

# Position Paper on the Effect of COVID 19 ON Women in Malta

## The Consultative Council for Women's Rights

15 June 2020

### Introduction

COVID-19 has affected men and women differently in Malta and the world over. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities. Due to their economic insecurity (NSO, SILC), women are socially and economically more vulnerable to the effects of this pandemic. With the pandemic women were expected to continue working while taking care of children and relatives at home, with the added chores this brought with it whilst adhering to and applying prevention measures for the household. The ramifications of this will be felt in the future if certain measures are not taken now.

### Economy

The Consultative Council for Women's Rights which consists of a group of women's organizations acknowledges and lauds the government's monetary and technical support to help businesses retain employees until the economy rebounds. Minister Falzon mentioned "a mix of soft loans, tax deferrals, and various types of grants to both business and employees, which have been complemented by measures announced by the commercial banks, at the government's behest"<sup>1</sup>. These include the Malta Enterprise wage supplement, modernization of equipment incentive, rent refund, the facilitating of technical support to help businesses, and self-employed to invest in technology that enables teleworking.<sup>2</sup>,

CCWR recommends that the authorities:

- Provide some form of financial assistance to enable those in charge of workplaces to set up the necessary infrastructure (screens, dividers) made of durable material that can be easily sanitized to allow employees to work from establishments to safeguard their health and that of their clients<sup>3</sup>. There needs to be a centralized committee within the Health and Safety Authority dealing with this issue. Health and Safety officials need to make site visits to ensure that adequate measures were taken by companies and public service/sector - if they are in breach they are to close down.
- When enterprises reopened, business did not perk up automatically since recovery depends on consumers. The latter are skittish and financially struggling, so might not buy clothes, take holidays or eat out. Special support is needed for women in business who may find that their business will not function in a post-COVID economy. Women find it harder to garner the necessary funding to start up, set up or evolve their business model. CCWR suggests that an agency or a section within Malta Enterprise needs to be assigned with experienced individuals who can give female owners the needed help to re-organize or re-start a business if this fails post-COVID.

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<sup>1</sup> Falzon, M. (2020, June 11). Protecting the most vulnerable – Michael Falzon.

<https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/protecting-the-most-vulnerable-michael-falzon.797610>

<sup>2</sup>Malta Enterprise (2020). <https://covid19.maltaenterprise.com/employee-wage-support/>

<sup>3</sup> Mudditt, J. (2020, May 15). How offices will change with coronavirus.

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200514-how-the-post-pandemic-office-will-change>

Women deal with failure differently from men. They are more cautious, take longer to setup a new business.

- Salary supplement needs to be retained until the economy rebounds. This will allow female business owners to keep their employees on their payroll.
  - Households made up of more than one individual need more than 800 euros per month to survive. Single parents with children cannot live on this. A number of EU countries have been dallying with the idea of introducing the universal basic income, with Spain taking the initiative.<sup>4</sup>
  - Data is needed on the take up and impact of COVID-19 on women's jobs and business. Data is also needed on women's uptake on COVID-19 incentives and measures. See section on *Data and gender sensitive research*.

### **Labour market.**

The worst hit economic sectors are leisure, hospitality, childcare, retail, and education, the sectors where quite a substantial number of women work. Thanks to the measures provided by Malta Enterprise, these sectors have managed to retain a good portion of their employees.

In spite of these measures one can note an increase in the unemployment rate among workers in April 2020. Our fear is that there will be an increase in women's inactivity rate once these rates are published – they have not been published to date. Inactivity means total withdrawal from the labour market, unlike unemployment.

The occupational sectors which in April 2020 registered a high unemployment rate were clerical support workers, followed by technician and associate professionals and to a lesser extent service and sales workers (NSO 2020)<sup>5</sup>. These are the sectors where a good portion of the female labour force find employment. Workers who had been registered as being employed for less than 21 weeks were more likely to find themselves unemployed when this pandemic hit Malta, and the bulk of these were 45 years and over, followed by the 30-44 age cohort (NSO 2020). The 30-44 age group is the child bearing and child rearing age bracket, so this is somewhat worrying since this involves families with young children, and children cost money.

