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GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE : FEMALE HONOUR AND FEMALE POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IN MALTA¹

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1. Introduction

“Mara sabiha gmielha jibqa’ sakemm titef giehha”²

(Aquilina 1972: 159)

Not unlike some other Mediterranean countries, the Maltese political sphere is characterized by an extreme underrepresentation of women in political key decision-making positions. Viewed against this background, it is somewhat surprising that in Malta, in contrast to many other, even Western and Northern European³, countries some 50% of all party members are women. This fact deserves some attention since there never was an influential womens’ liberation movement that could have fought for female access to and equal representation in politics.

This paper is going to deal with two distinct problems. The first, addressing the possible reasons for the high participation rate of Maltese women in political parties and the second, asking why despite this fact women do not occupy important political positions. It is suggested that the answers to these two questions may be found in a time-honoured particular cultural pattern, the so called *code of honour and shame*, as well as in a few recent processes of modernization, which have modified this code to some extent. Due to this historical order, I will begin with an analysis of the *code of honour* and then turn to the relevant modernization processes. Needless to say, these patterns will be regarded from the perspective of Maltese women, before their impact on political behaviours can be analyzed.

1 This is a revised version of a paper which was presented at the Second European Conference for Sociology. Budapest, 30 August – 2 September 1995. I wish to express particular thanks for help and comments to Peter Meyer.

2 Malt. = The charm of a lovely woman lasts as long as her honour.

3 Political parties in Europe, typically, have much less female members. In German parties, for example, the percentage is about 30% (Mickel 1986: 338).

2. The Mediterranean code of honour

Turning to the code of honour it is important to notice that its impact is not only restricted to Malta, but according to a number of experts in the field, is in fact of utmost importance to social life in all Mediterranean countries.⁴ Some authors, such as Peristiany, state that honour is actually part of an embracing value system, common to all Mediterranean people (1966). Following these scholars, it is suggested, that honour carries particular meanings and prescribes certain differential qualities, as well as modes of behaviour for men and women. Gender-specific adherence to these prescriptions brings about honour and social respect, while deviance results in a state of disgrace.

Generally, the concept of female honour, is based on the notion of shame. In case of unmarried girls, shame requires the keeping of their virginity, and in the case of married women it means being faithful to their husbands. Obviously the impact of chastity and sexual shame is very important for the concept of female honour. Being honourable requires of women to behave in such a way, that they will not provoke men to approach them with certain intents. Female honour, therefore, has to be demonstrated by such peculiar means as shyness towards men, or by a certain style of costume, that is suited to hide the female bodily characteristics. The traditional Maltese women's costume, the *faldetta*, is an example of such a "decent" costume. A *faldetta* is a long and wide black dress with a headgear, which is closed in a way that only the woman's eyes can be seen. In Malta there are many proverbs which express what is expected from a woman. According to one of these: "Il-mara li tilbes imquacat max-xitan ghamlet rabta"⁵ This proverb means, a decent woman should show as little of her body as possible (Aquilina 1986: 155). Another proverb goes: "Mara mfettha, boxxla mbetha"⁶, this means, a decent woman, when sitting, has to keep her legs tight together (Aquilina 1986: 153). Finally, it is also said: "Selma b'rasek 'l isfel u mhux tinza' in u tizfen"⁷, which means, a decent girl must be always shy and reserved (Aquilina 1986: 159).

Although less well defined, manliness, as the basis of men's honour, usually includes the ability to be strong, courageous and virile (Campbell 1964: 268–274). Furthermore, since women are considered to be physically and morally weak, men are expected to protect and control the honour of the female members

4 The debate on a specific Mediterranean code of honour was started by a group of ethnologists by the end of the fifties (Peristiany 1966: 9).

5 Malt. = A woman who wears low-cut dresses has made a pact with the devil.

6 Malt. = A woman with legs spread out is like the open door of an antechamber.

7 Malt. = Greet with your head bent down and do not strip and dance.

of their family. In this respect, male and female honour are complementary, because if a woman deviates from the expected behaviour, she harms the reputation of her husband or father. On the other hand, if a man does not appear “manly”, he invites others to attack the honour of the women of his family.

The yardstick of an individual’s honour, it is quite obvious, is always public opinion. Larger communities, such as the village or town, tend to evaluate a person by various means before conceding or denying honour. Usually this is accomplished by gossiping in public places, such as in bars, in the *misrah*⁸, in shops, or whilst taking a *passiggata*⁹ (O’Reilly Mizzi 1994: 378). Although such public places are quite popular, because they provide entertainment, they are also considered to be dangerous, since honour can get lost there. In this regard it has to be stressed that suspicion alone may suffice to lose honour. Pirandello gives a vivid account of such a case in his novel *L’esclusa* (1987): Pirandello’s protagonist is Marta, a young Sicilian village girl, who was married by her parents in an early age to a certain Rocco. Since Marta felt quite bored in her new environment, she started – after a while – to answer letters sent to her by an admirer. She did not do so out of interest in the man, but only as some sort of intellectual pastime. One day her husband Rocco discovered the letters and sent Marta back to her parental home. By acting in this manner, he made Marta’s dishonourable behaviour public.

