THE GLASS CEILING: MALTESE WOMEN IN ACADEMIA

LYDIA SCIRIHA

Abstract *– This paper discusses the current status and role of the Maltese woman in education. Nowadays, many Maltese women are taking up the challenge to further their studies at the University of Malta. Which degrees do females obtain and which areas of study are favoured by most of the female students at the University of Malta? What is the profile of academic women in the ten Faculties at the University of Malta? Why are there so few female academics and why is it that they stand overwhelmingly at the bottom of the academic hierarchy? This paper seeks to provide answers to these questions and analyses the effect current social change has on the role of women in contemporary Maltese society.*

Introduction

Folktales, folksongs, novels and plays are particularly insightful as to the changing role the Maltese woman has undergone throughout the ages. These literary sources which reveal man's chauvinistic attitude vis-à-vis his female counterpart are an indication as to why such attitudes have had a lasting effect on the status of Maltese woman today.

As one would expect, these folk tales do not usually give much prominence to the Maltese woman and in the instances when women are mentioned, these tales serve to reinforce the idea that the woman's role in society is limited to her home. She is the dutiful, loving, patient and caring wife who is there to look after the needs of her husband and children. The woman is depicted as utterly vulnerable and dependent on men and for this reason, women needed to marry as quickly as possible, to obtain the security they so desired (Xuereb: 1992).

The Maltese woman in novels and plays

The image that surfaces from the above-mentioned tales is that the Maltese woman is subservient to man and is utterly dependent on him. This

view has also been perpetuated in Maltese novels, which were heavily influenced by Italian literature. In *Ineż Farruġ* Caruana (1891) follows Manzoni's pattern in *I Promessi Sposi.* Quite surprisingly *Ineż,* who is expected to be the main character in the novel, as the title of the novel would suggest, disappears from the scene after the first few chapters and only reappears towards the end and then under tragic circumstances.

Following the Second World War the historical novel was taken over by social and political fiction. Even then, the Maltese woman was portrayed in very much the same way as in the folktales and ballads. Besides, in these novels, the Maltese woman is rarely the main character in the novel:

More often than not she forms part of the wider canvas in the gallery of characters portrayed and serves as a prop for the actions of the male protagonist. The poorer village girl, intelligent but with a low level of education (education and the town were often viewed as corrupting influences on a girl) is glorified. She is modest, withdrawn, courageous but submissive, often the victim of an unscrupulous male seducer (Xuereb 1992 : 4).

Slowly, these stereotypical notions regarding the Maltese woman started to be questioned by Maltese playwrights. Diacono (1952) in his play *L-Ewwel Jien* debates the idea as to whether a woman should go out to work. The widely held belief that the husband is the sole breadwinner and that the woman's place is in the home is questioned. In this play, Victor, an ornery character, adamantly refuses to allow his fiancée to find a job, even though he is overcome with sloth and is really unable to provide for her adequately. Victor argues that no well meaning employer would give a job to his fiancée.

Although nearly half a century ago Diacono's play touched on quite a sensitive topic, only recently has this stereotypical image of the female undergone changes by playwrights like Joe Friggieri and Oreste Calleja. In their works, both man and woman are considered equal and the woman is given her own personality. She has a mind of her own and is able to take decisions just like men (Xuereb 1992).

Female university graduates

As is evident from the above-mentioned folk tales, novels and plays,

the Maltese woman has, up to some time ago, been depicted as uneducated, very submissive and often the object of derision. The only way such a mentality could be countermanded was by giving women greater access to education. In fact, over the past two decades education has became available to all and there are significantly higher numbers than ever before of Maltese women following courses at the University of Malta. Besides, it is not merely the arts subjects that female university students study but there is a growing tendency for them to read science, medicine, architecture and engineering too. This change in reasoning however, did not occur overnight. Whereas previously, on the one hand, most Maltese parents would openly declare that they prize education, nevertheless, on the other hand, they really did not think their daughters needed to be highly educated, though chauvinistically so, such a stance was not adopted towards their sons. One needs to address a constellation of factors as to why parents held such negative attitudes towards their daughters' education. The salient reason they would cite was the fact that tertiary education for their daughters was a sheer waste of time and money. Indeed, most women end up marrying and setting up a home with their husband and children. Such a mentality, though not to be condoned, was quite understandable. After all, in Malta until 1981, female government employees were compelled to resign once they got married and so their careers came to a grinding halt once they tied the knot.

