

THE CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN MALTA

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CHANGE in the status and role of women is indicative of overall change within a society. By status I mean, the collection of rights and duties, associated with polar positions in a pattern of reciprocal behavior, while roles are the dynamic aspect of status, the putting into effect of its rights and duties. Each society can be viewed as a balanced collection of statuses and roles interwoven into a particular cultural pattern. Change comes to a society when the cultural pattern is altered. This can happen in two ways: (1) the number of statuses within a society can either be increased or decreased thus changing the pattern, for example, the status of midwife and the status of marriage broker have both disappeared from Maltese society while there are many new technical statuses not in existence 100 years ago. (2) Through time the behaviors associated with a particular status and viewed as acceptable by the society in question can change. It is this change, the alteration of behavioral patterns with which I am concerned at this time.

In most traditional societies the majority of women hold the statuses of wife and mother and Malta is no exception. Thus changes in the behaviors associated with these statuses can be construed as basic changes within a society, lying as they do, at the core of a woman's life.

Two of these changes seem to me to be of singular importance in Maltese society, namely the changing patterns of mate selection and changing fertility patterns and it is these two changes that I will discuss in this paper.

CHANGES IN PATTERNS OF MATE SELECTION

In Malta, 50 to 100 years ago, most families arranged marriages for their daughters while sons gradually chose their own mates. If a household had a marriageable female living within it a pot of *basil* would be kept on a window sill to indicate her presence. This allowed an eligible male to approach her father and ask for

her hand in marriage. If this device did not work, or for other reasons a girl remained unmarried there was always a marriage broker or 'huttaba' available for consultation. Although there is no hard data available today, the reminiscences of many older men and women as to their parents and grand-parents marriages lead us to believe that the family played a very large part in the selection of a proper mate for the daughters of the household. The girl herself was asked for her consent to the marriage, but the initiative in selecting a mate was usually not hers.

From about 1900 up until World War II there began to emerge a more modified pattern, where young women, although still guarded and with very limited access to the opposite sex, began to have some voice in the selection of a husband. They were able to walk along the local promenade with their girl friends under the watchful eye of their parents or other relatives and were able to attract the attentions of young men as they so desired. Friends of her brothers, cousins and other kin, and local neighbourhood youth were all possible mates. However young women were not allowed to go out with a man unescorted by an adult member of the family and even groups of girls must be escorted when they left the immediate neighborhood. Young men still had to ask a girl's father for her hand in marriage. They were usually local youths who were well known to the family. The final decision in selecting a mate still lay with the woman's parents. This power was supported by the dowry system; which mandated a dowry for every girl, but giving the father control by his right to withhold the dowry if he did not approve of her suitor.

After World War II another pattern entirely began to emerge. Young women, possibly because of the greater freedom and mobility given to them as a consequence of the disjointment of Maltese society by wartime conditions, began to meet young men outside of their own communities and subsequently marry them. Today, young women go singly or in groups from all over the island, to Valletta or Sliema in order to meet young people, both male and female. The very young girls of 13 or 14 years are still kept close to home, meeting their friends within the community. When they reach 16 years however, the sphere of interaction moves to the urban centers. At this age there is more individual paring of particular boys and girls for the movies, a bite to eat, etc. but generally single sex groups return home together by bus rather than in couples. This kind of group interaction can continue for many months with the boy and girl never really having a date, but seeing each other often. It is during this period that young people are able to meet a variety of members of the opposite sex without any

commitment on either side. Finally a pairing takes place by an individual couple and they see only each other, for periods of up to several years, meeting often usually either in Sliema or Valetta.

During this time, the parents have very little knowledge of who their children are seeing and almost no control over it. While they may suspect that their daughter or son is seeing someone, it is rare for them to know exactly who it is. Brothers and sisters share this information among themselves but do not discuss it with their parents.

