



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**Women in political  
decision-making**  
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Comments Paper – Malta



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# Women in Political Decision-Making in Malta

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Malta Background and Policy Context

Malta has in recent years experienced some progress related to women's participation in public life. In education, girls continue to do better than boys at school and eventually graduate in larger numbers from University. When it comes to employment, Malta has registered a consistent increase in its rate of female participation from 44 % in 2012 to 53.5 % in 2015 (NSO 2016). Malta has reached gender parity in the Judiciary with the number of women increasing from 35 % to 45 % (DG for Justice and Consumers 2016). Political representation at EU Parliament has leaped from 0 % in 2004 to 67 % in 2014.

Meanwhile, the rates in other areas remain stagnant. No improvements were registered in the gender representation in entrepreneurship, and in economic and political decision-making. Moreover the labour market and the educational institutions in Malta remain heavily gender segregated (NCPE Annual Report 2015). The underrepresentation of women on Maltese company boards is abysmal with only 4 % female CEO's, 14 % female executives and 3 % non-executive board members (NCPE Annual Report 2015).

### 1.2. Political Representation – A pervasive Glass Ceiling

The fundamental principal of equality is enshrined not only in the Constitution of Malta (1964) but in all its legislations and regulations. Malta has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1991 that ensures women's access to, and equal opportunities in political and public life. Moreover, the Constitution of Malta (1964)<sup>1</sup> also mentions special measures to redress inequalities between women and men.

Female representation in political decision-making in Malta has always faced major difficulties in terms of gender equality. In Maltese Parliament this ranked the lowest amongst the 27 EU Members States in 2013 (Schiavone 2013). Malta also ranks low among the 57 OSCE participating states as the 8<sup>th</sup> lowest representation of women in Parliament (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2015). Looking at the General Elections, presently out of 70 representatives forming part of the Maltese Parliament, which includes the Speaker, only 9 of them are female (just 13 %). There is 1 female Minister out of 16 (excluding the Prime Minister) and 2 female Parliamentary secretaries out of 6.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 14 of the Constitution of Malta affirms that the 'State shall promote the equal right of men and women to enjoy all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and for this purpose shall take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination between the sexes by any person, organisation or enterprise'. <http://www.constitution.org/cons/malta/chapt0.pdf>

Maltese women seem to fare better at local council elections than at the General Elections. During the last elections for local councils in 2015, 20.1 % of the contestants and 19.2 % of the elected councillors were women. However from 68 mayors only 12 are female which marks an increase from 8 female elected mayors in 2013 and 9 female elected mayors in 2014 (NCPE Annual Report 2015).

On a positive note, 4 out of the 6 members of the European Parliament are women following EP elections of 2014 bringing it to one of the highest female representation at EU level with 67 %. When Malta joined the EU in 2004 there was an all male representation at each election until 2013 when 3 male MEP's resigned to be candidates for national elections thus giving the chance to others to get re-elected, with the result of getting 3 female MEP's to replace them through by-elections (Cutajar 2014). The situation of women in the public sphere as pictured so far indicate that, although Malta is registering progress in some areas, a pervasive glass ceiling is proving very difficult to shatter (Spiteri 2007, Carabott 2016).

## 2. Policy Debate

### 2.1. Some Factors and Consequences

Research has identified some factors specific to Malta as an island state<sup>2</sup> that might have influenced the lack of gender-balanced representation in political decision-making. Lane (1995) contends that, on average, Maltese women have the same chances as men to be elected once nominated, and that more men get elected because there are more male candidates contesting the general elections than female candidates (Cutajar 2014). An increase in women candidates will create a better critical mass and should lead to an increase in more women being elected.

Since there are always more male than female incumbents (Lane 1995, Schiavone 2013), males have more chance to get re-elected due to their power of incumbency. In fact, most new female contestants get elected through by-elections since it is more difficult for women to win the General Elections when they are new entrants in the political field (Cutajar 2011). Moreover, candidates within the same party have to compete with each other. Cutajar (2011) describes how women candidates experience 'macho bullying' taking place at district level from their male counterparts and it is usually not an environment that women feel that they would want to be involved in. In this way men can elbow their way in much easier.