Following the 1981 change in working conditions, coupled with the introduction first of the University Student-Worker scheme (1989-1987), and then the stipend system (1987-), there has been a growing positive change in mentality towards tertiary education since students are no longer a financial burden on their parents. Such a measure proved decisive not only because it has bolstered the student body at the University of Malta, but also the numbers of female university students registered remarkably high increases when compared to the 1970's as is evident from the following tables.

Table 1 illustrates the number of male and female students who obtained the doctorate, master and bachelor degrees as well as those who were awarded Diplomas during the academic year 1973. Whereas in 1973 a total of 55 students obtained doctorates, of these only four were females. The overwhelming majority of females did not go beyond the bachelor's degree (41 out of a total of 53 females).

Table 1: **Degrees and Diplomas Awarded 1973**

	Male	Female	Total
Doctor	51	4	55
Master	8	3	11
Bachelor	155	41	196
Diploma	6	5	11

Table 2 gives a breakdown of those who graduated in 1979 by gender. The number of female graduates was then still very small and displayed only a slight increase over the previous six years. Besides, the majority of the female graduates (45) obtained a bachelor's degree. Eight females were awarded the degree at the Master's level and another four females were awarded the Doctorate.

Table 2: **Degrees and Certificates Awarded in 1979**

	Male	Female	Total
Doctorate	58	4	62
Master	23	8	31
Bachelor	101	45	146

More recent data on graduates (1980-1990) are given in Table 3. What is immediately striking is the steep increase in the number of female graduates in 1990 when compared with the figures in 1973 and 1979. Even though in 1980 only 45 females as opposed to 137 males graduated out of a total of 182 graduates and in 1983 there were only five females in contrast to 78 males who graduated out of a class of 83, the numbers of female graduates started to increase significantly in subsequent years. In fact, in 1990 slightly less than half the total number of graduates (409) were females (174) and 235 were males.

Table 3: **Number of graduates by Gender**

	Male	Female	Total
1980	137	45	182
1982	311	121	432
1983	78	5	83
1984	111	23	134
1985	170	49	219
1986	193	74	267
1987	184	68	252
1988	267	155	422
1989	253	134	387
1990	235	174	409

Academia and the Maltese Woman

The previous three tables clearly illustrate the alarming dearth of female graduates before 1988. In view of such statistics, it is thus hardly surprising that female academic members of staff at the University of Malta who hold doctorates are very conspicuous by their absence. Furthermore, as expected, most of these academics are attached to the Humanities.

Table 4 gives a breakdown of full-time members of staff by gender in

Table 4: **Full-time members of Staff by Gender**

	Professor		Associate Prof.		Senior Lecturer		Lecturer		Assistant Lecturer	
Faculties	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Architecture	1	-	-	-	10	-	3	-	1	-
Arts	9	-	3	-	10	1	6	1	4	3
Dental Surgery	1	-	2	-	-	-	2	-	1	1
Economics	4	-	2	-	12	-	4	-	7	1
Education	2	-	3	-	9	3	5	5	9	11
Engineering	4	-	2	-	12	1	3	-	14	1
Laws	5	-	2	-	6	-	18	3	6	3
Medicine	12	1	2	-	19	-	41	8	2	4
Science	6	-	6	-	10	-	6	2	6	1
Theology	3	-	1	-	1	-	11	-	4	-
Total	47	1	23	0	89	5	99	19	54	25

ten different Faculties at the University of Malta (University Calendar 1996-97).

Of the 362 academics, the number of male academics (312) is staggering when compared with their female counterparts (50). Not only are there so very few females (13.8%) but even their position in the academic hierarchy is quite low. In fact, of these 50 female academic members of staff, only one is a full rank professor, there are no associate professors and five are senior lecturers. Most of the female academics either are lecturers (19) or assistant lecturers (25). It is indeed striking that overwhelmingly, female academics stand at the bottom of the scale. Furthermore there are no female academics occupying posts in certain faculties such as Architecture and Dental Surgery and even though there is one female senior lecturer in Engineering, one needs to underline the fact that she is a foreigner. Traditionally, Maltese women have chosen to study languages and it is understandable that in the late 1960s the first female assistant lecturer at the University of Malta held her post in the Department of English. Interestingly so, in this same Department, at present, there are more female academics than males, but then this is in keeping with the trend for females to study English and other languages more than males.

Furthermore, out of a total of 312 male academics only 54 are assistant lecturers, that is only 17.3% of all males but there are 25 female assistant lecturers (50% of the total female population). This in itself is very telling and is a clear reminder that the past cannot be relegated into oblivion. After all, a closer look at the University calendar's list of female academics and their concomitant qualifications reveals that just one third of them hold doctorates; the rest are at most in possession of a degree at the master's level.

