

Chapter 4

The Equality Mark for Employers, Malta

4.1 Context

The total population of Malta is 413,965 (July 2015) with a ratio of 0.99 male/female (CIA 2015). Women's economic participation in Malta has been the focus of several initiatives by the government in recent years. In 2013, the gap between male and female employment rates in Malta was around 32 per cent, the highest in the European Union (EU). Estimates place the female employment rate at 46.8 per cent, with even lower rates for women aged 55–64 (approximately 30 per cent) (EC 2015; Times of Malta 2013). In addition to women's low rate of employment there is significant labour market gender segregation, with a high percentage of women employed in low wage sectors (NCPE 2014a). Maltese women are also more likely to interrupt their careers for childbearing, which generally leads them to drop out of the workforce. The situation has left Malta lagging behind when it comes to women pursuing lifelong careers (Mizzi 2013). The government views women's workforce participation as an important pillar of economic growth and sustainability and is therefore creating an environment to increase it.

This case study focuses on one government initiative, the 'Equality Mark' certification, which recognises employers who model good internal practice in gender equality. The initiative seeks to challenge discriminatory attitudes and practices that are barriers to gender equality in the workplace and to promote a more gender-balanced workforce.

4.2 Key institutional actors

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) monitors the implementation of the Equality for Men and Women Act (2003) in order to safeguard and promote gender equality in employment, training and vocational guidance in Malta. NCPE carries out various initiatives to raise awareness and disseminate information on rights and responsibilities related to equal treatment; monitors the implementation of national policies with respect to safeguarding and promoting gender equality through gender mainstreaming; and assists persons who are discriminated against in this regard. NCPE has spearheaded several projects to improve women's labour force participation and economic position, including the Equality Mark initiative.

4.3 Theory of change

The Equality Mark initiative is based on the following theory of change put forward by the NCPE: through the implementation of gender equality policies and measures, employers benefit from the retention of trained and experienced staff, reduction in staff recruitment costs and increased access to the full talent pool in the labour

market. Employers also have the potential to increase profitability by ensuring that the different skills and experiences of a diverse workforce are translated into enhanced products and services, and attract investors and business opportunities that increasingly take gender diversity into consideration. At the same time, ‘employees... benefit from a workplace free of harassment, family-friendly measures such as telework, flexible hours and reduced hours, equal opportunities for training and promotions, translating these into a work–life balance. Thus gender equality policies at the place of work can benefit both employers as well as employees’ (Malta Today 2015). Through the Equality Mark initiative, employers become more aware of the barriers to women’s economic participation and ensure that gender equality policies and measures are in place to attract and retain women.

4.4 Social institutions and discriminatory norms

Recent research exploring factors that contribute to women’s low employment rates have highlighted the influence of key social institutions and discriminatory norms. According to NCPE research, ‘Attitudes and perceptions towards gendered roles and expectations on what a woman is expected to do are changing very slowly’ (NCPE 2012). There is an awareness of ‘the barriers engrained in the cultural context of females as main homemakers and carers’ and the need to ‘mitigate these through institutional changes’. This requires, for example, rethinking the ‘gendered welfare systems’ and ‘strong culturally constructed ideologies’ that serve as constraints to women’s full economic participation, in addition to creating positive, supportive working environments (Azzopardi and Bezzina 2014). Factors that inhibit women from actively pursuing paid employment include low wages, family responsibilities and a dependency on social security contributions/benefits that reinforce gender stereotypes (Azzopardi and Bezzina 2014).

Formal laws, policies and accountability: The laws and policies in Malta, including social welfare programmes, have traditionally reinforced gender social norms that delineate a clear division between the public and private spheres, and very specific gender roles for women and men. Legislation such as the Equality for Men and Women Act (2003) and other formal laws to promote gender equality have created a legal framework for gender equality in the workplace, but it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure full implementation. For example, formal measures to foster the right working environment as a means of overcoming gender imbalances in labour force participation – more supportive and flexible work structures available for working mothers, equal opportunities for women in the workplace, and employment and training opportunities (particularly for women over 40 with limited skills and work experience) (Azzopardi and Bezzina 2014). Several steps have been taken to formalise policies that level the playing field for women, particularly in relation to the availability of childcare, including subsidised childcare places.¹

