

Aphrodite and Haphaestus

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Equality between the sexes is once more high on the agenda. How much will it take us, albeit dynamised by EU funds, to shed our patriarchal peel? Acceptance that discrimination based on sex does indeed exist might be the first step in the direction of addressing the problem. However, structures around us have to change radically for such a phenomenon to take place. Our women and wives, whatever their status, still live behind their men.

Our first ladies have gleefully lived in the shadow of their husbands all their life. They join them silently at official ceremonies and at most offer a good substitute for their husbands each time they can't make it themselves. They're there to represent their husbands' social stability and virtuous lifestyle as a family man with the full knowledge that bachelors have never been politically popular in this country. Come Christmastime everybody starts wondering how many cups of coffee Mrs X and Mrs Y will serve backstage at L-Istrina, most times being addressed by their surnames rather than names (with no intention of reminding the public who their husbands are, of course).

Political parties still look like they are channelling women to the world of tombola. Men's attitude to play is usually another way of funding causes or joining the Saturday lotto gamble. However, our middle-aged women seem to be playing for the sake of playing. With the Labour Party historically at the fore when it comes to women rights, the Nationalist Party has finally made huge steps ahead by appointing two female ministers and implementing positive discrimination within its structures. Notwithstanding, our Parliament is hardly any better than in the olden days when it comes to women participation in politics and success.

However, the problem with women's careers seems to be that whatever they do, whoever they are, they have to do this along with being a housewife. The most successful of women in the political, journalistic or managerial spheres have at least a part-time role as a housewife. While men's extra time is spent as presidents of clubs and participating in social initiatives, women are restricted to one role plus being a housewife.

Take the head of the EU Permanent Representation in Malta, Joanna Drake, who has to look after her children after work; Daphne Caruana Galizia, the controversial journalist-cum-housewife; beauty queen Helena Dalli MP-cum-housewife; the notary-cum-former Speaker-cum-Labour Women's president Miriam Spiteri Debono; Gozo "queen" Giovanna Debono, belatedly appointed minister; ex-journalist-cum-mother Simone Cini, and all other women who took the marriage option some time during their life.

Other influential women seem to be destined to a single, childless life partially because of the roles they have. In this category we could start with the late former President of Malta Agatha Barbara, the head of Super One News Miriam Dalli and MLP II founder and controversial columnist Anna Mallia.

One figure stands alone - and this is none other than Giannella Caruana Curran who found a compromise by sending her children to boarding school outside the island.

In most cases the problem revolves around the obligation to be a part-time mother rather than not having a career. Nothing is wrong with this, of course, but the burden doesn't seem to be weighing in the same proportion on men. It arises not only from the natural ties between mum and child but, more often, from court decrees and decisions too. At the end of the day, a woman must do whatever a man does plus being the housewife and mother. A man is never suspiciously looked at if he does not spend the evenings with his children - neither by his wife, nor by his ex-wife or by society.

I am not fully aware of the extent of sexual harassment involving women in Malta (and doubt if anyone is). However, in a male-dominated society women can only be at a loss. Women can directly or indirectly lose jobs if they reject sexual advances as much as they can directly or indirectly gain jobs owing to the interviewer's not-strictly-professional intentions. Not-so-good-looking women may lose jobs because they have nothing to offer in addition to good work - not even potentially. Good-looking women can lose jobs because they are faced with sexual advances right when the decision on recruitment or otherwise is to be taken. It seems this is not usually such a big problem among men - although it might exist in some cases.

Feministic enthusiasm has somewhat abated these past few decades. However, discrimination lingers on. Society is still led by males and structures don't seem to be readily female- or mother-friendly. Women's urge to be equal has abated prematurely without ever reaching a peak. There has been a mitigation of the impact of

discrimination on women's lives by policies implemented so far but a solution definitely has yet to be found. Society at large, women, men and the authorities, are taking it too easily to make sure that a balance be struck between Aphrodite's and Haphaestus's roles.

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