Marta, actually, had not dishonoured her husband, but since he had sent her back, everybody *believed* that the woman had done something wrong. Although Marta’s mistake was in fact small and innocent, she had to bear all the consequences that follow a loss of honour. Such effects can range from quite subtle to rather severe forms of discrimination against the person. In Marta’s case they were drastic: Her father died out of grief and left the rest of his family – Marta, her mother and sister – alone behind. Thereby, the women had lost their source of income and in addition became totally isolated, since nobody in the village would talk to them any longer.

In Malta, loss of honour will lead to milder forms of social sanctions, nevertheless these are quite efficient too. O’Reilly Mizzi, for example, has observed that Maltese villagers will not greet any person considered to be dishonoured. Moreover, they will not have their children play near the house of a deviant or even with such a person’s children. Generally, villagers would point to the state of shame of, let’s say a woman who is often seen with a man, by making mutterings, noises or signs when passing her house (1994: 378).

8 Malt. = village square.

9 Malt. = stroll.

Since honour has such an enormous impact on social relations and its loss so many negative consequences in this respect, it is often defended by all means. The Maltese historian Wettinger, for instance, reports about a well documented case in 15th century Malta when a man was stoned to death because he had tried to approach a woman during the night in her house (1980: 70–77). Recently, such *vendette* are not likely to occur in Malta any longer, in other Mediterranean countries, however, they are still practiced. According to Maltese practice, a *vendetta* can be prevented by a reduction of occasions when female honour might be endangered. If women, for example, do not mix with unrelated men and stay within their family boundaries, their honour is safe. Therefore, a consequent interpretation of the code of honour should almost necessarily lead to a separation of genders, restricting women to the family network and men occupying the public sphere. It is therefore not surprising that gender separation, either in a strict form, like in many moslem countries, or in a more loose one, can be observed in many Mediterranean countries. In Malta the traditional separation of labour is, consequently, not questioned. In the family the wife is responsible for housework and child raising. The most important role in life for a woman seems to be that of a wife, housewife and mother. Women are responsible for the family work and remain in the “private sector”. In the so-called “public sector”, i. e. in politics and in the economy, we still find comparatively few women. It remains the domain of men. Men go out for work and earn the family income, women stay in the house. The code of honour leads to a particular position of women in Maltese society. On one side they are very respected and honoured, due to the essential role they play within the family, which is still the most important institution in society.¹⁰ On the other side a very reglemented behaviour is expected of them. The virginity of daughters and the sexual faithfulness of wives are of great importance. From childhood onwards girls are taught how to behave towards men. Girls who flirt too often or have had too many boy-friends are the target of gossip. A married woman who does not keep her household in perfect order or is seen with other men risks that people gossip about her. For this reason most women do their utmost to fulfill their social role in society (O’Reilly Mizzi 1981: 82–83). Women restrict themselves to contacts mainly with other women. That can be seen in the strong relations and frequent meetings between mothers and daughters, who meet regularly and help each other. Within the kinship the relations between women play a central role. If there is a big

10 Traditional family and kinship networks are still relatively intact in Malta. The Maltese consider the family to be the only institution, which can be completely trusted (Abela 1994: 5). This attitude is, for example, expressed in some paraphrases like “tal-familja” (Malt. = family man). A man, who is known as a “tal-familja” is considered to be an honest and reliable person.

family meeting like a baptism or a wedding one can see women sitting and talking together separately and also men doing the same thing together separately. If a woman is sitting next to a man this will be her husband. It is important to note that the code of honour and shame is also strengthened by the Catholic Church, which is still very powerful in Maltese society.

The fruitfulness of the concept of honour has been proven by many empirical studies in different Mediterranean countries. Some scholars even concluded that the code of honour and shame is a major characteristic of all Mediterranean societies. Recently, this view has been criticized on various grounds. Herzfeld and Giordano, for example, although not denying the usefulness of the concept, seem to be convinced that its significance was grossly exaggerated in the past (Giordano 1994, Herzfeld 1980). According to them, Mediterranean societies were portrayed as far too homogenous, “exotic” and “archaic” (Giordano 1994: 177). Contrary to these notions, they claim that the concept has to be put in the right perspective. Giordano, for example, emphasizes the rational background of a behaviour related to honour as opposed to the traditional interpretations.¹¹ Herzfeld stresses that the meaning of honour, as well as its actual impact, does not only differ considerably *between* various Mediterranean countries, but also *within* individual Mediterranean societies. It could be added that the concept of honour might also have undergone historical changes in the course of time, without necessarily losing its underlying principles.