Political parties have a strong role as gatekeepers for their candidates. When they actively promote their female candidates these have a better chance of getting elected (Sansone 2014). This was experienced in the last EP elections of 2014. However, Sammut claims that the pressure to push for gender equality and support given to the women candidates by women's organisations played an important role in their successful outcome (Sansone 2014). On the other hand, when political parties do not commit time, finances and efforts in promoting female candidates, this influences negatively on the female representation in politics.

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<sup>2</sup> The Maltese islands have a territory of 316 square kilometers and is the smallest EU member state with 400,000 inhabitants in one of the highly densely populated states, where every vote counts in the Maltese political system.

Cutajar (2011) argues that even if political parties want to have more women candidates, they find it very difficult to identify women to contest the national elections due to family and caring responsibilities falling mainly on the women's shoulders. Indeed parliamentary meetings involve late night meetings and parliamentary structures are not at all family-friendly. There are no childcare facilities in the new Maltese purpose-built Parliament inaugurated last year.

The Maltese political scene is highly polarised between the two main political parties. The Single Transferable Vote (STV)<sup>3</sup> is the electoral system used in Malta where the candidates are usually running under the flag of a party and where voters give their votes according to their preferences. Some contend that this system may help women get elected (Lane 1995, Schiavone 2013) but others argue that it might work against them (Bonello 2013). Therefore an alternative voting system might work better for getting women elected. However it was interesting to observe that during the last MEP elections of 2014, the majority of voters who had voted for women candidates had continued to vote for other women candidates on the ballot sheet. Through the STV system the votes of the eliminated or elected women candidates were transferred to the other women candidates but similar to the General Elections few had voted cross-party (Vella 2014).

	Arlette Baldacchino (IE)	Fleur Vella (PL)	Helga Ellul (PN)	Deborah Schembri (PL)	Miriam Dalli (PL) (E)
	Count 5	Count 6	Count 14	Count 19	Count 24
Miriam Dalli	9	58	43	2394	-
Marlene Mizzi	2	53	29	2981	701
Deborah Schembri	4	280	22	-	-
Fleur Vella	1	-	-	-	-
Therese Commodini Cachia	3	3	466	26	1
Helga Ellul	3	1	-	-	-
Roberta Metsola	3	2	1508	E	E
<i>TOTAL women transfers</i>	25	397	2068	5401	702
<b>TOTAL TRANSFERRED</b>	<b>493</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>3067</b>	<b>8314</b>	<b>1554</b>
<b>% women transfers</b>	<b>5.07%</b>	<b>66.17%</b>	<b>67.43%</b>	<b>64.96%</b>	<b>45.17%</b>
Non-transferables	21	15	115	166	67
TOTAL without NTS	472	585	2952	8148	1487
% women transfers	5.30%	67.86%	70.05%	66.29%	47.21%

Source: Vella, *Maltatoday* 27.05.2014

Other factors that affect negatively women's venturing into the political realm are their lack of financial and power resources (Spiteri 2012, Cutajar 2014). Undoubtedly, the invisible barriers of social norms, history, culture and tradition in Malta (Cutajar 2014, Spiteri 2012) that hinder women to move from the private to the public sphere are reinforced and perpetuated all the time through the media who continue to depict women mainly as housewives and mothers or else objectified according to their beauty and physical attributes rather than focusing on women's intellectual and political abilities (GMMP 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The STV system allows voters to vote for candidates according to their preferences but can also choose to cross party lists when voting, though this does not seem to happen so frequently (Lane 1999).

## 2.2. Political Parties and Recent Events

The issue of quotas as temporary special measures or targets is usually the dreaded bone of contention over which there is continuing disagreement (Spiteri 2012, Dalli 2013). However, although nothing has been done so far, awareness about this has increased, possibly leading to a shift in attitude towards quotas from a 'never' to a 'maybe'. If anything, there is an increase in the acceptance that gender parity in political and economic decision-making brings benefits not just to women but also to the country's democracy. Political parties are considered as the main 'gatekeepers' of women's representation in national legislatures (OSCE/ODIHR 2014). In Malta, both main political parties and their leaders are generally in support for gender equality and agree that women should be better represented in political and economic decision-making positions. However, it is felt that not too much effort is made by political parties and they just pay lip-service to this issue. (EU Parliament Info Office Malta 2014, Piscopo 2014). Both parties have devised some strategies to facilitate women's advancement in politics, including the adoption of voluntary measures for a better gender representation within their party structures (Schiavone 2013, Spiteri 2012).