The importance of social capital

The data (Table 4) cited above, are a stark reminder that even though women are given the opportunities to advance, it is difficult for them to break the invisible barrier or what Abdela (1994) has dubbed 'the glass ceiling'. Quite often, the main hurdles females need to overcome are strictly cultural. In the academic arena in Malta, the majority of the females are not in possession of a doctorate, even though they are now required to obtain such a qualification.

Problems arise not because they are intellectually unable to proceed

with post-graduate studies, but because most of them have familial commitments, which are either incompatible or not easy to reconcile with an academic career that requires long hours of research and teaching. On account of these family obligations, women also tend to take shortcuts to balance their career and their family life. Most of them opt to continue their studies in Malta rather than abroad. They thus inevitably miss out on the unique and stimulating opportunity of living and studying in a foreign university. Throughout history, women have always faced this dilemma. Their family connections are understandably so important that women feel compelled to make a choice between what they really wish to achieve and their obligations to their husband and children. It is also important to point out the fact that indirectly, Maltese society in general has an effect on young women who are goaded by their parents and their peers to marry when still in their early twenties. Surprisingly so, as we are on the threshold of a new millennium, this mentality has not changed as drastically as one might have expected. Furthermore, the reason why two-thirds of the female academics have not yet obtained a PhD is itself quite telling as to the role these women have at the University. It could be that even a policy of positive discrimination through which females are recruited with lower qualifications will eventually work against the full development of females in academia. At present, 50% of female academics stand at the bottom of the totem pole whereas only 17% of their male counterparts occupy such a position. Strategic decisions are now required to ensure that official policies of equal opportunities are indeed possible.

Somewhat paradoxically, it seems that Maltese academic women are being instrumentalised in a very subtle way. Although they have the intellectual ability to achieve as much as men, yet they need the backing of their significant others. Besides, being women in an overwhelmingly male dominated university can be quite daunting especially for those who are still very young and inexperienced in this particular environment. Most women are indirectly disadvantaged because owing to their many commitments, they tend to spend less time discussing university politics. Consequently, their social capital within the organisation is virtually insignificant.

Tannen (1994) provides an example which is both apt and applicable to the local scene. Her research has revealed a growing tendency for females to have their lunch in their office, while males go to lunch with their immediate superiors. A cursory look at the patrons of the senior common room at the University of Malta is quite enlightening and reinforces

Tannen's example. Few female academics lunch there and when they do, they all huddle next to each other; they do not really mix with other male academics especially those who hold high positions in the academic hierarchy. It is not that these females specifically want to distance themselves from their male colleagues. But it is usually their male colleagues who make these women uncomfortable with their patronising attitudes. Thus, females adopt different coping strategies to counteract such uncomfortable situations. Women dine together as a group, or else opt out of such an embarrassing situation and have their lunch in their office. In effect, what is really happening in the situation described is that these male academics are acting as gatekeepers. They want to retain the power that the information they derive from interacting with influential members of the academic hierarchy provides them with and which is not available to others outside the inner circle. Thus, they get to know information that serves as a prop to boost their academic careers. Their interactions with influential members of the academic hierarchy serve them well. They manage to glean information regarding what best to emphasise in their applications for resources of whatever kind; they enjoy power because they are aware of developments prior to official communication. This is confirmed by the fact that at the University of Malta, the same academics who ritually complain about their heavy work load, quite surprisingly, regularly attend the 10 am coffee break in the senior common room, because the Rector of the University might drop by. They are all too cognisant of the fact that their very presence provides an occasion for extended socialisation with the authorities, thereby facilitating links of communication when required. For the same reason too, females present on these occasions at times adopt radical stances in the belief that they can so leave an imprint. In view of the foregoing, it is hardly surprising that women are not in a position to mobilise a network of social relations at University that provides them with recognition of their achievements and thus rendering their chances to obtain assistance and support quite slim.