3. Societal preconditions for female political behaviour in Malta

In Malta, an island situated between Sicily and Libya right in the centre of the Mediterranean sea, some 50% of all Maltese party members are feminine. Since, however, the code of honour does not permit female access to the public sphere, it could be assumed that many Maltese women violate this cultural code merely by participating in politics. Viewed from a Western European perspective one would tend to expect that Maltese women will favour such political parties promoting gender equality. This, however, is not the case. Unlike these expectations, there is in fact an almost equal distribution of female membership between the two major parties on the island, both of which do not have a reputation of being very progressive with regard to gender equality.

¹¹ According to this author honour constitutes an important hierarchical principle in the Mediterranean countries, since its loss means societal degradation of the ones involved, and – on the other side – advancement for all the others. (1993, 1994) A point which was also made by Davies, who deals with honour as an important means of social stratification (1977: 89–101).

These parties are the Socialist *Malta Labour Party* (MLP) and the Conservative *Partit Nazzjonalista* (PN). Both parties have each approximately 30'000 members, who are locally organized in sections. Various party sections can be found in almost all 60 towns and villages of the Maltese archipelago.¹² Furthermore, the two big parties own on the local level so-called "party clubs", i. e. big houses with bar facilities and a variety of rooms. Usually, these clubs are situated in the villages squares and can be considered to be important meeting places. The two main political parties play an extremely important role in Maltese society. The reason lies in the fact that the party in government can almost exclusively distribute most of the societal resources as it wishes, because of the prevalence of political clientelism (Bestler 1996). Having the right relations to a politician helps to get advantages like jobs, promotions, licences, government-owned flats, telephones etc. Therefore a party membership pays off, if one's own party is in office. Consequently, in Malta approximately 25% of the electorate is enrolled in one of the two main political parties (Bestler 1996: 209). Since Malta's independence from Great Britain in 1964, either the MLP or the PN has governed the state. Smaller parties have hardly ever managed to get some of their members elected in Parliament. Presently, there are, next to the MLP and PN, only two smaller Parties: the *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD), which ideologically can be seen as Malta's "green" party, and the *Partit Komunista* (PK). Both do not have a large following. The Alternattiva has some hundred and the Communist Party just a handful of members. Contrary to the two big parties, both smaller parties are quite progressive concerning their views on the equality of genders. Interestingly, they do not have a large female following.

Consequently, the question to be addressed now is, why are so many women engaged in the two main political parties, despite the existing vital code of honour? It is suggested that two factors may account for this. Firstly, women gained, some decades ago, quite a lot of leisure time thank to general modernization processes, which will be dealt with later, and political parties provided them with a possibility to spend it in an acceptable manner. Secondly, the traditional code of honour which had kept women practically solely to their houses, changed due to the same modernization processes and this enabled women to enter political parties. Let me now describe these two factors in more detail, because an improved understanding of these is a precondition for analyzing present day female political behaviour in Malta.

12 The Maltese islands consist of Malta, Gozo and Comino. Approximately 370'000 inhabitants are distributed over an area of 315 km² (Bestler 1996: 177).

3.1 *The time factor: more leisure time for women*

Until the sixties Maltese women's scope of action was restricted to family and household. These duties practically required all the time women had. Household appliances, like washing or sewing machines, electric cookers etc. were not available at that time and many everyday activities required manual work. Even shopping was more time-consuming than it is nowadays, due to the fact that almost nobody had a refrigerator. Housewives often had to go shopping – especially during the hot summer months – several times a day, because many goods deteriorated very quickly. In general, the standard of living was very low and money had to be saved wherever possible. Money was practically never spent on goods which the housewives could produce themselves. Accordingly, Maltese women used to sew, to mention just one example, all the clothes for their family (O'Reilly Mizzi 1981: 192–207).¹³ Moreover, women used to have much more children these past days. On average, they gave birth to 7.38 children, consequently families were quite large and kept women busy all day long (Central Office of Statistics 1986: 67). Due to these circumstances, women did not show any interest in political life. This situation began to change in the sixties, when women acquired more leisure time. This was due to two important developments: firstly, a drastic decline of the crucial birth rate, as a result of a campaign in family planning by the religious institution *Cana movement* (Bestler 1991: 47);¹⁴ secondly, an improvement of the standard of living, which resulted in the fact that now household appliances could be bought, which made the housewife's life considerably easier. Less children and less housework meant for women now much more free time at their disposal.