After many months or even years of seeing each other, the young man or young woman is brought home to meet the parents of their respective partners. This is a very serious event in the lives of the young people. It announces to the world of friends, neighbors and relatives, as well as the parents, that there is a serious attachment and begins the time when parents can start to investigate each others backbround prior to engagement and marriage. Most girls do not like to bring home more than one or two boy friends in a life time. Their reputation is likely to suffer, especially in the eyes of the neighbors. A girl who cannot make up her mind, or cannot hold on to a boy is looked upon as a flirt, which is unflattering.

Thus the parents are kept completely apart from any participation in this important decision making process of mate selection. They do still retain some measure of control through the dowry system, but girls can make their own dowry today and often do so.

This process of changing patterns of mate selection is illustrated by data collected through interviews in Senglea in 1973.

AGE COHORT	NO.	MET WITHIN COMMUNITY OR THROUGH RELATIVES		MET OUTSIDE COMMUNITY	
		NO.	%	NO.	%
15-29	41	21	51	20	49
30-44	39	19	49	20	51
45-59	23	19	83	4	17
60-75	18	17	94.5	1	5.5

AGE COHORT	NO.	AGE AT MARRIAGE
15-29	26	20.27
30-44	36	20.94
45-59	23	22.08
60-75	17	24.18

Of the women who were over 44 years of age in 1973 more than 80% of them had met their husbands either within Senglea or through

relatives; of the women who were under 44 years of age in 1973 however, only 50% of them had met their husbands within the community or through relatives. This 30% change is significant and suggests that women do indeed increasingly choose their own mates.

This transfer of power, the power to select a mate, from parents to the young women involved is a major change in the life style of Maltese women, with important implications for social structure.

CHANGES IN FERTILITY PATTERNS

Several fertility surveys have been done in Malta during the last 30 years. In 1955, a survey was made and again, in much greater depth, in 1961. The study in 1955 concluded that 'fertility in Malta has changed little since the start of the century, when it was already very high by British standards'. 'If we ignore illegitimacy, assume the continuation of 1954 age-specific mortality rates and that the number of marriages will depend on the number of males reaching marriageable age, then an assumption of *six children per marriage*, spread according to the duration specific rates of the sample would, in the absence of emigration raise the population from 299,000 in mid-1955 to 469,000 in mid-1975.' (Seers, 1957)

According to the 1961 survey, the average family size appeared to be dropping. They said: 'Women who were married for the first time in the years before 1920 had, on the average, borne 6.64 children by the end of 1960. For women married in 1920-29, the average was 6.21; it was lower still at 5.78 for those married in 1930-39.' (Enquiry, 1963, p. xivii). Thus, even in 1961, the family size seemed to be dropping.

Examining the Crude Birth Rate tables, it becomes apparent that the birth rate (number of live births per 1000 persons in the population) while it has been slowly declining since 1900, really began to change radically in 1961. In 1960, the CBR was 26.1 and in 1961 it had dropped to 23.3. From that point on, it declined significantly every year, until in 1969 it was 15.8/1000. In 1970 there was an increase and again in 1971 and 1973 when the CBR was 17.5. This rise is probably caused to some degree by the structure of the population. In 1944, directly after the war, there was a large increase in the number of babies born and the CBR went up to levels common in 1900. This rise continued until 1950 when the CBR returned to the pre-war levels. It is these children, the war babies, that are now beginning to have children, thus showing another increase in the CBR.

Sociologists often use the ideal family figure as a good tool in trying to predict family size. The following table shows the

figures when an ideal family figure was asked for in Senglea. The women responded with 2 or 3, 4 or 5. The responses were averaged, thus getting a composite figure.

AGE COHORT	NO.	IDEAL FAMILY SIZE	'AS MANY AS GOD SENDS'	
		AVERAGE NO. CHILDREN DESIRED	TRADITIONAL RESPONSE NO.	%
15-29	53	2.8	3	5
30-45	41	2.6	3	7
45-59	26	3.3	8	30
60-75	19	4.6	12	63

The response 'As many as God sends' is viewed as the traditional one.

