



CASE STUDY: GENDER EQUALITY IN MALTA

DR MARK C. MIFSUD proposes potential methods for tackling gender inequality in NGOs in Malta

Introduction

The objective of Agenda 21 is to guarantee a future that is economically, socially and ecologically sustainable. Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, produced at the 1992 United Nations Summit Meeting in Rio de Janeiro, was entitled 'Global Action for Women towards Sustainable and Equitable Development'. It outlined strategies to achieve the full and equal participation of women in order to bring about sustainable development. It is policy and management oriented and contains over one hundred specific recommendations and references to strengthen the role of women in sustainable development. It particularly focuses on the elimination of obstacles to women's equal participation in decision-making activities.

The three key areas of sustainable development: economic growth and equity; conserving natural resources and the environment; and social development and their balance cannot be achieved without solving prevailing problems of gender inequality and inequity. The involvement of woman in making decisions that will affect their own future is of vital importance regarding sustainability (World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002).

Several plans of action and conventions have endorsed the equal and beneficial integration of woman in all development activities, including the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for Woman that emphasises the role of woman in national and international ecosystem management and control of environmental degradation. Other conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination have been adopted to eliminate gender based discrimination and ensure

equal access to resources.

Legislation regarding gender equality and equity in Malta was long overdue, and in 2002 the 'Act to Promote Equality between Men and Women' was drafted. The legislation is limited in scope, appearing to address mostly gender issues in employment or training. Provision should be made for other issues, such as social security, non-occupational healthcare, the participation of men and women in decision-making, and the role of woman in sustainable development.

Establishing a Working Definition of Gender and Gender Equality

Gender refers to socially constructed differences and relations between men and women that vary by situation and context. It does not refer to the biological differences between women and men. Achieving equality does not mean that men and women are the same; it means that one's rights or opportunities do not depend on being female or male. Gender equality requires understanding that every policy, program or project affects men and women differently, and therefore equality can only be achieved through partnerships between men and women.

Legal Framework

The rights of women are an integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Maltese Legislation guarantees the right to equality in the law and equal benefit of the law without discrimination on a number of grounds including gender. Malta has ratified all the major international human rights treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Malta is also committed to the consensus reached at the various UN conferences such as the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, and most recently the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The Maltese welfare state is nowadays seeing a shift from the single breadwinner model in the case of the older population, to the dual breadwinner model

adopted by the vast majority of under-forties. This shift is being made possible by programs of parental leave to encourage mothers to remain in gainful employment. Families typically have two children, though the fertility rate is steadily decreasing. Apart from circumstances directly related to childbirth, married women are now covered by the same labour, tax and social security legislation as men.



Theoretical Framework

In the Maltese islands, there are a large number of local environmental problems including the high population density (more than 1200 persons/square kilometre), untreated sewage disposal, unregulated solid waste disposal, a very high rate of childhood asthma and a high level of lead content in the blood.

Women are influenced by these problems, including the effects of pollution on their health. Environmental problems in Malta need to be tackled, regardless of gender differences. Most policy decision-makers are men however, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) rarely have women in positions to make decisions. Agenda 21 advocates that governments should review policies and establish plans to increase the proportion of woman involved as decision-makers in the implementation of policies and programmes for sustainable development. We need to recognise that gender inequality is not only present in developing countries but is also present in developed countries like the Maltese islands:

“In industrial countries unemployment is higher among woman than men, and women constitute

three fourths of the unpaid family workers...no society treats its women as well as its men” (UNDP, 1997).

Environmental leaders need to understand that there will only be environmental equality when there is human equality (Agyeman, 2000). One method for attaining this is to make the environmental content and process gender sensitive. Environmental education must not only consider the environmental problems but should also be concerned for educating towards a socially and environmentally just world (Dichiro, 1987). Environmental issues which are better seen through a ‘gender sensitive lens’ (Peterson, 1993) such as the use and disposal of sanitary wear, the diversity of food species in fields and gardens (Rea, 1995) and family planning and child health (Graham-Brown, 1991) are sometimes not given due importance by male environmental leaders.

Women play an important role in promoting sustainable development through their concern for the quality and sustainability of life for present and future generations. Environmental education and participation is crucial in achieving this and NGOs are in an ideal position for this task.