However, the enlarged time-budget of Maltese women can not be seen as the reason for the high participation rate of women in politics, since similar developments – a decline in birth rates and a growth of the standard of living – also took place in other Mediterranean societies and especially in Western and Northern European countries, where women are organized to a lower extent as compared to Malta. Thus, the time-budget cannot be viewed as the single most important cause of female political behaviour, but only as an indispensable precondition for female political participation.

13 For the societal changes in Malta after 1945 and their effects on women see: O'Reilly Mizzi 1981.

14 *Cana* was established in 1956 by father Charles Vella, who strongly believed that Maltese families should not have more children than they can economically afford. Therefore his institution spread the slogan of *responsible parenthood* and advocated the use of natural methods of birth control.

3.2 *Modernization and the disappearance of the old code of honour*

Turning to the other precondition for female participation in political parties on a larger scale lately, a general change of attitudes towards women may be pointed to as a result of modernization processes in the sixties.

As pointed out before, prior to this date women were expected to stay solely in their homes. An old proverb gives expression to these expectations: “*Il mara sewwa tidhak u tgawdi gewwa*”¹⁵, which means that a good wife has to be interested in her family and home only (Aquilina 1986: 159). Women, in the old days, were further completely subjected to either their father or husband and might not do or decide anything by themselves. Women were not even permitted to leave their home without a male company. Thus, they also could not engage in professional work outside their home and, as a result, were financially dependent on men. It did not even help them to inherit property, because legally they had an inferior status to men and were not permitted to administer property by themselves.¹⁶ Viewed against this background, it is only obvious that women hardly had any chances to participate in political parties. Such activities would have been completely out of place in these days.

The situation of women began to change in the sixties, due to economical changes, such as the rise of industrialization and the development of tourism, as well as the introduction of television. During this time many Maltese men were unemployed¹⁷ and had to accept that their wives and daughters started to work in the newly built textile industry, where especially female skills, for instance sewing, were needed (Bestler 1989: 22–31). Due to this fact, women slowly became integrated in the country’s workforce and the Maltese, generally, got used to the idea of women leaving their homes to work outside, thereby contributing to the family income. It is important to note that the majority of men did not like the idea too much but pure economic necessity forced them to accept the new situation. Even nowadays it is expected that a woman will give up her job when she marries and gets children. Mainly because of this attitude almost only (young) unmarried Maltese women are gainfully occupied. Consequently, the rate of gainfully occupied women in Malta is only 26%, which is far below the European average (Bestler 1996: 220). The innovation in the economic sector was paralleled by an expansion of tourism, which used to be of minor importance in the Maltese economy. More and more foreigners came to Malta and brought with them novel role models for women. Some of

15 Malt. = The good wife laughs and enjoys herself indoors.

16 Legal gender equality in Malta was reached only in autumn 1993.

17 After the Second World War more and more Maltese men were discharged by the British Colonial power, especially from the large military drydocks, which were the biggest employers on the Maltese islands.

those novelties were diffused via TV.¹⁸ Many of the British and American productions presented women whose behaviour, attitudes and also fashion styles differed completely from those of Maltese women. Slowly some of these foreign manners concerning women were adopted in Malta. An obvious example is the change of women's costumes, since Maltese women soon stopped wearing their traditional costume, the *faldetta*, and started to dress like everywhere else in Europe. In line with the increased female range of action and the changed outlook towards women some well-educated female professionals founded in 1964 the independent *National Council of Women*, a conservative female pressure group (Bestler 1991: 50). This organization, which counts nowadays approximately 500 members, fought mainly for equal pay for women and the reform of the Maltese family law.¹⁹ The more radical ideas of the women's liberation movement did not find too much support in Malta. Only a handful of women met in the seventies and eighties in feminist pressure groups like *Min-Naha-tan-Nisa*²⁰. Hardly any women were and are interested in more radical changes. The situation is still as Lilian Sciberras, one of Malta's leading feminists, observed in 1975: "In Malta ordinary women citizens know only vaguely of the new female awareness in the developed and the more progressive developing countries. Knowledge of the extent of the demand for self-determination is almost alien to the Maltese woman, hence proportionate participation is a long way off" (1975: 373). A possible explanation is suggested by Anzinger, who stresses the importance of the family in Malta (1994). Since women do have a lot of power within the family, they are quite content with their present situation and cannot envisage what they could gain if feminist ideas would be put in practice.

Due to the above described processes of modernization the *old* code of honour gradually faded away and women gained not only some financial autonomy, but also a much wider scope of action than ever before. Now it became at least possible for them to enroll as members in political parties.