Obviously, the traditional attitude has almost disappeared among the younger generations. Maltese women have accepted some measure of control over their own sexuality and the size of their families. Family size in reality is generally larger than ideal family size, but the decrease in the ideal model is an important factor in the future reduction in real size of families. The actual number of children among the same women who were interviewed concerning ideal family size is an interesting statistic.

AGE COHORT	NO. OF CASES	ACTUAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN BORN	
		NO. OF CHILDREN	AVERAGE NO. OF CHILDREN
15-29	22	37	1.7
30-44	41	124	3.0
45-59	28	138	4.9
60-75	18	68	4.9

When examined in relation to the ideal family size, we see that the 15-29 year old group who have not finished their child bearing years has some leeway in reaching their goal of 2.8 children. The 30-44 group has already exceeded their goal of 2.6 and probably will end up with between 3 and 4 children per family. The 45-59 group who have generally finished their child bearing years have also exceeded their ideal number of children. The ideal is between 3 and 4 and the reality is between 4 and 5. The oldest group have generally met their ideal number; however, I feel that my particular sample in this age group is not representative of the age group as a whole. It is the smallest group in my sample, thus subject to fluctuations in statistics and it has an unusual number of single women and several women who married late in life and thus had only one child at most. Therefore, I suspect that the real number of

children in women of the age category is in excess of 4.9 per woman and that they too have exceeded their goal. The pattern seems to be, that the actual number is one more than the ideal number. Thus, there is some predictive value to ideal family when one wishes to examine future family size.

Another indication of change in family size through time is found by comparing my informants number of children with their mother's number of children. This gives us a further time depth plus an indication of changing family patterns.

INFORMANTS NO. OF CHILDREN

AGE COHORT	NO. OF CASES	NO. OF CHILDREN	AVERAGE NO. OF CHILDREN
15-29	22	37	1.7
30-44	41	124	3.0
45-59	28	138	4.9
60-75	18	68	4.9*

INFORMANTS MOTHERS NO. OF CHILDREN

AGE COHORT	NO. OF CASES	NO. OF CHILDREN	AVERAGE NO. OF CHILDREN
15-29	60	317	5.3
30-44	45	298	6.6
45-59	29	229	7.9
60-75	23	166	7.2

*possibly incorrect

Thus we can see a continuous decline in the average number of children throughout eight generations of women.

The decreasing birth rate can be related to several factors:

- (1) Establishment of compulsory education
- (2) Greater economic cost of having and raising children
- (3) Higher aspirations on the part of all Maltese
- (4) More entertainment in the evening especially the development of TV
- (5) The perceived effect of foreign influence both during the war and after
- (6) The establishment of some means of disseminating birth control information.

The establishment of compulsory education and the subsequent increase in the number of years spent in school has tended to lower the birth rate. The fertility study done in Malta in 1961 shows that 'Women whose husbands have had some further education after compulsory school age tended to have the smallest fa-

milies, 3.44 live births per woman. The families of men with no further education after compulsory school age has 4.66 live births per woman and those with no schooling at all had the largest families or 5.81 live births per woman. This indicates a direct relationship between the husband's increased education and decreased family size. In 1946, the compulsory school attendance age was 12 years. It subsequently changed to 14 and finally in 1973 to 16 years old. This, thus increased the minimum amount of education for everyone and indirectly helped to lower the birth rate.

The standard of living has increased in Malta over the last 75 years. In 1900 the average income was 100L per person while the income today is about 200L per person. In the past, most children were born at home and delivered by a midwife, at a minimum cost to the parents. Today, almost all children are born in the hospital and are delivered by a doctor. This is a much more expensive process even with a health delivery system that is state subsidized.

When we asked the question 'Where were your children born - at home or in a hospital?', of our 100 women in Senglea, the distribution on the following table became evident.