In dual earner couples, the partner with the lower income, was more likely to withdraw from the labour market according to international literature.<sup>6</sup> Dual earner families may choose to protect the main breadwinner's job, usually men's, during uncertain economic times. When women were not the breadwinners, their career was deprioritized and they became full time carers.

It was obvious from comments and letters which appeared on the media, some women were not clear which benefit they should apply for – Parents' Benefit or Unemployment Benefit since their employers closed their businesses a week after schools closed.

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<sup>4</sup> Houeix, R, (2020, June 1). Once a radical idea, universal basic income is gaining support.

<https://www.france24.com/en/20200601-once-a-radical-idea-universal-basic-income-is-gaining-support>

<sup>5</sup> NSO (2020, May 22). Registered Unemployment: April 2020.

[https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Documents/2020/05/News2020\\_085.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2020/05/News2020_085.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ammerman, C. and Groysberg, B. (2020, May 5). Why the crisis is putting companies at risk of losing female talent. <https://hbr.org/2020/05/why-the-crisis-is-putting-companies-at-risk-of-losing-female-talent>

Overall it was more beneficial for many working parents to take up the parents' benefit instead of quitting their jobs and applying for unemployment benefits. At least, the parents can retain their job and return back to work once the situation stabilizes. The parents in question may suffer financially during this time since they may miss out on other work related benefits such as bonus and vacation leave entitlement for the year. Furthermore, workers who applied for the parents' benefit will have their service interrupted which might hinder their promotional prospect. This is because when a call for promotion is issued, employers usually insist that five (5) **consecutive** years in service are required. Such call discriminates against parents who have taken parents' benefits (or other forms of parental or caring leave for that) even though these might have an aggregate of five (5) years. The bulk of these parents were female (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Claimants and beneficiaries of COVID benefits, as on May7, 2020

Covid-19 Benefits	Males		Females		Total	
	Claimants	Beneficiaries	Claimants	Beneficiaries	Claimants	Beneficiaries
CODP Disability	240	200	214	156	454	356
COMB Medical	807	639	905	755	1,712	1,394
COPB Parents	806	480	4,434	3,629	5,240	4,109
COUB Unemployment	692	678	548	531	1,240	1,209
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,545</b>	<b>1,997</b>	<b>6,101</b>	<b>5,071</b>	<b>8,646</b>	<b>7,068</b>

Data provided by Mr Musu, 7 May 2020, Ministry for the Family, Children's Rights and Social Solidarity

As the above statistics show, when schools and childcare facilities closed during the pandemic, women were forced, pushed out of the workplaces. The challenge is the ability of women to retain and return to their employment when there is a lull in this pandemic. Parents are still hesitant about sending their children to childcare centres or schools.

Women are not a homogenous group. Different women face multiple forms of disadvantage apart from gender. For example women with a disability tend to be concentrated in blue collar employment, the area most badly hit by the pandemic. They were more likely to be made redundant. Single parents, who are mostly mothers, experience higher rates of economic insecurity than their counterparts (NSO, SILC)<sup>7</sup>. These are not alone. Migrant women share salient characteristics.

Recommendations:

- Promotion should be adjudicated on cumulative rather than consecutive years. The latter punishes those who interrupt work histories when they take unpaid leave to take care of family members.
- CCWR members feel that a scheme similar to the Carer at Home Scheme for Active Ageing can be set up. This will provide parents who work (whether they work at

<sup>7</sup> NSO (2019, August 7) EU-SILC 2019: Salient Indicators.

[https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/View\\_by\\_Unit/Unit\\_C1/Living\\_Conditions\\_and\\_Culture\\_Statistics/Documents/2019/News2019\\_128.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/View_by_Unit/Unit_C1/Living_Conditions_and_Culture_Statistics/Documents/2019/News2019_128.pdf)

home or not) with homebased childcare. We are aware that not all workers might be in a position to afford to make use of this scheme. This scheme will however ease up spaces in childcare facilities, rendering them safer.

