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Count her in

ACCELERATING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH
ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Fidem Foundation

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CONFERENCE | 8 MARCH 2024

FIDEM's International Women's Day Conference

COUNT HER IN: ACCELERATING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Friday 8th March 2024 – Xara Lodge, Rabat

Report by Edward Bonello

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FIDEM's International Women's Day Conference once again provided an opportunity for reflection on the achievements obtained in the field of gender equality, while focusing on the areas that still required attention.

While great strides have been registered, agreement exists that it was only when men and women worked together that meaningful change could be achieved.

The conference underscored the fact that women's access to education was pivotal for transformative empowerment, yet this was still seen as an issue due to prevailing social structures hindering career-family balance.

There is the need to reconceptualize the economy to benefit women as central players, highlighting disparities in employment sectors. Recommendations include universal childcare, specialised education programmes, gender-sensitive career guidance, and the integration of migrant women into educational systems.

Limitations within Malta's family-support policies were seen to be impacting women's professional growth. Panellists urged for more inclusive workplace practices, tax incentives for working mothers, and societal shifts to normalise work-life balance.

Discussions addressed gender pay gaps, education reform, and promoting women's representation in decision-making roles. Policy suggestions included gender-neutral employment practices, awareness campaigns to diversify career options, and improving access to ICT professions.

Panellists also stressed a meritocratic approach to appointments, rejecting quotas in favour of empowering women based on capabilities. A holistic approach to address declining birth rates, emphasizing quality-of-life improvements over economic metrics was also a topic of debate during the conference.



WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION BY DR SABINE AGIUS CABOURDIN, LAWYER AND FOUNDER OF FIDEM FOUNDATION

In her welcome address, Dr **Sabine Agius Cabourdin**, said that the fact that Women's Day still needed to be celebrated meant that a long way remained to be travelled to address challenges women met on a daily basis in Malta.

While improvements had been registered in matters of equality between women and men, it was only when men and women worked together that meaningful change could be achieved.

Dr Agius Cabourdin said that FIDEM Foundation had supported over 300 women, to gain access to education, this was considered a core value of the organisation which provided the necessary transformative power for individuals to choose their paths.

Just as education was seen by FIDEM Foundation as a basic fundamental human right, so was access to education. In fact, FIDEM encouraged and enabled women to never stop learning.

Dr Agius Cabourdin commented on the fact that in 2024, women were still made to choose between having a rewarding career and raising a family, as the necessary support structures were not in place and available for all. She asked whether the existing social policies were enough to enable all women to participate in the economy. Unfortunately, the onus of duties related to family life still lied squarely with women.

Though great strides forward were registered, and the glass ceiling was evidently cracked, a long way ahead remained for it to be completely broken. The fact that society celebrated a woman becoming CEO meant that this was still seen as something extraordinary rather than the norm.

The entire country celebrated when Roberta Metsola became President of the European Parliament. Same when the Chamber of Commerce elected a female President, but sadly this was quickly replaced a few years down the line. While more women were in Parliament, it was noted that this was due to the quota mechanism rather than the electorate choosing females to represent it.

Session 1 : EMPOWER WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ECONOMY

Led by Prof Carmel Borg (University of Malta)

with panellists

Helen Baker (HR Director, Betsson),

Stephania Cuschieri (Assistant Director Office of the Director General, Ministry of Education),

Ann Marie Cassar (Director, Institute of Community Services, MCAST) and

Ylenia Vella (Unit Manager, Jobseeker Advisory Services, Jobsplus)

Prof. **Carmel Borg** reflected on the title of the session, '*Empowering women to participate in the Economy*', and said that it betrayed a sense of consensus that the economy was something extraneous to the woman, who needed to adapt to it rather than be empowered to changing it to her needs. There was little appetite on society's part to deconstruct the economy and understand what worked and what didn't.

He said that women were more likely to be unemployed or to participate in the more informal and vulnerable sectors of the economy. The lack of a proper analysis of the economy could mean that women could easily become victims of social entrapment.

He also said that Malta still couldn't guarantee access to education to migrant women due to difficulties with paperwork and documentation.

