

## The International Corner

### Work-Life Issues in Malta

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Malta is a small island state located to the south of Sicily in the Mediterranean Sea. It occupies an area of 316 square kilometers with a population of 408,000.

“Family-friendly measures” have become buzzwords in Maltese society. However, a close look at the female employment rates and the national birth rates may give an indication that the reconciliation of work with family continues to be elusive to a great number of families. Both the female employment rate of 38.6% and the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 1.4 are below the EU average.

Family-friendly measures for workers in the public sector are generous, but the same cannot be said for those working in the private sector. Family friendly measures in the public sector include a 12-month career break, an option to work on a reduced timetable until a child reaches 12 years of age, and the possibility to telework. The employees in the private sector do not have access to these benefits and may only use the minimum standards set in the Employment and Industrial Relations Act (2002). According to the Act, mothers must return to work after 14 weeks of fully paid maternity leave. They are also entitled to an additional 3 months of unpaid parental leave and 15 hours of urgent family leave (deductable from the annual leave allocation). The unpaid 3-month parental leave period is also available to the fathers working in the private sector, but there is little evidence to show that men actually use this leave.

When compared to other European countries, one can quickly deduce that these conditions of work do not go a long way in enabling Maltese families to reconcile family life with work. In fact, the NSO Labour Force Survey (Q2/2008) reveals that 66.5% of females aged 15 and over are not active in the labour market. Among the same

age group, 34% of men are inactive. This discrepancy between the inactivity rate of women and men is partly due to the withdrawal of women from the labour market in order to deal with family responsibilities. The NSO survey shows that 54.5% of the inactive women, in contrast to 3% of men, were not active in the labour market because of personal and family reasons.

A report issued by the EU shows that Malta has a low provision of child care for children less than 3 years of age. Working parents lacking the support of their children's grandparents and access to a conveniently located child-care centre find it hard to remain in the labour market. Once the child starts school, the problem of child care is not solved. School hours in Malta are short; some schools finish as early as 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon. To compound the issue, there are long summer holidays that start towards the end of June and end in late September. The compromises that must be made in order to combine work and child care often result in a decision by the mother to give up her job completely, especially if working conditions are not flexible. The lack of supportive structures for working parents also affects the extended family that often helps with child care. The denial of an opportunity to parents to reconcile work with care is not cost-neutral. Malta may already be paying a hefty price in economic terms because of the overall low employment rate. This situation is reducing government revenue, hampering economic growth, and may adversely affect the sustainability of pensions. Since Malta is also experiencing some of the lowest birth rates in Europe, generous family-friendly measures may mitigate some of the problems of the demographic and economic deficit.

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