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## The work-life balance

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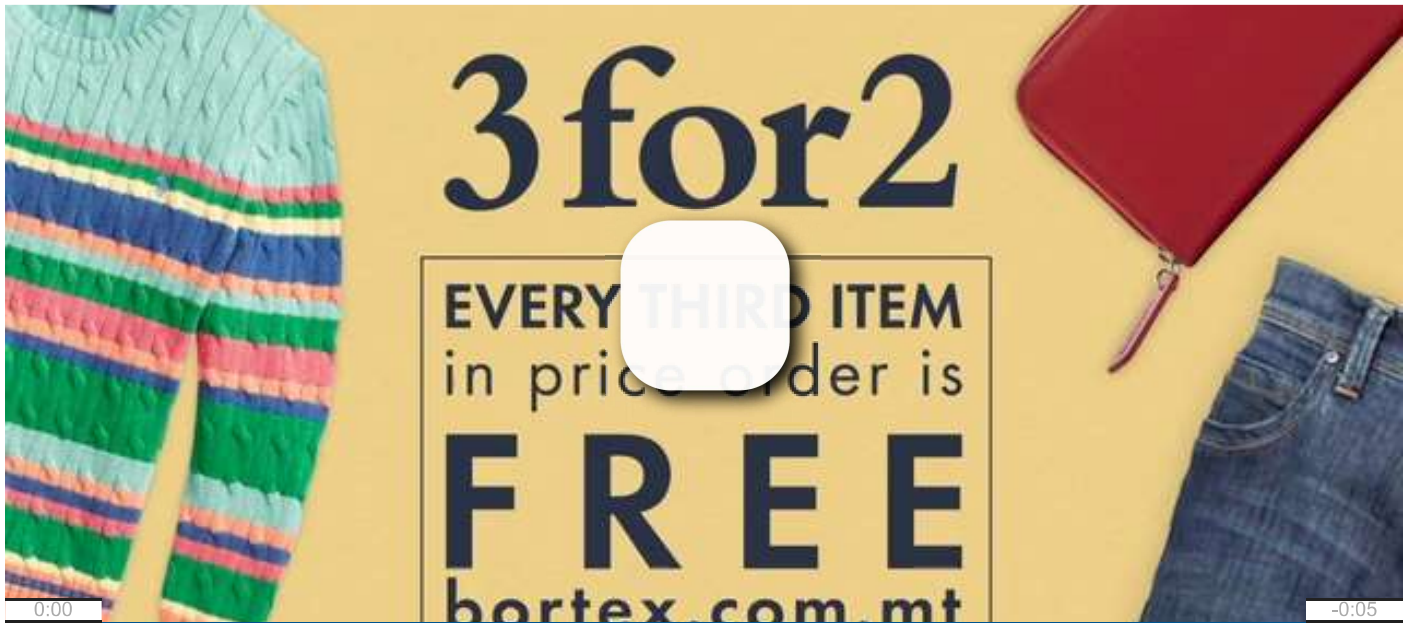
Over the past days various indicators of employment in Malta shed light on everyday realities faced by workers and employers.

On the one hand, it was confirmed that Malta's unemployment rate is relatively low, despite being slightly higher than before Covid-19 emerged. On the other hand, various businesses are expressing their anxiety regarding what lies ahead, should the global situation not improve.

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Government's wage supplement and other incentives are providing an economic lifeline for many, whilst at the same time some are campaigning for an increase in the minimum wage. What happens next is anyone's guess, but policymaking plays a key role in equipping the country to meet the challenges ahead.

In the meantime, government and academics recently discussed policy development related to the work-life balance. The need for reforms in this area is also being highlighted by trade unions and other voices from civil society.

There is much to say about the work-life balance, with various sociologists pointing out that gender inequality is a key factor which influences everyday life situations faced by workers. In this regard, some argue that when we speak about the increase of women in the world of employment, we should similarly highlight the need for a corresponding increase of men in the world of housework. Otherwise, women may be experiencing a double-shift, thus perpetuating gender inequality within the current context.

When discussing this issue, we should also keep in mind that a plurality of family forms exist in society. Besides the nuclear family which is made up of two parents of the opposite sex, one finds partners in cohabitation, reconstituted families, same-sex couples, single-parent families, and singleton households, among others. Not to mention that families with a similar structure may have different aspirations and may experience different situations. For example, one nuclear family may have a traditionalistic set-up of male breadwinner and female housewife, whilst another one may be characterised by a dual-earner couple. In the case of the latter, this could be the result of either more liberal values or of the family's financial needs.

One also should factor in the plural forms of parenting, including custody arrangements involving separated, divorced, reconstituted and/or single parents or family forms.

open In various instances, a parent may end up working shorter hours due to family responsibilities

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economy is, in my opinion, underestimated - to the engagement of cleaners, carers and others, at a cost. Of course, not everyone can afford such services!

In this regard, it is very positive that Malta's employment, social policy and educational structures include family-friendly measures and free facilities such as breakfast club, klabb 3-16 and childcare services provided that the parent/s are in employment. I believe that children whose parents are not in employment should also benefit from such services, though this merits another article. Policy-makers should also take account and remedy situations of parents who work within small and medium enterprises which cannot afford certain family-friendly measures.

From a policy perspective, one should also look into the various possibilities which exist for a healthy work-life balance. Some may be related to choices, values or aspirations within the family; others may be related to situations over which the family would have little control. Respective policies may help facilitate or complicate matters for family members.

The current Covid-19 context has shown that various workers can fulfil a lot of their duties from home. Telework has become widely used in various sectors, and is helping improve the quality of life of many workers. At the same time, working from home has challenges ranging from the right to disconnect, to the attitude of the employer or director towards such practices.

Some families try to achieve a work-life balance by working non-standard hours, such as shifts. Again, this depends on the job in question, and very often is dictated by employment demands rather than workers' choices. Let us keep in mind that whereas a good number of workers, especially in the public sector, are unionised, many others - both Maltese and foreign - have no collective voice fighting for their rights. The wave of food couriers is only one example in a long and varied list of jobs which raise questions on workers' rights.

The work-life balance can also be enhanced through more social investment in the community. If people have stronger social networks this could result in more trust, reciprocity and voluntary assistance to each other. On the other hand, in a society which has become more diversified, families which are not integrated within community settings may be excluded from such opportunities. Again, evidence-based policy making has an important role to play to fill in such gaps.

The upgrading of Malta's legislation in this area should involve representatives from various areas. Apart from politics, academia, and social partners, civil society in the broad sense of the term could also offer various insights, particularly when one considers the 'invisible' work on the ground carried out by various experts and volunteers within the plurality of realities in Malta.

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