18 In Malta mainly British and American productions are transmitted. Furthermore, also Italian channels can be received.

19 Next to these items the Council of Women also had activities for protecting unborn children and decent clothing in public. These and similar topics show the strong leaning of the Council of Women towards the Catholic Church.

20 Malt. = From the side of the women.

4. Women's participation in the political sphere

Viewed against this background it is quite easy to realize why women did not in fact play a sizeable role in politics prior to the sixties. Neither would they have had sufficient time at their disposal, nor would they have been accepted due to the traditional code of honour. Let me now describe how women eventually gained access to the political sphere.

The first Maltese to advocate political rights for women was Manwel Dimech (1860–1921). Dimech, a very progressive politician, demanded already in the beginning of the 20th century, in his paper *Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin*²¹, that women ought to develop their political awareness. He even asked them to become members of his political party *Ix-Xirca tal-Imdawlin*²². Not surprisingly, his idea was considered to be rather strange at that time. The Church was suspicious of dangerous effects. Bishop Pietro Pace consequently warned Dimech in a pastoral letter, that was read in all churches. The bishop warned: (Frendo 1971: 148). But since Dimech did not stop publicizing his controversial views, he finally had to face the consequences and was excommunicated in 1911 by the Church (Frendo 1971: 148–149). The next politician to try something similar was the leader of the *Malta Labour Party*, Pawlu Boffa. He demanded the introduction of universal suffrage.²³ In 1947, after a lengthy procedure and much resistance from the church and the *Partit Nazzjonalista*, universal suffrage was eventually introduced. From this time onwards women were able to vote and stand for elections to parliament. Pirotta writes rightly that that was “a factor which offered a new type of challenge to all parties” (1987: 90). However, political parties did not yet make any efforts to recruit women into their ranks and also did not found women's party organizations, since public opinion would not have favoured such a move.

This situation changed after the sixties, when the political parties responded to the societal changes described above and founded various women's branches within their organizations. The Malta Labour Party founded *Ghaqda Nisa Socjalisti*²⁴ as soon as 1961, and in 1975 *Moviment Nisa Partit Nazzjonalista*²⁵ was established by the PN. It is interesting to note that not so much the women themselves as the *party men* felt the need to have women organized within and tied to their parties. The central aim at that time was not to further equality

21 Malt. = The flag of the Maltese.

22 Malt. = The association of the enlightened.

23 But Boffa was, unlike Dimech, wise enough not to stress the question of equality between the genders.

24 Malt. = Socialist Women's Movement.

25 Malt. = Movement of Nationalist Party Women.

between genders, but to organize the women who constituted more than half of the electorate. (Interview with Maggie Moran, President of the MLP-Women's Movement, 21.10.1985, and Joyce Grech, President of the PN-Women's Movement, 01.10.1985)

There are no figures available about the female party membership before the seventies, but in many interviews with party activists it was confirmed that women were practically absent. The following table indicates to what extent women were politically organized in the seventies and eighties:

Table 1
Year of entry by female party members in Hal-Luqa²⁶

Year	MLP (Total)	MLP (%)	PN (Total)	PN (%)
Before 1940	–	–	–	–
1940–49	3	6.4	1	4.5
1950–59	2	4.3	1	4.5
1960–69	6	12.8	2	9.1
1970–79	8	17.0	6	27.3
1980–89	25	53.2	12	54.5
No reply	3	6.4	–	–
Total	47	100	22	100

Source: Own membership survey (1990)

The fact that nowadays almost 50%²⁷ of the party membership is female seems therefore to be a quite recent phenomenon (Bestler 1996: 209). The majority of these party women are housewives and pensioners (Bestler 1996: 223). Like their male counterparts, the women in both parties belong to the working class (Bestler 1996: 224–225) and were recruited by their families within their respective party (Bestler 1996: 226). A closer look at the parties tells us that

26 Since both parties do not provide data about their members' year of entry, it has to be relied on the Hal-Luqa data. Hal-Luqa is a typical Maltese village with approximately 5'000 inhabitants. Due to a number of reasons, Luqa can be considered as fairly representative of Malta, especially concerning politics. For this reason it was chosen by the present author for a membership survey, which was done in the spring 1990. Every fifth party member was interviewed by means of a questionnaire. A random sample was used, which was manipulated in such a way, that the exact percentages of men and women in the local party sections were reflected in the sample.