- In the eventuality of a recession, women will be hit the hardest if austerity measures lead to public sector jobs being lost, and/or benefits or services scrapped. The public sector is a major employer of women in Malta since this sector provides a number of family friendly measures.<sup>8</sup> There is also the possibility that the pandemic might lead to severe job losses in women dominated sectors such as tourism, retail, cleaning among others. If government decides to start cutting jobs in the public sector, the CCWR asks the authorities to factor in ways to protect women's jobs.
- Gender, racial and economic disparities were amplified by the pandemic. Migrant and undocumented migrants were also more likely to be affected by this pandemic – health and employment wise. Social inequality was a key risk factor for COVID-19 mortality and morbidity – apart from age and medical vulnerability. We also need data on how different women were affected regarding employment.
- Those who get the virus or have to undergo quarantine, spend a long time out of work. It would help if this continues to be paid until a viable vaccine is found.<sup>9</sup>
- There is a need to consolidate teleworking, flexible hours, and family-friendly measures. Those who have researched virtual work found that those who work remotely are more productive than average (Ammerman and Groyberg 2020). Remote work is necessary more than ever before. It will enable work to continue being done safely. Both the private and public sectors would benefit more from remote working which allows for more flexibility than the telework system currently allows employees.<sup>10</sup> The public service/sector should act as a role model where remote working is concerned since this lockdown has shown that it works.

## **Mental Wellbeing**

The CCWR was glad that the Ministry for Health initiated a mental health wellbeing helpline to assist individuals who are experiencing mental health issues caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. It was also noted that a guideline document was published to assist individuals in creating a structure/ routine, maintain good physical health, and gave them information on how to seek social care and mental health treatment.

With children out of school, parents who were lucky enough to retain a job, were working with children at home. They have to supervise online classes, and assist children in homework/school projects, deal with the cognitive labour of household work, shopping for themselves or elderly relatives, cooking and anticipating the family's needs. Fear of getting the virus themselves or that vulnerable family members might do so, the fear of redundancy,

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<sup>8</sup> Azzopardi, R.M. (2018). The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality. Comments Paper- Malta 2018.

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid\\_development\\_cooperation\\_fundamental\\_rights/mt\\_comments\\_paper\\_de\\_october2018\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/mt_comments_paper_de_october2018_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Gonzi, P. & Pullicino, M. (2020, April 1) Special paid leave for mandatory quarantine in Malta in view of COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.internationallawoffice.com/Newsletters/Employment-Immigration/Malta/Fenech-Fenech-Advocates/Special-paid-leave-for-mandatory-quarantine-in-Malta-in-view-of-COVID-19-pandemic>

<sup>10</sup> The Economic Times (2020). <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/software/dell-technologies-sees-demand-for-remote-working-solutions-amid-covid-19-pandemic/articleshow/76369975.cms>

reduced pay, keeping children occupied, all have an impact on mental health, not to mention the physical stress involved.

Those with health issues experienced high anxiety levels especially women with mental health conditions. This led to an increased intake of medication, which impacts their level of independence negatively. Mental wellbeing is also exacerbated when having to take care of children while working from home or remotely.

Women who are on the autism spectrum or are taking care of family members together with women with intellectual impairments have a hard time adjusting to new routines, and this often leads to challenging behavior. This type of behavior is challenging for family members, employers and work colleagues, and so needs to be factored in.

Women with a disability who have children and work from home have no time to rest and take care of themselves. This will impact their health, rendering them more vulnerable to the virus.

Recommendation:

- These issues need to be kept in mind when the second wave of the pandemic hits Malta, and with ease of lockdown.