Access to resources and opportunities: Research on women’s economic participation, including NCPE-led studies, has created a stronger evidence base on the kinds of resources and opportunities that will support gender equality in employment. As noted in an NCPE study, ‘Assumptions and false impressions regarding women’s

abilities, commitment and career intentions limits women's potential at work. The societal and organisational culture that fosters the "old boys' network" and keeps men in positions of power is a strong indicator of the Glass Ceiling.² The research also makes clear the link between low female participation rates in the labour market and the availability of affordable, quality childcare facilities. Strategic investments are now being made to strengthen existing childcare facilities, and the setting up of new ones is considered an important mechanism to support the government's policy on work-family life balance and female participation in the workforce.³

Informal norms and exclusionary practices: Social norms related to clearly delineated gender roles for women and men need to be overcome for gender equality in the workplace to be achieved. In addition to their work in the home, women, particularly above the age of 40, are 'providing social welfare services for others that are free of charge' – caring for children, older people and the disabled – and are likely to be more involved in voluntary work (NCPE cited in Azzopardi and Bezzina 2014). One interesting manifestation of the lack of public or private childcare services in Malta is the role that grandparents play in childcare provision, which affects workforce participation by women aged over 40. According to NCPE research (2012) 'Women predominate in certain occupations... that attract the lower levels of skill, pay and responsibility which then gives rise to the pay gap phenomenon. This also reflects the value given by society to women's skills and work and operate as subtle barriers limiting women's career development [sic]'

Women's and men's consciousness: Research supported by NCPE (2012) exploring women's experiences in paid employment highlights the complex interaction between women's attitudes about work and discriminatory attitudes and practices within workplaces. Interestingly, this research highlighted that significant numbers of women reported being subject to discriminatory (and indeed illegal) lines of questioning in job interviews (e.g. about their plans and commitments related to their personal lives and whether they had children or planned to have children). The research also pointed to employers reinforcing stereotypes about the kinds of jobs appropriate for women and men, and perceptions of women's ability to play leadership roles in the workplace. In relation to the low level of women's economic activity, the NCPE study cited the main reasons women give for inactivity in the labour market: caring for children; family as their main priority; not motivated to work; and too old to look for a job. The study also suggests that major barriers to paid employment include women's fear of losing social security benefits, enjoyment from staying at home and losing their current freedom and flexibility (Azzopardi and Bezzina 2014).

There is still significant work to be done to shift attitudes, including women's attitudes about paid employment as a fulfilling career option. Attitude change can be supported by alterations in the workplace environment to make it more inviting for women. The availability of high quality childcare services will also help to shift women's attitudes about working outside the home. Similarly, work to shift attitudes about sharing family responsibilities is crucial. As noted in the NCPE report, 'Policies targeted towards the involvement of fathers in taking on their fair share of parenthood would not only give more time to women to focus more on their career paths but would also reap benefits for the well-being of the family'. To this end, the government has launched

an awareness campaign, '*Nistá* – Sharing Work-Life Responsibilities', which is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of its National Reform Programme (Malta Independent 2013).

4.5 Strategies

NCPE awards the Equality Mark certification to employers following an assessment of their organisational equality policies and the measures in place to ensure implementation. The initiative was initially launched in July 2010 as part of an EU co-funded project, 'Unlocking Female Potential'. Following its successful uptake by companies NCPE continued working on this initiative even after the termination of the project in December 2012 (COE 2014).

Areas assessed as part of the certification process include:

- Policies and initiatives on equality and sexual harassment.
- Equal opportunities in recruitment and employment, including equal pay for work of equal value to employees irrespective of their gender.
- Equality in career advancement and personal development.
- Availability of family-friendly measures for men and women with caring responsibilities.
- Employee equality representatives.
- Gender equality in access to and supply of goods and services.

Companies and entities enter into the process voluntarily. The process of applying for the Equality Mark begins with a formal application to NCPE. When applicant organisations complete and submit all necessary documentation, an audit is held at the applicant's premises to ascertain whether the employer is really committed to gender equality. An NCPE audit check involves, for example, recruitment files, templates of interview questions and score sheets, procedures for the circulation of internal communication, vacancy adverts, training records and contracts or pay slips (NCPE 2014a). Throughout the process NCPE develops a file on the organisation. The file is presented to the Equality Mark committee, whose members make the decision on whether to award certification. For unsuccessful organisations, feedback is provided on what actions are still needed to meet the certification criteria.