27 According to official party statistics the MLP has 49% female members, the PN 43% (Bestler 1996: 209).

female members, in general, are not just membership card-holders but, quite the contrary, are very active and, in many cases, spend a good deal of their time within their political organizations. It may even be suggested that they spend even more time than men do as the following table illustrates:

Table 2
Participation rates of party members in Hal-Luqa

Party	I am active	I am not active	Total
MLP (Total)	80	10	90
MLP (%)	88.9	11.1	100
PN (Total)	48	15	63
PN (%)	76.2	23.8	100
MLP Women (Tot.)	42	5	47
MLP Women (%)	89.4	10.6	100
MLP Men (Total)	38	5	43
MLP Men (%)	88.4	11.6	100
PN Women (Total)	18	4	22
PN Women (%)	81.4	18.2	100
PN Men (Total)	30	11	41
PN Men (%)	73.2	26.8	100

Source: Own membership survey (1990)

Women, when asked about their participation in party life, indicated at about eighty to ninety percent that they actively take part in political matters in both parties.

Given this fact one may come to assume that the sizeable female party membership, and the high participation rate should be reflected in an equally high representation of women in political key positions, i. e. in the parties and in parliament. One might further expect, that the percentage of women in political key positions, together with their party membership, has increased in the course of time.

The real situation is, however, quite different. According to some party officers, women hardly ever occupy official positions in their organizations, neither on the local nor on the national level. Unfortunately, there are no statistical data available on the proportion of women in party positions, but my inquiries into many party committees – from the local to the national level – clearly showed that there are only few elected female party officials. In the

national party administration of the PN, for example, there was only one woman out of 14 members in 1990: the President of the PN's women's movement. In the party administration of the MLP there were two women out of 11 members in the same year. For the Executives of the two parties we find a similar picture. In the PN Executive out of 74 members only five were women: four represented the women's movement and one woman was from the Parliamentary Group. In the MLP's National Executive the situation was similar. Out of 82 members only six were women: two representatives of the women's movement, one woman from the Parliamentary Group, only three women were elected as ordinary members by the General Conference. I do not have any figures about the female proportion in the District and Sectional Committees of the parties, but in interviews with party officials from both sides it was confirmed that there were not many women either, although the picture seems to be a bit better than in the Administration and the Executive. The PN publishes figures according to which about 17% in the Sectional Committees are women (Partit Nazzjonalista 1990: 137). It is quite obvious that women do not play an important role within the party elites. There are even some male functionaries in both parties who complain that women do not really take part in political matters (Bestler 1991: 43).

Women also stand much less as candidates for parliamentary elections than men do. Consequently, only a few women managed ever to be elected, as can be seen from the table 3.

At present, out of a total of 69 members of Parliament, there are only four female members, or, in other words, the female percentage of Maltese parliamentarians is only 5,8%. In this regard, Malta is nearly at the bottom line compared to most other countries in the world.²⁸

The question to be tackled now is, why are the numbers of women represented in political key positions so small, whereas so many women are active as party members? It is suggested that this somehow astonishing situation is due to some peculiarities of the female political participation.

28 In a world survey it was found out that out of 31'154 parliamentary seats to be filled in the single or lower Chamber in the 145 National Parliaments in existence almost 15% of them were occupied by women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1988: 5). The average of female members of parliament in the EU is 18% (The Malta Independent, 8th Aug. 1995: 5). Scandinavian countries are ranging on the top with 41% (1994) for Sweden, 39,4% (1993) for Norway, 38,5% (1991) for Finland and 33% (1990) for Denmark (See Ismayr 1997: 57, 94, 108, 129, 186). The middle level, i. e. 18–26%, is represented by Austria, Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland (Lane 1995: 141, Ismayr 1997: 217, 413). Mediterranean countries have the lowest percentage of female parliamentarians, especially Malta and Greece (Lane 1995: 141, Ismayr 1997: 624, 659).

Table 3
Proportion of Female Candidatures and Mandates in Parliament (1947–1996)

Year	Candidatures	Women %	Elected	Women %
1947	124	1.61	40	2.5
1950	187	4.81	40	7.5
1951	130	6.15	40	10.0
1953	172	4.65	40	2.5
1955	142	5.63	40	2.5
1962	301	3.32	50	4.0
1966	264	2.27	50	4.0
1971	199	2.51	55	3.6
1976	225	4.76	65	4.6
1981	231	4.76	65	1.5
1987	243	4.93	69	2.9
1992	246	3.25	65	1.5
1996	242	7.43	69	5.8

Source: Own calculations according to Government Printing Office: Result of Polls – General Elections 1947, 1950, 1951, 1953, 1955; Department of Information: Results of Polls – General Elections 1962, 1966, 1971; Government Printing Press: Result of Polls – General Elections 1976, 1981, 1987, 1992, 1996.