Nature Trust: A Short History

Nature Trust Malta (NTM) was officially launched by the President of the Republic on Friday 8 January 1999 following the merger between the Society for the Study and Conservation of Nature, Arbor and Verde. Marine Life Care Group joined along in 2001. The mission statement is as follows:

“Committed to the conservation of Maltese nature by promoting environmental awareness, managing areas of natural and scientific interest, and lobbying for effective environmental legislation.”

NTM has worked over the years lobbying for the legal protection of various plant and animal species in Malta, particularly seeking to protect numerous endemic species from extinction. The organisation is also very active in environmental education.

Nature Trust is one of the largest environmental organisations on the Maltese islands with a membership of over 2500. Membership covers all sectors of profession and employment. There are no obstacles to membership due to sex, race or religious beliefs. The current membership profile is made up of:

- Adults (over 18): 1,500
- Youths (12 to 18 years of age): 600
- Children (under 12): 400

(Source: examination of Nature Trust Organisation records and two structured interviews with Nature Trust President (Attard, V.) and the Nature Trust Education Officer (Bonello, A.))

There is a relative balance between male (57%) and female (43%) members of Nature Trust, however males do constitute a slightly higher membership. The Nature Trust Council consists of eleven members, and is “responsible for the policy-making of the NGO together with the taking of major decisions dealing with the Administration of Nature Trust” (Attard, V., Nature Trust President). Although the ratio of females to males on the council (45% to 55%) does not seem to show any particu-

lar inequality between sexes, this is mainly due to chance rather than the statute, as there is no reference to a stipulated minimum number of females or males on council.

Recommendations

Reviewing the role and function of NTM suggested the following actions:

a. The drafting of a new statute that includes a gender-sensitive perspective

The importance of gender equality should be clearly stated as a basic principle of sustainable development. At the same time, active measures should be taken to ensure gender balances in the Nature Trust organisation especially with regards to senior council member positions.

b. Training of members

Training in gender equality is not sufficient at present. NTM should ensure that council members especially those in management positions attend training on gender-equality. NTM should lobby so that gender studies becomes a required component of teachers’ education. This would assist the promotion of gender-sensitive education considerably.



c. Establishment of a clear policy for promoting gender-equal education

NTM lacks a policy for promoting gender-equal education. The courses organised by the Nature Trust for individual teachers should enable them to lead in the development of a gender-sensitive education system, and the commitment of schools as a whole to gender-equal education. Another useful tool would be the production of gender-equal textbooks, written from the standpoint of the gender equality.

e. Women's participation in decision-making processes

A good percentage of woman participate in the decision-making process of the society, however they should be much more aware of gender equality issues. Half the members of all boards of NTM should be women who are aware of such issues and a sufficient number of both men and women should follow a continuous training programme with regards to human rights and gender equality. Nature Trust should be a place for developing sensitivity to environmental responsibility and gender equality.

f. New role models for youth female members

Male and female NTM leaders who are role models to young members are not equal in numbers or status, especially regarding media appearances. The NGO should strive to divide airtime equally between the sexes to promote appropriate role models for gender equality among women and men.

“Achieving equality does not mean that men and women are the same; it means that one's rights or opportunities do not depend on being female or male”

Conclusion

The Nature Trust has a number of strengths in the area of gender equality, in particular that its membership is nearly equally divided between the genders, females are represented in senior positions of

the Trust, and participation in training courses is high from both males and females.

There are however a number of weaknesses that prevail. There are currently no gender-related policies, which can lead easily to inequalities as there are no reference criteria or evaluation guidelines. The implementation of a new statute, including a gender-sensitive perspective, is proposed as a means of rectifying this. Such a statute should establish a clear policy for promoting gender-equal education. Training for council members regarding gender issues may be of benefit, enabling them to review the work of the NTM, such as publications intended for schoolchildren, from a gender perspective. It is predominantly men who get media appearances, which may result in a false impression that environmental leaders are mostly male. Increasing the exposure of female environmental leaders would correct this imbalance. There is still much to achieve in the area of gender inequality but a start has been made in the right direction.

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