The Equality Mark Certification is valid for a period of two years, following which companies can be recertified. The recertification process includes a training session delivered by NCPE to a number of employees, and both employers and employees are required to complete tailored questionnaires. This enables NCPE to ensure that the equality policies and measures are adhered to, and that there is an ongoing commitment to retain these good practices in the years to come (Malta Today 2015).

Certified organisations are able to use the Equality Mark logo on all outgoing correspondence, including recruitment advertising and press releases, which helps distinguish certified 'equal opportunity' employers. Through publicising the initiative

in this way, employers raise public awareness of the value placed on gender equality in the workplace. NCPE also undertakes further training and awareness raising with employers and employees on matters related to workplace gender equality, including gender equality in relation to pay. NCPE raises broader public awareness of the initiative and the value of gender equality in the workplace through its website, social media and other means of communication, such as promotional material. NCPE reports that more organisations are expressing their interest in this initiative and are applying for Equality Mark certification.

4.6 Outcomes to date

The Equality Mark initiative entered its sixth year in 2015. According to NCPE, by the end of 2014 there was a total of 60 certified companies and government departments or entities, with more than 15,800 employees working in places of employment with equality certifications. NCPE sees this as evidence that ‘employers are recognising equality certification is an important management tool’ (Malta Today 2015).

Several positive outcomes of the process have been reported by NCPE. For example, certification has introduced new standards of equality at the workplace and helped employers formalise their gender policies or align their policies to further safeguard gender equality. Employers have been encouraged to make necessary adjustments to their practices and develop new policies that promote equality. In particular, the Equality Mark process allows employers to formalise their practices through the development of official policies and to introduce new policies, for instance on sexual harassment at the workplace (Malta Today 2015). In addition, employers and employees have a fuller understanding of their rights and responsibilities related to gender equality in employment. Throughout the application process, employers and employees are made aware of issues related to equal treatment, including equality in recruitment, family-friendly measures and sexual harassment.

Overall the Equality Mark certification acknowledges companies with good gender equality policies and builds public awareness that these companies endorse a culture that promotes equality of treatment. However, it is too soon to assess the impact of the Equality Mark certification and other measures of the Government of Malta on improving gender imbalances in overall labour market participation.

4.7 Lessons learned and the way forward

NCPE carried out an evaluation of the Equality Mark initiative to analyse its impact and make recommendations to enhance its potential. As a result, important lessons from this initiative were highlighted that may be of relevance to other Commonwealth governments considering similar initiatives (NCPE 2014b).

The promotion of gender equality at the workplace can happen in ways that make economic sense and are appealing to employers: The provision of targeted assistance tailored to the needs of each company provides employers with important business intelligence and strategies to improve their performance. Through the Equality Mark, employers were further sensitised on the benefits of endorsing a culture that fosters

gender equality. In particular, employers worked to enhance gender equality and were thus better able to access the full talent pool of employees and to increase staff retention through further awareness of family-friendly measures and other flexible working arrangements.

Public initiatives such as the Equality Mark have positive knock-on effects: Recognising and ‘certifying’ the efforts of employers in the sphere of gender equality may encourage other employers to reach similar goals. Additionally, employers with certification also become ‘employers of choice’ whereby they are able to attract and retain highly qualified workers. Through the Equality Mark logo and other promotional material, including advertisements and articles in the media, NCPE raised further awareness with the general public and other stakeholders.

The ability to reach a wider pool of employers to promote gender equality in the workplace: Certification enabled NCPE to reach and keep in contact with a broader group of employers and employees, and to sensitise them on rights and responsibilities related to gender equality in the workplace. This also raised awareness on the roles and responsibilities of NCPE. Additionally, through the recertification of the Equality Mark (after two years of certification), NCPE provides further training to these companies, and ensures that changes and updates within work policies and practices continue to foster gender equality.

Notes

- 1 These measures are delineated in the *Budget Document 2014*, Ministry for Finance, 2013, available at: http://mfinc.gov.mt/en/The-Budget/Documents/The_Budget_2014/Budget2014_Document.pdf (accessed 15 June 2015).
- 2 This 2012 study was carried out as part of comprehensive research on the participation of women in the labour market as part of the EU co-funded project, *Unlocking Female Potential*, ESF 3.47. The research report is available on NCPE’s website at: http://msdc.gov.mt/en/NCPE/Pages/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/Unlocking_the_Female_Potential.aspx.
- 3 This also contributes towards reaching the EU’s 2020 targets of providing child placements for at least 33 per cent of children aged between 0–3 years in Malta. (Malta Independent 2013)

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