5. The code of honour and the form of the political participation of women

Female party members in the *Malta Labour Party*, as well as in the *Partit Nazzjonalista*, restrict their activities almost entirely to the local sections of the respective womens' organizations of the two parties. Their main activity is to organize so called coffee mornings for their members once a week. Usually, the local womens' committee will book a coach, as well as a room in a restaurant in another village for this particular day, when the coffee morning is going to be held. Let me now describe such a coffee morning in some more detail. In general, the coach is likely to arrive at about 9:00 a. m. in the village at the local party club, where the local female party members, quite often more than fifty, will already be waiting. On the way to their destination the committee members are likely to sell so called sheets to the fellow-travellers, which are

intended for playing *tombola*.²⁹ *Tombola*³⁰ is a very popular play of game in Malta. After arrival the women will take their chairs in the restaurant and give orders for some *pastizzi*, pastry, tea or coffee. In the meantime, committee women will take care of a microphone, the dices, as well as a shuffle machine, and then the *tombola* starts. Usually one lady from the local committee will read out the numbers, while the other women listen and see whether they have the right numbers on their sheets. After two or three hours of playing and chatting the coffee morning is about to end, and the coach will take the women back home, where they are likely to arrive in time pick up their children from school and prepare lunch for their families.

In general, coffee mornings, offered by the local sections of the respective womens' organizations of the two big political parties, are very well attended and in demand. This is also confirmed by the *Hal-Luqa* survey indicated above, where more than half of the questioned MLP (53,2%) and PN (54,6%) women answered that they usually took part in coffee mornings. But not only the female party members are interested in coffee mornings, the party as an organization is also interested, since a lot of fund raising is done during these activities. The amount of money raised during these activities can be guessed from a simple calculation: If every participant spends only two *liri* on sheets and fifty women would participate once a week, the local womens' committee may expect a net gain of a least approximately LM 150.— (= DM 600.—) per month. Since every party has about sixty local womens' sections on the islands, that amounts to about LM 9'000.— (= DM 36'000.—) per annum for every party on the national level.³¹ No wonder the party officials state how grateful they are towards their womens' organizations for subsidizing their parties to such an extent. The women, on the other hand, are also proud and claim that they often contribute more money than the local party club has at its disposal.

Obviously the coffee mornings can be considered hardly as a truly "political" activity. The fact that the major activity of female members is coffee mornings, is due to the code of honour, which still has an impact in Malta. Nevertheless, the practical meaning of honourable behaviour has somewhat changed recently. For instance, the *modern* code of honour permits women not only to leave their homes to go to work, but even to enjoy themselves outside their family networks. But the code still requires that women should be chaste and, consequently,

29 Sheets are small peaces of paper with numbers on them. These sheets resemble lottery tickets and, in fact, they are something similar.

30 *Tombola* was brought to Malta by the British in colonial times. It is identical with British *bingo*.

31 This calculation, most probably, is too careful and the parties earn much more by coffee mornings.

should not mix with men to whom they are not related via family bonds. Women who do not in fact respect this cultural pattern are likely to lose their own as well as their family's reputation. It is conceivable that political parties are an attractive location for women since they can spend their leisure time there together with other women, without committing a breach to the code of honour. There are otherwise not too many possibilities for women to enjoy themselves without violating the *code*. A possible alternative would be either to volunteer in charitable church activities, or to attend courses in sewing, language or cooking. Many Maltese women do, in fact, opt for these latter possibilities as a pastime, but many others – as we have seen – prefer to go to a coffee morning, especially since coffee mornings take less time and can be easily combined with family duties. To attend a party coffee morning is further highly acceptable in a society where political parties are of utmost importance like in Malta.

Certainly, the code of honour alone cannot account for the fact that women in reality are absent in Maltese politics. In this context it has to be referred to more general reasons like typical career patterns, career restrictions and discriminating behaviour and attitudes towards women. Hoecker identifies two main career patterns in politics, which seem to be general enough to be also applied on the Maltese context. The first is that a person needs to invest a lot of time to climb the party ladder from the grass root level up to a high office. The second pattern stresses the importance of the occupational position. This can mean that a person has an influential private occupational position, or a special knowledge because of his job, or that he was successful in an pressure group. (1987: 6–7) According to the author both patterns are geared to the male biography. Women do usually not have influential occupational positions and also do not have sufficient time because of their family duties. The females' responsibility for the family means a structural barrier for a political carrier. Myriam Spiteri Debono, a Maltese public notary and party candidate for Parliament confirms: "Women have problems, because most of them have got still less free time on their hands than men. And therefore, they have the family, some have family and work, full or part time, some take care of old relatives, that makes it difficult to be politically active" (Interview 20.04.1990). There is also another dimension which hinders women from being successful in politics. This refers to prejudices and hindrances in behaviour and attitude towards politically active and ambitious women. Up to date there is a nearly world-wide perception of the political incompetence of women, based on handed down societal and individual role assignments (Hoecker 1987: 10). Many different forms of discriminations against politically active women were reported by my Maltese interviewees. Anne Agius Ferrante, for example, an Ex-PN Member of Parliament mentioned that she was often told, when doing door-to-