Double bind situations

The disadvantaged position of women does not only arise because most women work in a male dominated environment and have many roles to play but also because women's mode of verbal interaction is quite different from men's. Tannen (1994) cites a number of examples which show the disadvantaged position of females vis-à-vis males. According to her,

men and women differ in the way they interact with one another and this difference is counterproductive and prohibits women obtaining promotions at the top management level. Women are taught early on when they are still girls that it is not wise to blow their horns. Males instead are socialised into doing exactly the opposite: they gain status by making known their own accomplishments with their immediate superiors. Thus, women's achievements are kept locked in the cupboard and so it is hardly surprising that Maltese female academics are at the bottom of the hierarchy. The kind of socialisation in which self-aggrandising talk is not allowed for women proves to be detrimental to their advancement when they become career women. However intelligent and able they are, it is very difficult for them to break the invisible barrier. Their code of conduct has been imprinted on them and now it is difficult to change it. Even if they do, males do not seem to accept such a change from women. Unfortunately, what is acceptable for males is not acceptable for females.

An incident that occurred to the author a few months ago illustrates that discourse understanding is greatly gender related to the extent that metamessages are frequently lost. A meeting with a senior University official was extremely cordial and the atmosphere throughout was friendly. At one point, the author jokingly remarked to her interlocutor that the University had been quite lucky to recruit her because, unlike most Maltese academics she already possessed a doctorate from a foreign university, when she was recruited. The implication of this statement was that she had spared the University a lot of money as she did not need to go abroad for further studies. The metamessage intended in this remark was merely to make her interlocutor aware that in general, the University hardly ever pats anyone on the back, even when such accomplishments are very rare. Unfortunately, the metamessage went awry as is evident from the negative reaction the author got for saying so. Her interlocutor considered what she had just told him as act of boasting highly reminiscent of the inhabitants of a particular area in Malta who are notorious for being braggarts. It is difficult to envisage an identical response had the author been a male. This example reveals what Gregory Bateson (1972) has dubbed the 'double bind' situation that females usually face because as Tannen (1992 : 17) remarks *"whatever we do to serve one need necessarily violates the other"*. On the one hand if women stick to their own way of interacting, namely being humble and unassuming about their achievements, no one will give them credit for their work. On the other hand, if they learn to interact in the same style that males do, they are subjected to

a lot of flak and snide comments. In such circumstances, women can never win however hard they try.

The pitfalls of indirectness

Males and females differ in their communicative styles to the extent that Gray (1993) contends that though men and women inhabit planet Earth, they actually come from two diverse and distinct planets, Mars and Venus. This notion is further reinforced when one discovers how direct or indirect men and women are. Sociolinguistic research by Lakoff (1975), Tannen (1991,1992,1994), Zimmerman and West (1977), Smith (1985), Coates (1986), clearly reveals that there are language differences among men and women and at times, owing to these differences men and women find it difficult to communicate with one another. In these studies a number of differences have been cited, but only gender differences as regards the way directives are given will be discussed here.

A directive or a command is a speech act in which an individual persuades someone to do something. Such a directive may be simple and direct such as asking the other person "shut the door" or its force might be attenuated and thus be indirect as in "It is very cold here". In all probability, the direct command was issued by a man, while the indirect one was given by a woman.

Engle's (1980), Bellinger and Berko-Gleason (1982) conducted fieldwork on interaction patterns parents use when playing with their children. The findings of these studies showed that fathers used more direct commands than mothers. Furthermore, a study by Goodwin (1980; 1988; 1990) corroborates these findings. Goodwin researched the communicative styles of boys and girls in Philadelphia while they were playing outside their homes and in the street. The results revealed interesting patterns in the way boys and girls ordered their friends around. Whereas boys were direct and made bald commands as in "Give me the ball", girls used 'mitigated commands' in which they *"used modal auxilliaries can and could to suggest rather than demand action"* (Coates 1986 : 124). This research shows that when still children, girls and boys interact very differently and other research (Tannen 1994) further demonstrates that these patterns are carried over in the workplace. Whereas men give direct commands, women who hold identical positions at work have a tendency to issue mitigated directives. This indirect method of communicating often results in women not being taken seriously since their directives are not considered to be orders.

