

ON THE SPECIFICITY OF GOZO AND OF GOZITAN FEMALE LABOUR

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Introduction

This paper reviews the position of Gozitan women in the labour market in the 1990s. Although Gozitan female labour accounts for a seemingly marginal 2% of all the gainfully occupied in the Maltese islands, their case makes a strong argument in favour of the specificity of Gozo, and of smallness as a variable in social, labour market and economic research.

Special Characteristics of Female Labour

There are a number of factors common to women in employment across the globe. The first of these is that females have a lower participation rate in the formal economy than do men. One interesting aspect of gender difference is the importance of non-standard forms of employment and/or the informal labour market for understanding female employment. Non-standard forms of employment can apply to working hours, work organisation and to employment contracts such as flexi-work, out-work or piece work. The informal economy, on the other hand, tends to suggest a completely unregulated sphere of economic activity, one that may be attractive to both employer and employee because it reduces wage-related costs (contribution to National Insurance, granting of any paid leave and others).

The Gozitan female labour market gives us some indication of how large non-standard or informal employment is. In 1995,² according to data provided by the Employment and Training Corporation, there were 2762 gainfully occupied Gozitan females (which excluded those not classified as working full-time). Taken as a proportion of the Gozitan female working age population for the same year³, it appears that the Gozitan female participation rate, is 17%, far lower than the national average for females in 1995, which is around 30%. However, when one examines more detailed disaggregated Census data for the same group of females,⁴ a rather different picture emerges.

However, other data suggest a different scenario. According to the self-report answers of Gozitan women,⁵ 8283 out of a working age population of 16,485 were working full-time (30 hours or more a week). This produces a participation rate of 50%, a rather different picture to the 17% of current official statistics. Whilst not wanting to over-interpret these data, since only a Labour Force Survey would be able to determine why so many are working in this way and what this suggests, the data confirm the importance piece-work and out-work has had for Gozitan women. Out-work can be both a *facilitation strategy* whereby work is organised to facilitate *employees'* wishes for flexible hours and location, or a *utilisation strategy* whereby *employers* cut both wage and non-wage related costs by keeping a peripheral or marginalised workforce (Wickham, 1997).

Gender Difference in Gozo

Apart from the participation rate, one measure of gender difference is the proportion of males and females in gainful employment. In the years between 1990-1996, Gozo presents a constant pattern of a labour force (excluding part-time workers and informal work) which is represented by 72% male labour and 28% female labour.

There is a slight shift, a decrease in the relative proportion of female to male workers which other data (reported below) suggest may be interesting and indicative of decreasing employment opportunities for Gozitan females. Whilst not wanting to imply that Gozitan females are less likely to be in paid labour than any other group in the Maltese islands, it is also apparent that, as with their Malta-only sisters and women across the globe, there are a number of factors which may be keeping them out of the formal labour market. The 'large' 6 percent of Gozitan females working more than 30 hours per week in non-standard forms of employment or in the informal economy would suggest that *both employees'* needs for flexibility and lack of suitable employment opportunities contribute to a pattern of labour which is markedly different from male labour.

In different sectors

One of the interesting differences between female and male Gozitan full-time employment is that there are proportionately less females in public sector employment than there are in the private sector. In examining the relative distribution of male to female Gozitan workers, we find that between 1990-1996 there is a consistent pattern whereby males make up approximately 80% and females 20% of the public sector workforce. It is interesting to note however, that there has been an increase in the percentage of Gozitan females in the public sector from 16% in 1980 to 22% in 1996⁷. This would suggest⁸ that changes in employment protection (such as maternity leave) as well as specific Gozo-friendly Government policies such as the 1997 Labour government decision to locate some Government departments in Gozo, have had positive effects on Gozitan female labour. Despite these opportunities and some closure in the private sector discussed below, there has been a shift in female employment towards the private sector (from 67% of the female gainfully occupied in 1990 to 70% in 1996).

In the private sector there has been, until 1995, a relatively stable pattern with a higher proportion of females to males than in is evident in the public sector, with males comprising 66% and females around 34%. This relative distribution had dropped to 32% by 1996, and this in spite of the change in female employment

patterns discussed above. Until we have labour force survey data, it would be incorrect to make any presumptions about what these data indicate. However, they are in line with well-known industrial strategies of underdeveloped countries. Low-skill and low-pay female labour is utilised in the first phase of industrial development, mainly in manufacturing. This operates alongside forms of occupational closure in the public sector, such as marriage bars or disincentives to returnees who have to start at a number of grades below the one they may have left to bear and rear children.

The private sector is likely to provide more opportunity to move in and out of the market, as well as to work hours that are more compatible with the 'dual shift' of women in paid and unpaid labour. The high percentage of Gozitan women in the self-employed category of the private sector suggests that one strategy could be to work on terms of one's own as a self-employed person. The proportional decrease of female employees (not self-employed) in the private sector⁹ from 53% in 1990 to 45% in 1996 is indicative of the change to a tertiarised economy (from manufacturing to services) with the concomitant 'restructuring' or massive contraction of the industrial sector. . Despite the fact that in real terms the number of females in the private sector (excluding the self-employed) has not decreased but increased over these years, the proportionate distribution between males and females in this category should not have changed as drastically as it has. The tertiarisation of the economy should have provided some opportunities for this group of women and one would need further study to see why Gozitan women are not benefiting from this labour market change. If the first to experience constriction in the labour market are Gozitan women, is this because the Gozitan economy has not yet made the shifts that the Malta-only economy has made?