Hence, Prof Borg called for the following actions:

- An audit of the inclusive education system.
- Universal childcare which guarantees quality education for all.
- Education programmes that specifically target disadvantaged families, and intergenerational underachievement.
- Investment in training of specialised personnel and teachers.
- A greater effort to address gender stereotyping in career choices.
- Integration of migrant girls from vulnerable backgrounds.
- Flexible, quality online programmes that allow women to engage in lifelong learning without interrupting their work.
- Quality gender-sensitive career guidance.
- Establishment of a National Centre for Women Empowerment.
- Investment in Voluntary Organisations that focus on women empowerment.
- Educational leave for women to upskill and reskill.
- Establishment of an observatory for gender and education
- Ongoing gender mapping in lifelong learning.

Helen Baker said that her company provided flexible hours and core hours for anyone who needed them, offering a gender-neutral working environment. While she acknowledged that there might be matters of perception related to certain gender issues, she said that her organisation endeavoured to offer equal accessibility to all.

Stephanie Cuschieri said that her organisation had been encouraging young students, especially girls to take on STEM subjects. She said that they believed in early childhood education and empowering girls at a very early age to choose subjects that would really interest them and not based on preconceived social norms. She called for more investment in family-friendly measures such as breakfast clubs which allowed mothers to proceed with their professional careers.

Ann Marie Cassar remarked that women as young as 16 were noted to limit their career choices, as they were mindful of their future societal obligations. This was evident by the amount of women choosing career paths which were seen as more compatible with raising a family due to more favourable working hours.

She said that the social construct of women being responsible for raising families still existed and was perpetrated by many. This was perpetrated even during playtime amongst children, with gendered toys reinforcing the stereotyping of roles.

Out of 400 students taking a course in Early Years education at MCAST, which is seen as a career path that suits the female stereotype, only 12 males were attending. In her closing remarks she said that this number was up from 5 a few years back, so a small perceptible development was noted, yet a long way remained to go.

Ylenia Vella said that the 'Make Work Pay' strategy adopted by Government had encouraged more people to become gainfully employed, particularly women, even though this was not specifically aimed at females. She added that free childcare did offer an opportunity for women to study and join the work force. She said that the reality was that most women didn't have the luxury to pay for childcare if they were not eligible for it. This would mean that they would be the ones that would be left behind.

Starting from treating children equally and not feeding any stereotypes between boys and girls, she said that parents needed to trigger social change, providing healthy examples about equal opportunities for both genders. Education started from early childhood.

Session 2: LET HER CHOOSE: CAREER, FAMILY OR BOTH?

Led by Prof Anna Borg (Associate professor, Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta),

with the panellists:

*Natalie Briffa Farrugia (Chairperson, Vassallo Group),
Dr Ann Bugeja (Lawyer, Senior Associate, GVZH),
Abigail Agius Mamo (CEO, Chamber of SMEs) and
Christopher Vassallo Cesareo (President, The Malta Chamber)*

Prof. **Anna Borg** said that in 2024, Malta was far from providing equal opportunities for both genders to be free to make their own choices. She said that while most 25-55 year olds were at work, which meant that most women of a working age were gainfully occupied, short schooling hours, long summer holidays and afterschool extracurricular activities meant that women often were forced to contend with running such duties by default.

She argued that Malta lacked the necessary family-support mechanisms. Women were expected to return to work after just 18 months of pregnancy leave, which was paid at a measly €23 per day. She added that children sick leave did not exist in Malta.

Prof Borg remarked that such issues were not cost neutral as they resulted in a plummeting birth rate, claiming that society expected women to raise children as though they didn't work, yet work as though they didn't have children.

Natalie Briffa Farrugia asked why men weren't taking on a bigger role in family life. She argued that for women to truly grow in their professional lives, more women needed to take on bigger roles and sit round decision tables and board rooms, to truly promote the female cause where it mattered.

While acknowledging that many women were lucky to have great support systems that allowed them to progress with their careers, this was not true for all women.

She called for a lower tax rate for working mothers that would encourage more women to join the workforce. She also argued that families would require different support structures at different stages of the family's journey.

Dr **Ann Bugeja** said that as a practicing lawyer who was about to become a mother for the first time, a great deal of trepidation about whether her and her partner were going to be able to strike the right balance between family life and their respective careers, was real. She said that this was living proof of the predicament faced by women. She felt lucky as her workplace offered family-friendly flexible working arrangements and that the father-to-be also was very supportive, but also understood that this was not the norm.

