

Hélène Buhagiar was of course instrumental because of her appeal to female voters. From a woman's point of view she promised to devote all her attention to housing and food supplies. She also dreamed of national unity where parties cooperate so that the best brains in Malta give their input to solve difficulties, in an effort that would resemble a 'National Government'.

In its electoral programme her party promised to defend female workers via new laws that would be enacted "to regulate the employment of women and children in industry".

Agatha Barbara came from a background that was completely alien to the elite membership of the Women of Malta Association. Barbara, a young teacher with solid work-class roots from Zabbar, entered the political arena with the Labour Party after gaining sympathy within her own community because of voluntary work.

The Times of Malta (12th August 1947) published a report of a Labour meeting in Paola, where Barbara appears in a party activity. The newspaper observed: "Miss Barbara is the first woman to address a public meeting since the enfranchisement of women in Malta".

Barbara campaigned in the working-class districts of the inner harbour areas with immediate success. In her meetings and early contributions in the press Barbara, never disconnected the plight of women from that of the working class. Although there are no records that she was sympathetic with the struggles of the international feminist movement, Barbara was in line with socialist feminist perspectives that deem gender to be deeply embedded in the condition of the working class and its political demands.

At 75.42% the turnout for the 1947 election was very high, a sign that people were eager to participate in political life and they knew how to exercise their newly acquired right.

The result tendered the biggest electoral victory ever for the Labour Party with a 59.9% of the votes. Labour elected Barbara, who wrote history when she succeeded to win a seat and she obtained the required quota in the first count.

Being the first woman in the Legislative Assembly changed her life prospects. Women had obtained suffrage and the right to participate in politics but social and cultural norms still set strict parameters for women in political life and she was bearing the brunt of all this on her own without much support... without any role models.

Her parliamentary seat afforded her one privilege: the right for equal pay with men. Other Maltese women had to wait another 27 years before a clause was introduced in the Republican Constitution of 1974. When Paul Boffa's Labour cabinet was formed in 1947, Agatha Barbara was not named among his ministers and some complained in the press, saying that "given her great personal commitment, perseverance and hard work

President Agatha Barbara (1982-1987)



Barbara deserved to become Minister... at least in recognition of women's important role in getting the Labour Party elected".

She did eventually become the first Maltese cabinet minister in 1955. After 35 years as a parliamentarian Agatha Barbara was appointed as the first woman president on 15th February, 1982. A series of firsts... where she mostly stood alone.

A slow process

The vote to women did in some ways help to re-define the political landscape but the process was slow. Seventy years after the MacMichael Constitution, we can argue that the dearth of female representation in Parliament amounts to a serious democratic deficit.

In 2017 the percentage of female Parliamentarians is almost the same as that of the election of 1950. The Inter-Parliamentary Union Index (2017) ranks Malta in the 148th place out of 193 countries. Across the years Malta steadily slipped down this index. While other countries advanced, the participation rate in Malta remained frozen in time. With exceptions, women were often rendered politically invisible.

In domestic politics Malta is far from achieving the required critical mass of 30% that is deemed essential to register regular and unassisted advancement. We are far from achieving a gender-balanced representation in Parliament, where both sexes need to have a minimum of 40% representation.

History shows that we need to shake the tree. Change may require temporary positive measures, a topic that is now thankfully on the national political agenda.

Throughout the years, the inadequate female representation in the public sphere has been reinforced by the invisibility of women in the narratives that are transmitted through national commemorations, rituals, monuments, texts and the images that people are exposed to. Collective memory is mirrored in discourse, literature and the media that shape our perceptions of past events, which we did not directly experience. The Central Bank's commemorative coin contributes to the celebration of the role of women and is a reminder of their present-day challenges in the contemporary political and constitutional trajectory.

This is an abridged version of the presentation by Dr Carmen Sammut, Pro Rector for Student and Staff Affairs and Outreach, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary since Maltese women were given the right to vote, at the Central Bank of Malta.