door visits during her election campaign, that a woman's place is in the house or that people prefer to give their vote to a man (Interview 30.03.1990). Other female parliamentary candidates complained about having been the target of insults with sexual connotations, about the lack of support from their parties and even physical violence (Bestler 1991: 61). It seems that only women with very specific characteristics have a chance to come into political office. In Malta they have to have an important occupational position or – even more important – the right family connections. Also the family status seems to be of some significance. It is interesting to note that practically all important female politicians were unmarried. The most famous example is certainly Mabel Strickland, whose father was the noble Lord Gerald Strickland, who was Prime Minister in the twenties and the founder of the “Malta Times”. Mabel Strickland, as editor of the “Malta Times” had an important occupational position, the right family connections and was unmarried. She is the only woman who even managed to become a party leader (Bestler 1991: 54–60).

In summarizing it may be suggested that the code of honour helps to explain why Maltese female party members *cannot* be as active as men tend to be in their respective parties, with the exception of the womens' organizations. The major reason for this is the restriction of association with men. According to the code, this could endanger womens' honour, consequently the majority of party women will avoid participating in “normal” party life and restrict their “political” activity to womens' organizations. Most party women do not even think about being active in the party as such, because they consider the local party club, for example, as a *men's club*. Since they are not active in the political world of their male counterparts, it can be understood why women do not advance to important political positions and are so extremely under-represented in the party top positions and in parliament.

6. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that women became integrated in political parties only since the traditional code of honour had disappeared to some extent and since womens' scope of action, therefore, became wider. Another important precondition that permitted women to spend some time in political parties was the increase in leisure time, due to the decline of the birth rate and to improved household facilities. Due to these causes women were attracted on a large scale to the political parties since the seventies and became active within their ranks and enrolled as party members. But although women nowadays do spend a lot of time within their parties, they are not “politically” active, in the strict

sense of the word. In fact, the majority of female party members in Malta does not discuss political matters or participate in debates in their respective parties. Female members are almost confined to the party women's organizations and consider political party clubs as *men's clubs*, anticipating that they would not be welcome in these clubs. Given their non-participation in "normal" party life, women cannot advance to political offices and are consequently hardly represented in the political decision-making process, neither within their parties nor in parliament. It is suggested, that the major obstacle still is the code of honour and shame: While its contents have changed considerably, it still keeps women away from politics. Even nowadays women will not be permitted to mix with men, unless they are relatives. Due to this reason, female members tend to be interested solely in the political women's organizations of the two big parties. As indicated above, these organizations are attractive for women, because they offer them possibilities of spending their free time together with other women, which is in accordance with the code of honour. Since not too many other alternatives are in fact open to women, the party women's organizations were able to gain a lot of female participants. Thus it may be understood from the described cultural pattern of the code of honour why women, contrary to their sizeable membership in political parties, do not in fact play an active role in Maltese politics.

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«Kommunikation und Revolution»

Das Thema «Kommunikation und Revolution» steht wie kaum ein anderes an der Schnittstelle von zwei zentralen Fragen der Öffentlichkeitsforschung. Der Frage nach dem «Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit» einerseits und der Frage nach dem sozialen Wandel moderner Gesellschaften in Gestalt von Revolutionen, Krisen, Zäsuren, Epochenenden und -anfängen andererseits. Umbrüche verändern die Produktionsbedingungen und -formen der öffentlichen Kommunikation – Revolutionen als Produkt öffentlicher Kommunikation ändern die Reproduktionsbedingungen einer Gesellschaft. Nach Revolutionen und Umwälzungen beginnt – selbst wenn sie scheitern – etwas Neues: Die Gesellschaft danach lässt sich nicht umstandslos mit derjenigen zuvor in Beziehung setzen, der Umbruch dazwischen konstituiert etwas, das sich aus Entwicklungstrends nicht ableiten lässt. Die Einsicht in kontingente Transformationsperioden, in Zeitläufe also, in denen es auch ganz anders hätte herauskommen können, als es herausgekommen ist, mahnt zur Vorsicht gegenüber den nach wie vor gängigen Trendperspektiven in den Sozialwissenschaften und richtet unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf die Diskontinuität der Moderne. In diesem Buch setzen sich Kommunikationswissenschaftler aus Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz mit diesem Thema auseinander.



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