

[Home](#) > [Debate](#) > [Blogs & Opinions](#) > Are we reconciling employment with family life?

Are we reconciling employment with family life?

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open [we say that people in Malta are reconciling work with family life? A recent publication by the](#)

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interpretation of some key figures in the study. 'Work' is a very broad term: Usually employment is referred to in official statistics such as those of the NSO, but we must keep in mind that much work in society is not accounted for in figures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), despite such work being invaluable to society. Housework and voluntary work are two such examples

From a statistical perspective, some of the key findings of the NSO study are that women in Malta are reporting greater use in teleworking arrangements, and assuming a slightly greater load with respect to childcare. It also transpires that more women are adapting their employment patterns to responsibilities in terms of care.

The NSO study states that more than a quarter of persons between the age of 18 and 64 take care of children under 15 years of age (26.4%), 3.5% take care of ill, elderly or disabled relatives, and 2.1% are involved in multi-generational care responsibilities. The remaining 68% do not declare any care responsibilities.

Here one should keep in mind that among the 68% there are a good number of people who do not have direct caring responsibilities but whose employment and/or voluntary work involves caring and/or educational responsibilities. Some people have both direct and indirect responsibilities, such as in the case of parents and teachers.

With regard to females' slightly greater load with respect to childcare (41,701), when compared to males (40,452), it is pertinent to note that females with care responsibilities spent on average 34.3 hours per week in employment while males spent 42.2 hours. At the same time, almost one in five females reduced their employment time whereas 12.7% of males resorted to ways in which they could increase their income.

These figures need to be interpreted and analysed further to give a clearer picture of the situation. For example, what exactly does one mean by childcare responsibilities? How does this translate to the employment-family life balance in terms of gender and other variables? Some sociologists refer to the 'double shift', which is often more common among women in the balancing of work in the home with employment responsibilities, meaning that in total they may actually be working longer hours than males.

Indeed, 'invisible work' and 'emotional work' within the family, ranging from cooking to playing with kids, is often stratified according to gender, where women may be carrying more responsibilities. But one should avoid simple generalisations, for men's roles may vary from that of main breadwinner with traditionalistic gender-segregated values to that of involved father. Then again, there are different family forms experiencing different situations and having different cultural perceptions and aspirations.

The NSO data also shows that 1 in every 4 persons with childcare responsibilities uses childcare services. The majority of persons with childcare responsibilities arranged care alone or with their partner (60.2%) while for 12.7% children themselves and other children. Around 12% of persons

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parents with younger kids may be more likely to make use of childcare services, but parents with particular employment working hours and situations may resort to the pre- and after-school hour services offered for kids aged between 3 and 16.

At the same time, attention needs to be made as to whether parents resort to childcare services because they have no other alternative or because they trust and value the services offered. As regards the latter variable, parents who prefer leaving kids with significant others, most likely grandparents, may make use of the latter's support, provided that this is possible: In this case, we would once again be witnessing another example of invisible and emotional work which is not factored in data such as the GDP.

Other parents may resort to a mix of options. Then again, parents with a low degree of social networks (for example certain migrants) may have less options at their disposal due to a lack of community integration and/or social exclusion. In an increasingly diversified society, it is important to research such realities to help provide evidence-based policy making.

The NSO data also showed that most persons with care responsibilities were employed (78.2 %), 20.4% were 'inactive' and a further 1.4% were unemployed. Malta's erstwhile positive policy measures with regards to childcare, after school hours and so forth show their worth here, but one needs to question whether Malta needs to invest in more policies designed to cater for the needs of those who are not in employment. Sure, active policy measures such as the tapering of benefits are commendable, as they encourage people to enter employment through a gradual process rather than to remain welfare-dependent. But still, there are people who cannot be employed for a myriad of reasons. Why should their children be excluded from free childcare, given that it has potential educational and social benefits?

Going back to employment arrangements, one-third of employees with care responsibilities reported flexible working arrangements, but at the same time a larger share of females (56.2%) had the possibility to vary the start and end of their working day when compared to males (40.6%). More females also reported flexibility in organising their working time to take whole days off (41.1% females as opposed to 31.2% males), and teleworking arrangements were used by more females (17.4%) than males (11.4%).

This data takes us back to the concepts of the double shift, invisible work and emotional work. It seems quite clear that women in many families are expected to carry out more caring responsibilities than men. But again, one has to look at the interaction of societal factors with one's own aspirations and personal choices.

A deeper form of analysis would also take account of factors such as social class and employment conditions. For example, some jobs (often in the public sector) are more likely to enable such conditions, whilst some parents cannot afford to benefit from such measures due to economic constraints.

open regards to the latter. the NSO data states that long working hours (21.8%) was the most

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by class, age, gender and other factors.

There is much more to say on the NSO data, but I would like to conclude with an observation on a recurring political discourse. Politicians should go deeper than just celebrating the increase of female employment. They should also address the corresponding (or lack of) shift of males who are involved in caring responsibilities. And they should also keep in mind the myriad of family forms and arrangements, situations and cultural values involving different and often intersecting factors such as gender, social class, age cohort, employment conditions, citizenship status, financial (in)security, access to social welfare, psychological factors, geographical backgrounds and so forth.

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