Abigail Agius Mamo said that a great deal of power existed in the collective mindset, and it was fine to be overwhelmed as a woman as great pressures existed. She said that while tools such as hybrid and remote working existed, it still offered challenges and did not solve all issues completely. From a business perspective, striking the right balance was seen as a considerable challenge. She said that the Chamber for SMEs encouraged businesses to digitalise their work and become more flexible, in order to be more attractive to persons considering raising a family. However, this also required commitment from the employee's side.

Christopher Vassallo Cesareo said that like a company, the Chamber looked at resources rather than genders, and it looked beyond clocking hours, in favour of value and production.

During the open floor discussion, a participant said that women needed to include their male partners in raising children more willingly, as sometimes women failed to do so. She also called for measures to encourage breastfeeding beyond women's return to the workplace.

Another member from the floor said that workplaces needed to normalise mothers attending work and meetings with their babies and children, as it was an easy and efficient solution.

ADDRESS BY DR ROBERTA METSOLA PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

During her address Dr **Roberta Metsola**, acknowledged the fact that till recently, society would have been surprised to learn of women filling important and high-ranking places in society. This meant that society had come a long way, which achievements were not registered by accident, but through a concerted effort and sacrifice by many.

She said that the European Parliament worked hard to level the playing field between the genders. She said that while she agreed with mechanisms that helped women advance further in their careers, it was paramount that these would be implemented properly. She used gender quotas for Parliament as an example, as, during the general election of 2022, these actually resulted in fewer people voting for women than the previous elections, as they were seen as a convenient safety net that would get women elected in any case. This was counterproductive.

She said that the European Parliament, had agreed on legislation to promote the inclusion of women in decision-making positions, through the Women on Boards directive which would require companies across Europe to push towards greater presence of women on boards.

With the gender pay gap still hovering around 13% across Europe, measures requiring employers to be transparent about the subject were also introduced. Another achievement was the Directive on combatting violence against women, which would include tougher rules on cyber violence and measures to prevent rape.

In conclusion, she said that the mountain was steeper to overcome for women, but when women collaborated and worked together, they were more likely to be successful.

Session 3: POLICIES AND SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN – HOW CAN WE IMPROVE?

Led by Ariadne Massa (Media strategist, Media Insiders)

With panellists

Hon. Ivan Castillo MP, Shadow Minister for Maritime Affairs, Social Dialogue, and the Fight Against Rising Cost of Living

Hon. Justin Schembri MP, Shadow Minister of Education

Karen Demicoli, Director General, Ministry for Economy, Enterprise & Strategic Projects

Melanie Casha Sammut, Director, Ministry of Education

Prof. Marie Briguglio, University of Malta

Hon. **Ivan Castillo** said that measures to mitigate the gender pay gap had been in place for a number of years as there was broad agreement with the principle for equal pay, for work of equal value. He said that all workplaces should be gender neutral in their approach to all of their employees and future employees.

He commented on the fact that the gender pay gap still existed due to the fact that women were still drawn to certain sectors which are paid less than others, such as education and nursing. He expected that with the COVID 19 pandemic the world would have better understood and appreciated the role of nurses and teachers which would lead to this matter being addressed, however this did not happen. He called for a better concerted effort for this gap to be better addressed.

He also said that self-employed persons should benefit from all the benefits that are available to persons who are employed.

Speaking about the low birth rate, he said that while the country generated 11,000 jobs per year, it was only registering 4,000 births per year. This highlighted a very serious problem in the making and called on Government to seriously invest in addressing.

Hon. **Justin Schembri** said that girls outperformed their male colleagues at school all throughout their educational journey up to university. This was also true by sheer numbers as the gender distribution in educational institutions stood at 60/40% in favour of females. At post-graduate Doctorial level, the balance shifted completely, however, pointing at a difficulty on women's parts to pursue their studies beyond a certain point, since family life could be beckoning. This meant that family-related responsibilities still fell squarely on women's shoulders.

Speaking about the National Strategy for Education he said that it sounded great on paper, but it would be next to impossible to implement.

Karen Demicoli said that women still struggled to see areas such as ICT as viable career opportunities. In fact, in this area only 18% of the workforce was female.

She called for better structures to empower women to proceed with their careers, however, she also said that it was also a matter of changing mindsets, so ultimately a case of more awareness.