AGE COHORT	CHILDREN BORN AT HOME		CHILDREN BORN BOTH AT HOME AND IN HOSPITAL		CHILDREN BORN IN HOSPITAL	
	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%
15-29	1	5	0	0	19	95
30-44	9	23	14	36	16	41
45-59	19	70	7	26	1	4
60-75	10	77	2	15	1	8

The big change came between the 30-44 year old age group and the 45-59 year old age group, or about 25 years ago. Also the role of midwife has literally died out in the society. The last midwife in Senglea died in 1970 and there was no one to replace her. Doctors have also refused to deliver babies at home except in cases of emergency. This has decreased the number of birth irregularities but has increased the cost of childbearing. Also, the cost of raising children has risen greatly. This has always been true in urban areas and is partly the case for a disparity in the number of live births between urban and rural woman. Urban-suburban women in Malta have 4.25 live births per woman while rural women have 5.05 live births per woman according to the Fertility Study done in 1961. Urban women also have fewer very large families of over 10 children. Undoubtedly, the cost of raising the children and the cost of feeding them is one of the deterrents to large families in urban areas, along with the smaller household quarters.

In the past, Maltese families had fewer aspirations for their children as well as for themselves. To be fed, clothed and be able to read and write were often the greatest extent of their ambitions. During and after World War II, the Maltese were exposed to more direct contact with other nations. Up to that time, very few Maltese had travelled and returned to Malta with an understanding of other people's life styles. Today, Malta is part of western European culture and as such desirous of much better material life for themselves and their children. Minimum conditions of life sustenance are no longer enough. Washing machines and cars have become a necessity and a modern bathroom is a status symbol. All this costs more money and children are expensive. Also, there is a desire on the part of parents for better things for their children, as well, so there is more emphasis on education and vocational training to allow them also to achieve a better lifestyle.

Before TV arrived in Malta in 1963, there was very little to do in the evening. The church acted as the focus of community life and whatever social activities there were, were connected with parish activity. This generally finished early and when couples or individuals arrived home there was little to do. Sex was the most pleasant and inexpensive pastime. This coupled with the attitude that whatever God sends in the way of children is alright and a very limited knowledge of birth control procedures, led to an excessive number of children in many cases. Many doctors and social workers in Malta have told me that the TV has been the greatest birth control device to come to Malta.

During and after the war, a large number of English people came to Malta to work there in the many middle level jobs, such as foreman or chief clerk, that were closed to the Maltese. They often lived with Maltese families or in close proximity to them. This was especially true in Senglea, where many foremen in the dockyard lived. These English families were usually much smaller in size than the Maltese ones and became an influence on their neighbor's ideas and attitudes. This, along with the letting in of new ideas and family modes through the TV had an influence on the birth rates of the Maltese. Again, I find that I am emphasizing the influence of communications. However, it cannot be overemphasized that Malta, before the War, was a very closed community. This closed society had only one idea on how life should be lived, that proposed and upheld by the Roman Catholic Church which denied any means of limiting families until after World War II. Although many emigrated, very few came back to tell what life was like in other places. Today, there is a very large number of overseas

Maltese that return during the summer to visit their home islands and much greater communication takes place. TV came to Malta in 1963 (before a radio station did) and open up the horizons of the Maltese. They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, and so it seems in Malta.

Finally, the establishment of some center for the dissemination of birth control information was critical. In the past, a certain amount of birth regulation through the use of 'Coitus interruptus' was evident. In fact, the priests and doctors in Senglea tell me that this is still the prime birth control method used in Senglea. However, the establishment of the Cana movement was important as an indication of a change in attitude rather than just as a center for instruction in method. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church was the innovator in the area of birth regulation was of immense importance, especially to Maltese women who take their religion very seriously. No longer was the attitude 'as many as God sends' the prevailing one but rather a new attitude of adult responsibility especially in the matter of family size was fostered. Rhythm birth control is not very effective viewed statistically but the attitude conveyed by those who advocated rhythm and taught it to the people was very effective. It was no longer viewed as a sin to decide that you did not want unlimited children and there was some way to try and control your own fertility. No matter that the method was faulty. The attitude change was what was important. Today, young Maltese women talk about birth control and the size of their families freely and can openly discuss various methods of contraception.

