

MALTA

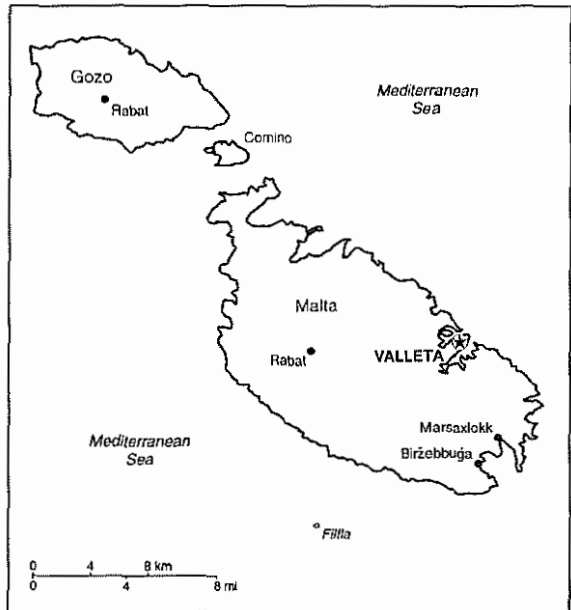
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PROFILE OF MALTA

Malta comprises the Maltese Islands which lie in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, ninety kilometers south of Italy. Malta is one of the smallest countries in Europe with a total population in 2000 of 382,525 living in an area of 316 square kilometers. Standing at the crossroads of Europe and Africa and of eastern and western Mediterranean cultures, this archipelago is a meeting ground between orient and occident.

The Maltese Islands are a resource-poor limestone outcropping. Nevertheless, their strategic location together with their deep and sheltered harbors have attracted the attention of world powers. The country has experienced the domination of, among others, the Romans, Byzantines, the Arabs, the Knights of St. John, and the British, until they gained their independence from the latter in 1964 and became a republic in 1974.

With independence, Maltese politicians adapted the liberal political structures and discourses prevalent in Western Europe. The head of state is the president, who is the executive authority of the country. The House of Representatives, which comes under the general direction and control



of the prime minister, is elected upon the principle of proportional representation by means of the single transferable vote.

The economy started developing with the departure of the British. Until the late 1950s, the Maltese economy depended on fishing, agriculture, stone quarrying, and British military spending. Since the 1960s, the economy has depended on manufactured exports such as microchips and service industries such as tourism. The 1990s saw a shift in the economy toward private services that has increased the job opportunities for women. This era has also heralded the dismantling of a centralist economic policy with the deregulation and liberalization of state-owned assets.

Emigration in the past together with the higher mortality rate of male babies and the lower life expectancy of males mean that the population is skewed in favor of women (50.4 percent) rather than men (49.6 percent). Total mortality rates among infants under one year of age was 7.2 per 1,000 live births in 1999, and maternal mortality was calculated at 11.2 per 100,000 live births within the period of 1990–1996. In 1999 the crude birthrate was 11.3 per 1,000 population, and the crude death rate was 8.2 per 1,000. The total fertility rate in 1999 was 1.8 among females of child-bearing age. In 1998 the life expectancy at birth was calculated to be 80.1 for females and 74.4 for males.

OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S ISSUES

Caring responsibilities are keeping women out of the labor market. Since Maltese citizenship rights are based on an individual's participation in the public sphere, women's low participation in this sphere means that their rights are derived through their relationship to men and/or the state. Non-governmental organizations and political leaders are concerned at women's low representational level in the labor market and trying to envisage ways of ensuring that more women participate in this sphere.

EDUCATION

Opportunities

The British government reigning in the Maltese Islands in the nineteenth century introduced the policy of universal state elementary education in 1836. The first state educational services were first directed at males, and gradually extended to their female counterparts. The same gendered pattern was maintained with regards to access to secondary and tertiary education. The University of Malta, founded in 1592, opened its doors to women in the mid-1920s when the first Maltese woman graduated in 1926. One needs to underline that prior to the 1970s education in the Maltese Islands was the prerogative of the propertied class, especially where secondary and postsecondary education was concerned. Parents with little

means were more likely to invest in their son's education, to the detriment of their female siblings.