### 2.2.1. Nationalist Party (PN)

The Nationalist Party (PN) is one of the two main political parties in Malta currently in Opposition. In 2008 the party adopted voluntary party measures to increase female representation within its party structures. Other policies were adopted in 2014 and the party undergone a restructuring programme where internal structures were revised to encourage more female participation and ensure better representation. The Forum Opportunitajiet Indaqs (Equal Opportunities Forum) was set up in 2014 with statutory rights to be represented in party structures. The FOIPN (Forum Opportunitajiet Indaqs), also a new structure within the Party, now dictates an equal representation of men and women at various levels. This is done by adopting separate lists for women and men and asking voters within the party to choose equal amounts of women and men from the separate list to be represented in the various decision making organs within the party. The separate lists for electing the Executive have worked well in terms of equal representation, which is made up of 18 elected representatives (9 women and 9 men). A women's group, Moviment Nisa Partit Nazzjonalista (MNPN) is the traditional women's movement within the Nationalist Party and works in support of women, particularly new and up-coming candidates.

### 2.2.2. Labour Party (PL)

The Labour Party, currently in government, has been historically the party that has supported gender equality<sup>4</sup>. Recently the Labour Party's strategy for increasing women's political participation through capacity development was chosen by the European Institute for Gender Equality as a best practice in competence

<sup>4</sup> Supported women's suffrage by giving Maltese women the right to vote in 1947. The only two women Presidents of Malta were also nominated by a Labour Government, the first one H. E. Ms Agatha Barbara in 1982 and the current President, H.E. Ms Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca in 2014. She had also been the only Secretary General of the Labour Party elected through the General Conference of the Party. The first and only female President of the Maltese Parliament (Madame Speaker) was Ms Miriam Spiteri Debono nominated by the Labour Party in 1996-1998. Presently Dr Lydia Abela is the Secretary to the National Executive of the Labour Party.

development (EIGE 2016). It was the first amongst the main parties in Malta to adopt quotas in favour of women's participation to facilitate the way for women into politics at party and national level. In 2013 there was a change in the ruling Party from the Nationalist Party to the Labour Party. Prime Minister Dr Joseph Muscat stated that he would work for a feminist government (Dalli 2013). In 2014 he nominated a female President of the Republic of Malta. This is the highest role in the country and intended to give a strong message in favour of gender parity and equality. He stated that 'she would be a role model for the younger generations and conveyed a strong message in favour of equality' (Micallef 2014). Previous initiatives launched by the previous government to encourage female participation were consolidated, and a number of other initiatives by the Labour government were introduced and which have effectively boosted female participation as well as the overall economy considerably.<sup>5</sup> These measures are helping women retain their jobs and should indirectly facilitate more women to find their way into higher levels of decision-making as well as in the political field.

In 2013, the women's group, Nisa Laburisti (NL) took over the role of the previous women's group within the party, Ghaqda Nisa Laburisti, to support equal opportunities and the active promotion of women's issues, including the increase of women participation in decision-making through various initiatives. The Labour Party's Think Tank, Fondazzjoni IDEAT launched a project in 2013 with the aim to encourage and support more women in politics. Some of the members who participated are now active members in the NL (EIGE 2016). It is noteworthy to mention that in this present legislature the Labour Party has pushed and legislated for the most progressive LGBTIQ related laws in the world. This was the first step in eradicating homophobia in Malta. This legislation is also about human rights and is serving to start a change in the conservative public attitude in Malta (Wikipedia 2016).

