

## **Our own affairs: female sexuality, contraception and childbirth experiences**

Here again, women are present as main protagonists of this project which has been one of the first to be launched by the Oral History Centre, through the teamwork of female undergraduate and post-graduate students and independent researchers with their elderly relatives, friends and neighbours. This familial female intimacy was one of the few ways available which enabled us to penetrate the world of elderly women and get them talking on what to them were 'intimate' and 'delicate' affairs, which are still considered taboo and never to be discussed with strangers, and especially males. The ensuing recordings of these women's voices provide a pool of experiences and recollections on what they frequently refer to as "our [female] affairs" on sexuality and fertility throughout their life cycle, related issues of contraception, care of the body, beliefs and practices, as well as on their childbirth experiences and their relationship with the midwives and the male doctors. Most of these female narratives are punctuated by the fear generated by the all-powerful Catholic Church – as personified by the parish priest – which strongly and loudly prohibited contraception and family planning as grave sins, but also by their practical indifference, if not outright 'disobedience', of these Church dictates. Natural and other forms of contraception; childbirth and post-natal complications; the fear of and actual experiences of infant death; breastfeeding and the use of the bottle and 'artificial' milk; hygiene and care. These are all topics dealt with by these women, from the rural and urban working classes –visibly playing a very important part in the makeup of their female identities.



**Maria \*:** 'Certainly I had the feeling of going to confess ... we couldn't receive holy communion if we did not obey [the priest]. We had done something bad. In fact when you gave birth till forty days later, you couldn't do anything with your husband ... We brought up very well behaved children even though we lived in poverty ... yet, when we already had seven or eight children, I remember, I told my husband that we should do intercourse during the safe period as we will not be doing anything sinful this way. He said "I think that if we do that [have intercourse] during the safe period you will be telling God that you will give Him only as many children as you want and not as many as HE wants !". What a husband I had! So see ... My husband was a 'cardinal' !. First of all, he was a just person ... I passed sixty years with him and can't find anything bad to say about him. He had only those common defects as all of us ... those related to married life. He never went against the laws of marriage, always showed me lots of respect during these sixty years together ... a signal that he was a good man ... an exemplary man. He went to hear mass, had holy communion, confessed and said rosary each and every day. His only real defect was that he was nervous – when he started shouting and using bad words ...though not swearing... but shouting yes, especially with the children. In fact all our children became very nervous except Paul who is a member of MUSEUM...all the others are nervous.

[about sexual intercourse] when we got married. That same night of our marriage my husband told me all 'the story' [everything about intercourse] In three years and a half before getting married we did not speak of sex let alone doing intercourse ! what a husband I had, what a serious person he was ... I cannot stop praising him !

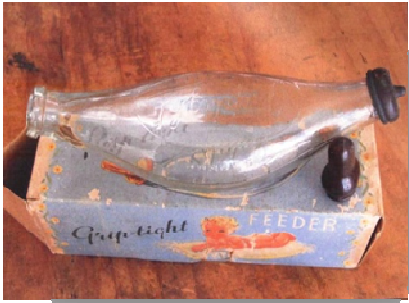
He was an example, he was an example - This man was a bandsman in the [village philharmonic] band and played music during carnival, playing music in..in..in all parties, and thus he mingled with all types of persons. He worked as a postman and thus came to meet women whilst knocking on their door, but he was a very honest and loyal man, on the move and energetic.'

**Antoinetta \*:** 'I didn't know what it means to give birth. I was already mature because I was thirty years old...but I am saying how ignorant I was ! One day, what happened was that I noticed that I was already giving birth through increasing pains. It all started at seven in the morning as I felt an abnormal pain. Naturally I spoke to my husband and he ran to the midwife. She came to visit me and told me that I would soon give birth. But I got a very rough 'passage'. I felt the first real pain at half past seven in the morning and the baby was not born before eight in the evening. The midwife sent for the doctor late and he took time to arrive. I told them that I was in great pain and was feeling from where the baby was trying to get out ... and that it was coming ... but did not really know what was happening. The assistance I had came at first from my sister-in-law. She helped me but I suffered a lot. When the doctor got here he told me that the time had arrived, but that I needed to be given 'drip'. I had trouble with my blood pressure. We sent for Dr Karistu Mizzi. From seventy-six it went down to fourteen and I needed to be assisted with 'drip'. God wanted me to keep alive. I had taken a lot of time...twelve hours but I was at home. I gave birth to all my children at home.

The doctor told me that I had managed this childbirth because I was strong. I used to eat a lot. I had a good appetite and did not vomit anything. I ate fruit and fish especially. If I wasn't strong I wouldn't have managed to overcome all that pain, thank God. I remember that I got five stitches on my outside. Then I had others when I had my next baby. The doctor told me not to worry as George [the first baby] had widened me enough. I went to *Frenč tal-Għarb* again asked him "Frenč, I am going to have the same pain as I had got in the other one ?" He replied "No, no ... but when the time comes for the baby to be born, the

doctor will not come in time". I sent for the doctor when I felt the first pains, it was five minutes past one in the morning and the doctor was at Marsalforn because it was at the end of September ... and when the baby was already born he had not arrived yet. This means...exactly as Frenč had envisioned. Frenč is still in our minds.

In my third pregnancy, Joy was born after an overdue of eighteen days and she suffered from white asphyxia. She didn't cry when born. I was terrified because I gave birth at home and when I was faced with the baby which could not cry ... There was my husband by me and the midwife. She told me "bring me the brandy" and she was in a hurry. My husband passed her the whisky and threw it on ... and started to scream. I christened her too, I remember: later on of course I took her to St George's church where she was baptized with the other children ... but her first christening was done by myself at home.'



**Helen Formosa:** 'We were thirteen siblings but all of the others died... I am the only one to survive. The reason was that when you couldn't breastfeed your babies the midwife used to tell you to change to another milk which could result in diarrhea - with the baby vomiting even up to four days. Poor little ones, when they reached four months or six months they would die. When I was born, the midwife told my mother: "start on artificial milk from the beginning". I remember hearing that at that time the milk brand was *Glaxo*...she kept me on it. So, no breastfeeding for me.'

Babies came when God sent them. We were like that in the old times. In those days you went to confess everything to the priest. The first thing the priest asked you, "is everything right with the husband?". If you avoided to have children, he would not absolve you...you were in sin. Amazing eh ! I was one of those many scrupulous women, so ...

The priests used to preach... 'God forbid that you will not do what He Wants, He will not forgive you if you go against his Will. So I would tell myself: My God what will I be if I restrain myself from having children. I used to be afraid from my own shadow ! I told my daughter that I am not happy that am going to talk of this on tape.'



**Doris Farrugia:**

'I had given birth at home. So I had to prepare a lot of things before hand: a jug, all the water basin set, towels and soap, a covered bucket, everything white and nice. A white clean towel...Then when I felt that the time had come I called the midwife ... in those days we use to call her *majjistra*. I was lucky because she lived nearby and I could call her from the balcony as she was so near ! Her name was Beninja ... knocked on her door. She said "do you need something" and I told her to come ... I always left it to the last minute ! I don't know why but I had always left it to the last minute, so that I won't have a lot of persons around for a long time. The husband was enough.'

\*surnames of these two interviewees have been withheld in compliance with the protection policy of the PMC.