Since the 1970s, Maltese students have had access to a free education, including tertiary education. To encourage students to continue their education beyond compulsory school age, students who qualify for entry into postsecondary and tertiary educational institutions are given a stipend. The number of female students at secondary (11–16 years), postsecondary (16–18), as well as tertiary level has increased in the last decade. In fact, the number of female students at tertiary level started surpassing that of their male counterparts at the end of the 1990s. Although female university students represent 52 percent of the students, they are still taking courses in health, education, and social issues and are less likely to be found in gender-atypical fields such as architecture, engineering, and science. Female students are also less likely to take vocational courses.

Literacy

The educational facilities available in the twenty-first century did not always exist. In fact, the illiteracy rate in the Maltese Islands is quite high. The 1995 census found that 9 percent of the working age population is illiterate. The rate for males (11.6 percent) is higher than that for females (7.2 percent).

EMPLOYMENT AND THE ECONOMY

Job/Career Opportunities

The Labour Force Survey maintains that 66.6 percent of men and 26.6 percent of women were in paid employment in 2001.¹ Women's activity rate within the labor market has not risen above 33 percent, which is one of the lowest rates in Europe, in the last two decades. Women are inactive rather than unemployed, since women's unemployment rate lies at 1.7 percent whereas men's is 4.3 percent.

The labor market is still gender segregated and segmented. Women are more likely to be found working within the manufacturing, wholesale, retail, education, health, and social work sectors rather than in agriculture, fishing, quarrying, or construction. And as late as 2000, women were invisible in the highest



Office worker, Malta. Photo © TRIP/D. Ellul.

EUROPE

echelons of the public service. Statistics on women's presence in the various occupational rungs within the private sector are harder to come by.

Women's rate of participation within the labor market starts decreasing when they reach their late twenties and early thirties and become mothers. They tend to drop out of the labor market but take up part-time jobs as their primary jobs when their caring responsibilities become lighter. The percentage of women who have a part-time job as their main occupation starts picking up within the 25-34 age bracket and remains stable until retirement age.

Pay

The Maltese Constitution deems that women should have the right to equal pay. In reality women still make 80 percent of the average gross salary that a male colleague takes home.

Support for Mothers/Caretakers

Women and men working within the public sector have access to several measures that enable them to reconcile work and family responsibilities. These consist of maternal and parental as well as responsibility leave, which entitles civil servants with dependents to twelve months' unpaid responsibility leave.

Maternal and Parental Leave

In 2002, female employees were entitled to thirteen weeks of maternity leave with full pay. Employees working within the public sector were entitled to unpaid parental leave for a period of twelve months after the birth of each child. Both parents could avail themselves of this leave. Parents are entitled to a one-time career break of three years to take care of children under five.

Daycare

Women tend to drop out of the labor market because of the lack of childcare facilities as well as because of the stigma connected with putting their career before the well-being of their children. In October 2001 there were approximately 15 state subsidized daycare centers or nurseries registered in Malta. Private provisions also exist, although there is no fiscal policy that aids the parents who make use of these policies.

Inheritance and Property Rights

According to Maltese law, married spouses can bequeath their property to each other in ownership or usufruct, which is the legal right to use the profits or materials belonging to someone else. In real fact, however, legitimate children have the right to one third of the property of the deceased parent. The surviving spouse who has children, own or adopted, cannot receive more than one fourth ownership of the deceased's property and is entitled to the usufruct of the rest of the deceased's estate. When the spouse dies intestate, remaining spouses are entitled to their part of the community of acquisitions and usufruct of the house of residence. Children of the deceased succeed their parents without distinction of their gender.

FAMILY AND SEXUALITY

Gender Roles

Although research demonstrates that men are participating in household chores more than they did in the past, domestic and caring chores are still seen as women's responsibilities.

Marriage

The structure and morality of the family are changing as well. The family is smaller in size, and people are more tolerant of divorce, single parenthood, homosexuality, and family planning.

Reproduction

A sign of increasing secularization is the mean number of live births within marriage, which was 7.1 in 1920 but had decreased to 1.9 by 1995.

Contraception and Abortion

Family planning in the Maltese Islands has been gaining ground since the 1960s. This is evident from the fact that the ban on the advertisement of contraceptives was abolished in the 1974 Press Law, and the prohibition on the importation of contraceptives was repealed the following year. The Roman Catholic Church tends to promote natural family planning over other forms of contraception. The state, on the other hand, only provides indirect support for family planning activities.