Being aware of such differences is important especially when one is a woman who needs to issue directives to men! The author came to this conclusion through bitter experience when she was the head of a unit for six years. When this post was handed over to her, she had just returned from her studies abroad and was still very young and very inexperienced. Although this unit had for a long time been riddled with problems (equipment, security, personnel), those in authority thought that, even though she was a mere greenhorn in this kind of administrative work, she should effect radical changes virtually overnight. One of her colleagues made her aware that she was entering a war zone and that in truth, she was being given a hot potato! Although the problems regarding the equipment were not at all easy to solve, yet problems dealing with the members of her unit proved to be the most daunting and the most difficult. Not only were some of her personnel taciturn, surly and at times utterly uncooperative, but they refused to take her directives as orders which had to be obeyed. One such directive that seemingly proved difficult for her staff to comprehend was the need for them to be punctual. Unlike academics, non-academic members at the University have stipulated hours. The author recalls the different strategies she applied in order to try and coerce her staff to obey these seemingly simple rules. The author would gently go over and speak to the persons in question and try to reason things out with them. Several times she would be use mitigated directives such as "The students were waiting outside this morning", instead of directly asking them "Why were you late? Even though she thought that by not using bald commands they would appreciate her mode of communication, unfortunately, these same persons who were repeatedly told to change their ways, continued to behave as if no one had ever called to their attention their transgressions. It took the author a long time to realise that her staff was confusing her mitigated directives as lack of authority on her part and that she was unable to control them because she was a woman. For the individuals concerned, her directives were no directives at all. It was only when the author decided that the only way to obtain action was by giving bald commands and ensuring that they were obeyed, did the message finally reach them. Unfortunately, this kind of disappointing experience robs females of their personality and their femininity, particularly through a feeling of been coerced to act as a man and not as a woman.

Not only women with administrative posts are required to walk the conversation tightrope: female lecturers go through the same experience. Once again, gender differences arise. The author acknowledges that she

needs to adopt two styles: one that she uses with male students and another with females. In addition, gender differences are further accentuated when relating to male students who come from countries where their culture has an even lower estimation of the intellectual potential of women.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion points to the many obstacles academic women are required to overcome in a Maltese university. Unless both men and women understand that linguistic knowledge and social factors are intertwined, discourse will not be correctly interpreted and will be fraught with misunderstandings. Only recently have sociolinguists stepped up their efforts to look into the co-variation of language and gender. In the workplace in general and in particular at the University of Malta, women are a minority group. Being members of a very small group means that academic women are a disadvantaged social group with an inferior status which is viewed negatively when compared with the dominant group.

In this regard, Tajfel's theory (1974; 1978; 1981) regarding interpersonal relations and social change throws light on women's position today. According to Tajfel, a social psychologist, women can either accept or reject their inferior status vis-à-vis men. If they do accept their situation, they usually compare themselves with other women or else they make an effort to join the superior group as individuals and not as members of a minority group. If one looks at the status of academic women at the University, the five female senior lecturers will not feel that they have an inferior status, if they compare themselves with the majority of academic women who are lecturers and assistant lecturers. They might also decide that the only way they will succeed is to join the superior group by adopting its values. This assimilation effectively requires women to undergo a personality change. The example given in the subsection on indirectness revealed that the author had effectively to communicate in the way men do, in order to effect the necessary changes. This is a sad way of extending influence and of providing society with the female ethos. In effect, this kind of assimilation strips the female of her femininity and of her God-given gender.

According to Tajfel, if women do not accept their inferior position in society as a group with an inferior status, they will endeavour to effect changes within the group by creating a positive and unique image of themselves. Sociolinguistic research has amply shown that men and women

have different speech styles. Both men and women need to understand that one style is not better than the other; they are just different in the same way that men and women are biologically different. Thus, in a predominantly male-dominated environment, women should demonstrate to their male colleagues that their own way of communicating does not make them less knowledgeable and less authoritative.

A few decades ago it was unimaginable for a Maltese woman to join the workforce. That this has come about is a tribute to the many, males and females, who have realised that modernity implies equality, and that even the religion-based biases of yore do not have a real base in the Pauline doctrine that God created man and woman as equals. From second-in-line position, Maltese women are slowly becoming significant role players at every level and in every sphere of Maltese society. One hopes that progress does not kill femininity, but will provide a surer route, and a stronger basis for a richer society, in which inter-gender sharing and co-operation can benefit both the individual, and at the macro level, total society as it grapples to construct meaning systems in a fast changing global village.

Lydia Sciriha *obtained her first degree in languages from the Faculty of Arts at University of Malta. As a Commonwealth scholar, she subsequently followed postgraduate studies at the University of Victoria, B.C., Canada where she was awarded her PhD in linguistics in 1986. Dr Sciriha, who is currently a senior lecturer at the University of Malta, has taught sociolinguistics and related areas since 1987. Dr Sciriha was appointed visiting associate professor at the University of Cyprus during her sabbatical year in 1995. On two occasions (1997; 1998) she was also invited to give courses to students at Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of a monograph on the linguistic situation in Cyprus, of a number of articles in sociolinguistics books and journals and of three multi-media publications, including a CD-ROM based Maltese language course published in Australia.*

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