In 1972 and 1973, there were no legal means of birth control available within the country. However, sometimes in 1974, a new regulation was passed whereby contraceptives could be imported into the country if the proper duty was paid. When I returned in 1975, women were able to obtain the pill at several drug stores in Malta with a doctor's prescription. However, there is great concern about the side effects of the pill and many Maltese women do not use it at present and contraceptives still may not be either displayed or advertised in Malta.

Women's attitudes towards contraception were varied and sometimes contradictory. We asked the question 'Do you approve of contraception?' In answer we got either a 'yes', 'no' and 'no but we approve of either safe-period or family planning'. It seems probable that they understood contraception to mean positive contraception such as the pill or condoms, etc., and this is often apparent in their comments about the pill. The answer that they

were in favor of the safe period is quite clear, but the answer that they were against contraception and in favor of family planning was confusing. I interpret the 'no, but' answers to really be a qualified yes. In other words, the women who answered 'no, but' were really conveying a feeling in favor of some sort of contraception either licit (safe period) or illicit (withdrawal).

ATTITUDES TO CONTRACEPTION

AGE COHORT	TOTAL	IN FAVOR		AGAINST		QUALIFIED AGAINST	
		NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%
15-29	59	12	20	27	46	20	34
30-44	43	11	26	13	30	19	44
45-59	26	2	8	15	57	9	35
60-75	20	2	10	15	75	3	15

The fact that the youngest age group was 46% against any form of contraception was quite a surprise. In general, one thinks of of the youngest as the most progressive but this was not true in this case. There is still a large number of women who have strong feelings about how to limit their families. When you view this data in conjunction with the ideal family size figures and the actual drop in the size of families, one wonders about the connection between belief and behavior. Only 3 women in the 15-29 age group said they wanted as many children as God Sends, or 5% of the group, while 46% of the group was against any method of contraception.

There seems to be some effect of the position in the developmental cycle on attitudes toward contraception. Women in the 30-44 year old group, after they have had a few children are more inclined to be positive about contraception than the younger women, while women in the 45-59 age group are again less inclined to be in favor of contraception. Also, the change in attitudes of the church towards contraception would not generally be reflected in this group (45-49) as the older members of the group would have been over 40 when the new regulations and practices were being advocated. I examined the data with reference to differences in attitudes between single and married women and there appeared to be no significant difference. The single women's pattern of answers were almost identical with the married women's patterns in all cases. I also examined the group for a correlation between education and socio-economic differences and attitudes to contraception and there still appeared to be no significant differences within the group. The middle class women living in Senglea felt the same way as their working class neighbors. However this may not hold true

in a largely middle class community. The questions about ideal family size and the question about contraception were widely separated in the interview. This may account for some discrepancy in the answers. But, I feel that, in many cases, especially the younger women, the two attitudes are both valid and that many women have not, as yet, worked through an acceptable life orientation to the problem. We see the same phenomena in the United States in regards to abortion, especially in Catholic women. When you ask them if they are in favor of abortion, the answer is no, yet, we know from statistics that many Catholic women, when faced with the situation get abortions, even though they will still hold a position against it in theory. In a society where there is a great deal of religious pressure to adopt a particular value, it is more comfortable to verbally adopt the prescribed value and when faced with the situation react as the situation dictates. I think that this is what is happening in Malta with contraception.

CONCLUSION

Thus we can see that change within statuses can be just as viable and important as the opening up of new statuses, especially to women. Maltese women, along with all other women, will continue to be wives and mothers. However the process by which they attain these statuses as well as the behaviors considered acceptable within the statuses can and do show evidences of change. Changes in the family can lead to concomitant changes in social structure and the implications of change in women life-styles can be far-reaching within the society as a whole. These behavioral adaptations are a necessary first step toward a restructuring of women's status within Maltese society.