Past histories of economic development continue to impact on the present labour market. In 1996,¹⁰ females made up 65% of Gozitan private sector *industrial* workers, a high proportion of jobs in a sector that is likely to shrink further. In contrast females comprised only 36% of Gozitan private sector *non-industrial* workers.

Further confirmation of a trend toward contraction of the Gozitan female labour market is the alarming drop, in 1997, of this group as a proportion of the Maltese¹¹ female gainfully occupied in 1997. Gozitan female full-time workers now make up 4.3% of the female gainfully occupied whereas they made up 7% in 1993. Since 1990 a higher percent of Gozitan females (as a proportion of the Gozitan unemployed) have been unemployed when compared to Malta-only females, although Malta-only females are also now experiencing increasing difficulty in finding employment. Whilst factors such as (un)willingness or eligibility to register as unemployed and opportunities for marriage may be factors in the

Gozitan case, a contraction in demand for female labour must also be seriously considered as providing an explanation.

Gozitan women and Self Employment

It is also interesting to note that whilst Gozitan females have made a 25% increase in self employment since 1985 (and men a 12% increase), a breakdown of male and female self-employed by sector¹² for 1996 demonstrates how many men are active in service sector occupations. Though the proportion of females in the wholesale and retail trade sub-group is higher than the average for the self-employed as whole, this difference between men and women is indicative of the difficulties women face even in so called 'feminised' sectors. Is it possible that following a steady increase in female self-employment from 1985 to 1995, we are now finding a downward turn as with Gozitan female employment in general?

Part-time Work

The Gozitan case reminds us that employer strategies regarding part-time work are as dependent on the vulnerability of certain sectors of the labour market as much as they are on the vulnerability of different groups of workers. For example, a summer-only tourist economy is more likely to need the flexibility of part-time work, and this is likely to include male workers as well as female. In looking at part-time work it is useful to distinguish between its rate and its incidence (Wickham, 1997). Rate refers to the average proportion of part-time work in the total work-force (or in establishments where part-time work is present). Incidence refers to the extent to which there are establishments in which at least one employee is working part-time. For 1997, I have computed¹³ the rate of part-time work¹⁴ for Malta-only and for Gozo. For Malta-only we find that the rate is 18% (with 82% working full-time) whilst for Gozo the rate is a very high 33% (and 67% work full-time).

This clearly indicates that the type of work available in Gozo is increasingly resembling new methods of labour market employment strategies with contract or atypical work, or so called 'flexible' jobs. Whether this is a result of a 'modern' trend towards new forms of employment or a result of past vulnerabilities, is not possible to determine here with this limited data. Some of these differences in rate in part-time work include, for example, textiles manufacture with a rate of 6% in Malta-only and 33% in Gozo, or wholesale and retail trade with a rate of 9% in Malta-only and 40% in Gozo. Interestingly, Government services have a rate of 4% in Malta-only and 46% in Gozo¹⁵.

1 This paper is a summary of a chapter appearing in the Central Office of Statistics' millennium publication *The Maltese Islands on the Move* (Vella, 2000). I am grateful to the editor, Ms Catherine Vella, for permission to reproduce parts

here. Readers who would wish to look at raw data on which the paper is based are asked to refer to this publication.

- 2 I have taken 1995 as the year of analysis since it would be possible to compare Employment and Training Corporation data for that year with the Census 1995 data.
- 3 Which I have computed from as yet unpublished Census 1995 data (ECO5F). Thanks to the Central Office of Statistics for these data.
- 4 'Same' here is used with the *caveat* that no data from different sources is directly comparable in any simple way. The Census for example is the employee's self-report whereas ETC collect data from employers. Moreover the Census qualifies 'full-time' as '30 hours or more per week' whilst the ETC has a more fluid definition that is often unreliable since different employers use different criteria. Notwithstanding these *caveats* a useful comparison can be made.
- 5 In as yet unpublished data forming part of the Census of Population and Housing, Malta, 1995 (ECO05F)
- 6 Up to 33% of the working age population according to the data in Tables I and II.
- 7 From data kindly provided by the Permanent Secretariat for Gozo. In 1980, there were 364 females in the public service compared to 1808 males. In 1996 there were 802 females and 3198 males.
- 8 With the *caveat* that though this is a fairly likely explanation, without Labour Force data it is impossible to be sure that these are in fact the actual or only causes of this increase.

- 9 As a proportion of Gozitan Female Gainfully Occupied (see Table IV).
- 10 Data for 1996 kindly provided by the Permanent Secretariat for Gozo, in 1997
- 11 Including both Malta-only and Gozo..
- 12 Gozo, November 1996, Permanent Secretariat for Gozo
- 13 Using unpublished ETC data.
- 14 Including both Males and Females in each case.
- 15 I am still working on this data-base kindly provided in a disaggregated form by sector, full-time and part-time, Malta-only and Gozo, and employees of the self-employed or of other employers, by the ETC.

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