Melanie Casha Sammut said that all of society including women had a responsibility towards quality learning and how children were educated. She said that exposing all children to STEM subjects was crucial in order to give equal opportunities to all children. This could be done by inviting female scientists to school which proved to be effective. This worked because children could visualise something which could inspire them.

She also said that Malta had been designated as the first World Capital for Women and Girls in Science 2023 – 2024 by the Royal Academy for Science International Trust (RASIT), something which marked the drive towards this goal.

Prof. Marie Briguglio asked participants to reflect further on the preoccupation with the diminishing birth rate. She noted that the demographic strategy recently adopted in Malta meant that population was in fact increasing despite the declining number of children being born to Maltese women. Furthermore, the 120,000 or so young foreign people working and living in Malta, were also having children. Therefore, she posited that for many, the underlying concern was not demographic nor gender-based. Neither was it economic. Rather it was a racial concern, perhaps even a racist concern.

Secondly, Prof Briguglio noted that there may well be valid reasoning why women were choosing not to have more than one child, if any at all, or to having them later and this might be related to the cost of several aspects of quality of life. It was worth considering, she argued, that people in Malta worked long hours and that satisfaction with time use in Malta was low relative to its EU counterparts. Prof. Briguglio was critical of dwindling work-life balance, asserting that higher GDP did not automatically mean a better life. Given the stage of Malta's economic development, efforts to improve quality of life in Malta now constituted an important policy goal. This included lower working hours (and consequently better salaries), more access to green spaces and lower pollution (like noise), participation in the arts, sports, and access to other well-established drivers of wellbeing.

Third, she noted that while there were several interventions that attempted to shift the balance towards having more children, there needed to be more attention to the design of such interventions. "How easily are they understood? How burdensome are they to access? How do they work together, cumulatively? Do they induce stigma? What are their unintended consequences? Interventions need to be based on existing evidence, but also workshopped, piloted, tested and only then rolled out. Trial-and-error or populist measures are not only expensive for tax-payers they also short-change the people who need most help. Teaming up with researchers to pre-test interventions could help ensure getting better value for money" she noted.

PRESENTATION ON FIDEM'S SKILL UP & EDUCATE TO EMPOWER PROGRAMMES by Judith Valletta (Director & Operations Manager, FIDEM Foundation)

Judith Valletta provided a brief review of FIDEM's operations focusing on how it supported women to gain access to education.

She explained how Fidem had been providing vocational assistance to vulnerable individuals, predominantly women and girls since its inception in 2018. The 'Educate to Empower' programme consisted in providing educational courses and learning materials, such as laptops and books.

She noted that Fidem took a holistic approach which went beyond financial support, through access to psychological support services. Fidem also helped numerous women pursue their education journeys in fields such as accounting, management, inclusive education, childcare, healthcare, nail technicians, hairdressing, bus driving and sixth form education.

Fidem's 12-month course SKILL UP included both English and computer literacy and basic life skills leading to an MQF level 3, as well as soft skills, such as mindfulness, yoga, drama, home economics, and self-defence. The course was currently being attended by 20 participants.

In conclusion she noted that all this would not be possible without the support of sponsors and volunteers.

INTERVIEW WITH SABRINA BORG (FIDEM SERVICE USER) BY JOURNALIST CLAUDIA CALLEJA (TIMES OF MALTA), WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PROF. MARCELINE NAUDI (ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING, UNIVERSITY OF MALTA)

Prof. **Marceline Naudi** said that Women's Day was an opportunity to reflect on the journey women were in, on the achievements obtained and the way forward. She said that equality was not possible when violence against women still existed. It was a vicious circle between violence and inequality. She said that this always resulted in a toxic balance of power and control, leading to women in abusive relationships finding it next to impossible to leave said relationship. This was due to several factors including children, stigma, and financial reasons among others. She said that empowered women, empowered women.

Sabrina Borg said that in her past abusive relationship she had given her abusive partner a last chance, but then she had to keep her word and move away from the abuse. This was what effectively saved her. She was pregnant and felt a responsibility towards her unborn child. She considered herself one of the lucky ones, as others did not live to tell the tale.

Leaving an abusive relationship was seen as the hardest part, but it led to personal growth, she said. In fact, this allowed her to help other women in similar circumstances to overcome their challenges. She called on all to be present for other women, as she felt responsible since she could truly understand the plight of women in similar circumstances.