Abortion is prohibited under all circumstances under the Criminal Code of Malta. Individuals who perform or consent to its performance are subject to imprisonment.

Teen Pregnancy

Secularization is further substantiated by figures that demonstrate that there has been an increase in the number of pregnancies among teenage single women. In fact, 16.6 percent of the children born in 1999 were born to mothers aged 15–19 years of age. Between 1995 and 1999, 46.1 percent of these children were born to unmarried mothers under twenty, an eight-fold increase over the previous decade.

HEALTH

Health Care Access

The Maltese government provides a free comprehensive health service funded from general taxation to all those residing in Malta. Individuals who suffer from one or more of a list of specified chronic diseases are entitled to receive free treatment for their ailments. Those with a low income can also benefit from free pharmaceuticals if they pass a means test.

Diseases and Disorders

The main causes of death are noncommunicable diseases, mainly circulatory disease and cancer.

AIDS

There were only forty-one cases of AIDS and thirty-seven deaths in Malta from 1985 to 1996.

Cancer

The main causes of mortality among women are breast cancer and coronary artery disease. In 1996, cancer accounted for 25 percent of all mortality. The rates of gastrointestinal cancer, lung cancer, and cancer of the cervix are among the lowest in Europe, and those of the breast, the uterus, and lymphomata are among the highest.

POLITICS AND LAW

Suffrage

Maltese women were given the right to vote and stand for elections in 1947. This came about through the instigation of the first Maltese women's movement, The Women of Malta Association, which was set up in 1944

with the intention of attaining the right for women to vote and be elected. This group dissolved once it obtained its objective.

Political Participation

Since 1947, a number of women participated and were elected in the general elections. Total female representation at parliamentary level is quite low. In 2002, only 9.2 percent of the members of parliament were female. The percentage of women who participate and are elected within the local councils elections is higher at 17.3 percent.

Women's Rights

Feminist Movements

Other women's groups have come after the dissolution of The Women of Malta Association, although they all had the tendency to disband after a couple of years. The only group that has withstood the tests of time is the National Council of Women, founded in 1964. This group adopts a moderate tone and rarely touches on issues that are anathema to the Maltese Catholic Church, namely divorce and contraception. This might explain why this group is still functioning whereas others no longer exist.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Religion is still important for the Maltese, especially the Roman Catholic religion that is constitutionally recognized as the religion of the nation. Even though church and state have been formally separated, the church is still powerful and is consulted when social policies relating to family and marriage are being devised. Both church and state start from the premise that women are the biological reproducers and nurturers of the future generations, which in turn affects policies and official statements.

VIOLENCE

Domestic Violence

Although women are becoming more assertive and conscious of their rights, violent incidents against women seem to be escalating as men feel that they are losing their control over their previously accommodating partners.

OUTLOOK FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Although legally women have the same rights as men within the Maltese Islands, more work needs to be done before they can have access to the same resources and privileges. As long as caring responsibilities are socially relegated to women, women cannot partake on the same level as men within the social structure.

NOTE

1. Labour Force Survey, www.nso.gov.mt/labourforcesurvey.

RESOURCE GUIDE

Video/Film

Sustainability Indicators for Malta. 2002. Sustainability Indicators Malta Observatory, Old University, St. Paul Street, Valletta, Malta.

Web Sites

Health in Malta, www.health.gov.mt/information/hom.htm.

Labour Force Survey, www.nso.gov.mt/labourforcesurvey.

Ministry for Social Policy, www.msp.gov.mt/.

Social Statistics on Family Values, www.discern-malta.org/domestic.htm.

Organizations

Grace Attard (President)
New Centre
Mountbatten Street
Blata l-Bajda, HMR 02, Malta

Lorraine, Mercieca
Snowdrop, Triq il-Ferrovija
Santa Venera, Malta

National Council of Women
Web site: ncwmalta@camline.net.mt

Women's Study Group
Web site: wsg@um.edu.mt

An informal women's group.

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- Deguara, A. *Life on the Line. A Sociological Investigation of Women Working in a Clothing Factory in Malta*. Msida: Malta University Press, 2002.
- International Labor Organization. "Library and Information Services: Malta." www.ilo.org/public/english/support/lib/contact/mlt.htm.
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