### **3. Transferability: Discussion of practices from Slovenia & France vis-a-vis Malta**

The different approaches presented in the papers of Slovenia and France are interesting best practices through various measures including quotas. The results in both countries demonstrate that unless quotas or measures are mandatory, political parties do not put much effort in developing effective strategies to improve women in decision making. However, mandatory or voluntary quotas on their own are not enough to increase female participation but an overall strategy is needed. One example of this is Slovenia's Act on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which obliges not just the government and its Parliament but also political parties to reach a balanced representation of each gender. Incidentally, Slovenia and Malta both joined the EU in 2004. Both countries have made progress with regards to gender equality. However with regards to women in political (and economical) decision making, Malta cannot claim to have made any significant inroads and might need to

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<sup>5</sup> As from April 2014, the Labour government launched a new scheme offering free childcare services for all working parents (and full time students) of children between 0 and 3 years. Malta has registered an increase in the employment rate for women which is now around 52.8 % from 44 % in 2012. The launch of the Maternity Leave Trust Fund in 2015 is aimed to address concerns related to discrimination based on gender at hiring stage. By virtue of this new regulation, employers are required to pay a monthly contribution to the Fund irrespective of the gender of the employees. This will be used to reimburse employers paying employees on maternity leave. Measures like free childcare, breakfast clubs and after-school-hours services are contributing to achieving higher participation and better work-life balance.

seriously look at such best practices by other countries that have put their money where their mouth is. Unlike France and Slovenia, and all Member States, political parties in Malta do not get any public funding (Committee on Constitutional Affairs 2015). Therefore any legal obligations on parties to comply with quotas cannot be linked to withholding this financial support because it does not exist. Furthermore the general public in Malta might not support the idea that political parties or the state assist financially electoral campaigns of new female candidates (Cutajar 2014). The arguments in favour of or against gender quotas in France and Slovenia are very much the same as those debated in Malta. Meanwhile, there are different factors that one has to keep in mind: Malta has a different parliamentary democracy and a electoral system from Slovenia and France. What might work in one country might not be as successful or applicable in another. Furthermore, any debate to compare Malta with other EU Member States has to take into consideration the specificities of an island state which has its cultural embeddedness influenced by a traditional gender ideology that places severe constraints on women's attachment to the labour market and to their possible positions of decision making (Spiteri 2012).

Malta's party political divide is usually characterised by intense rivalry, and where parties oppose each other for the sake of opposition and where engaging in a healthy debate is restricted due to antagonistic and adversarial politics. Since Malta is politically polarised with a two-party system, a cross-party coalition of women's groups in political parties as suggested by the Slovenian experience may be impossible to consider. However their idea to include women and men from different areas outside political parties would be the step in the right direction. The introduction of gender quotas in Slovenia and France have helped to increase awareness related to the benefits of having a gender balanced representation in decision making. Malta has had very limited experiences with quotas in politics and an overall resistance to any mandatory quotas, but a healthy debate together with a strong media and educational campaign together with a strong political commitment might bring about a change in culture at a faster rate than expected. Such is the experience with the introduction of the progressive LGBTIQ laws which now ranks Malta first amongst 49 European countries (ILGA Europe 2016). Through education, legal reform and political commitment, the positive attitude towards transgendered persons has changed in just one generation (DG for Communication 2015).

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Undoubtedly the debate about the introduction of quotas has retained a highly controversial level of debate. The same arguments put forward in favour and against seems to be similar in most countries. Arguments put forward against quotas are : not meritocratic, discriminatory and unfair towards men, unqualified women might be selected, all women can make it without quotas, creates conflicts, considered as tokenism, women are not interested to go into politics. Meanwhile arguments in favour of quotas are: for a better and just representation of society, men cannot represent women's interest due to their being socially and biologically constructed differently, more women in leadership positions will serve as role models for other women, benefits of having a gender diversity in political decision-making. Not only political leaders but also the electorate need to be reached out to, with continuous media and educational campaigns to enable them to learn about the importance of gender equality, equity and justice, and how this can be attained (Cutajar 2014). In conclusion, considering the lack of initiatives and commitment to redress the gender imbalance of decision-making in politics, mandatory quotas might be the way forward to a better gender equality at a national and EU level.

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