Sabrina also thanked FIDEM for its support which allowed her to further her studies. She wanted to continue studying so she could grow personally and be self-sufficient and not be a weight on society.

She called on everyone not to take domestic violence lightly as it could happen to anyone. It was not something that discriminated by social circles or any other factor. Domestic violence could happen to all.

SESSION 4: INVEST IN WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND BUSINESSES

Led by Vanessa Macdonald, PR and Media Consultant

With panellists:

Kenneth Farrugia (CEO, Bank of Valletta)

Rachael Blackburn (Head of Culture, APS Bank)

Sarah Curmi (Audit & Assurance Business Leader, Deloitte)

Prof. Marceline Naudi (Associate professor, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta)

In her introduction, **Vanessa Macdonald** said that when children were asked to draw an image of certain occupations, they invariably drew them according to their pre-disposed stereotypical gender biases. She said that this showed that these biases were not perception but were very real. She however said that a lot had been achieved.

She also said that while it was very hard for women to be parents and hold a career when they were young, it was even harder when they advanced further in their lives as their responsibilities grew and often included the care of elderly family members.

Kenneth Farrugia said that at Bank of Valletta 60% of workers were women, with women holding places on board level and several women in the C suit of the bank. He said that the development of human capital, that looked beyond gender was paramount.

As a bank, BOV sought to empower women in several ways, however he disagreed with the introduction of quotas as this was seen as a disservice to women who would be regarded as having obtained the said positions only through this mechanism. In order to mitigate this, the bank ensured that females would always sit on interviewing boards in order to guarantee a wide perspective at interviewing level. All appointments and employment should be a result of meritocracy and capabilities.

He said that the bank offered family-friendly measures, including working from home arrangements which were successful in helping women pursue their careers. Flexible

working arrangements had proven to be a significant benefit, enabling mothers to build their working hours around their family commitments. Where possible, employers should provide flexibility for employees to balance out work and personal life.

He said that more could be done in general to have more women on boards in other companies.

Private companies could be encouraged to open childcare leave to both parents, rather than mothers only. Though take-up was still modest, this initiative was already in place at BOV.

Employers would also be encouraged to ensure that mothers would not be completely cut off from their place of work, throughout their maternity leave period. This was seen as to be detrimental to the mothers. Conversely it would pay employers to ensure that parents are abreast with developments through communications issued, and training sessions organised.

It was also imperative to invest in mentoring programmes which were accessible to female employees, for them to effectively be in a position to consider applying for higher level posts.

Rachael Blackburn said that 56% of the Bank's workforce was female with the majority holding leadership roles in middle management. She did however note that the further up the ladder, fewer women were present, yet this was expected to improve with more women ranking their way into senior positions in time. A gender-neutral approach was present at the bank, yet this could not be taken for granted. The bank appreciated this as a core value.

She remarked that when the bank issued a call for non-executive Directors, several women showed interest.

Sarah Curmi said that she also disagreed with quotas as women should hold positions of power as a result of their capabilities and experience rather than gender-adjustment mechanisms. She said that women still had to make choices between raising a family or pursuing a career, and the stigma on the men staying at home, tending to the family needed to be addressed and removed as soon as possible.

Prof. Marceline Naudi said that it all boiled down to financial and economic abuse powered by an abuse of power and control. She said that persons who commit abuse would resort to all means to retain their power and control over their victims, which often included financial means.

Abuse, which was possible and present across all the socio-economic spectrum, could include stopping a partner from working, sabotaging of opportunities and extreme control.

**ADDRESS BY THE HON. GRAZIELLA ATTARD PREVI MP, OPPOSITION
SPOKESPERSON FOR EQUALITY, HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS, AND CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS AS OBSERVER**

In her address, the Hon **Graziella Attard Previ** said that it was evident that different women were on different rungs of the ladder of success. A change in the mindset was still needed. She said that schools had an invaluable role in addressing gender stereotypes.

She called on schools to encourage young girls to achieve anything they wanted. She also said that the approach needed to involve young boys too, in order to effectively eradicate stereotypes. She said that males needed to learn responsibilities about gender equality as well, which included the fact that a man's career was not superior or more important than that of his female partner.