## Housing

Being made redundant, or facing a reduction in pay impacts women who have loans or have to pay rent. Women tend to earn less than men thanks to the gender and income pay gap.<sup>11</sup> The measures introduced lately to help middle to low income earners with loans<sup>12</sup> or rent<sup>13</sup> will prove helpful. They might not help those who do not have a support network and/or savings to help them over, especially migrant workers.

Women with a disability who due to the financial issues caused by the pandemic might be pushed into searching for cheaper accommodation, might not find adequate housing if they have accessibility issues. This type accommodation is hard to come by in Malta.

Recommendation:

- Malta needs to invest more in accessible housing, especially now that the population continues to age – in an age where the majority of the elderly are women<sup>14</sup>.
- Temporary accommodation should also be given to women with children, especially those leaving abusive relationships. Hotels and leisure accommodation could be used until the economy picks up. This temporary accommodation would give these women and their children the time span needed the safety to search for affordable housing.

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<sup>11</sup> Eurostat. (2020, February). Gender pay gap statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics)

<sup>12</sup> Costa, M. (2020, June 3). Government launches schemes to fund 10% deposit for property buyers under 40. [https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/102749/government\\_launches\\_loans\\_scheme\\_to\\_fund\\_10\\_deposit\\_for\\_property\\_buyers\\_under\\_40#.XuClg0UzbIU](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/102749/government_launches_loans_scheme_to_fund_10_deposit_for_property_buyers_under_40#.XuClg0UzbIU)

<sup>13</sup> Costa, M. (2020, April 16). Government to subsidise up to 80% of rent of COVID-19 laid-off workers [https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/101738/government\\_to\\_subsidise\\_80\\_of\\_rent\\_of\\_covid19\\_laidoff\\_workers#.XuCmTEUzbiU](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/101738/government_to_subsidise_80_of_rent_of_covid19_laidoff_workers#.XuCmTEUzbiU)

<sup>14</sup> England, K. & Buttigieg, S. (2019). The impact of demographic changes in Malta on health and the health system over the past two decades. Malta: Malta Association of Public Health Medicine.

## **Public Transport**

Women tend to rely more on public transport<sup>15</sup> than men since their precarious location in the labour market renders them less able to afford their own means of transport. The majority of female migrant workers, those with a disability, and older women are in the same predicament. Those who use public transport to go to work, shop, access services and/or leisure facilities are at greater risk of coming into contact with the virus.

The CCWR believes that the health of public transport passengers and workers is of the utmost importance. Particular consideration should be given to vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions.

Recommendation:

- Guidelines and measures issued by the authorities need to be constantly updated and communicated to ensure that those who use these means of transport can plan and act on the basis of full awareness of the situation.
- This information needs to be communicated via multiple channels and languages.
- Transport companies or passengers which do not follow public health guidelines should not be allowed to operate and/or use the transport since they will be putting other people's lives at risk.
- Introducing subsidized taxi fare schemes might work out better for vulnerable people, especially those who cannot avoid travelling during rush hours. This will help keeping them safe.

## **Domestic violence**

An unanticipated effect of pandemic was the increase of domestic violence due to lockdown, and/or loss of jobs. Due to the expected financial insecurities brought about by the pandemic, it is also expected that victims who are not financially independent will find it harder to leave their aggressor.

Victims find it hard to ask for help when they are confined with their abuser, especially true during lockdown. The authorities need to ensure that there are adequate and hygienic facilities available for those who need to escape dangerous situations at home. Women's organizations and shelters need resources to make extra space.

In France the authorities worked in collaboration with hotel chains to give accommodation to women escaping dangerous situations (Kneeshaw, 2020). These shelters and DV services need to be accessible to different groups of women – migrant women, women with disabilities and those from rural areas who might find shelter and/or services difficult to access for different reasons.

The present information campaign using posters in different languages is a good example of good practice in Malta. Victims of domestic violence need to be made aware of the protection

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<sup>15</sup> Kneeshaw, S. (2020, May 8). Exploring the gendered impact of COVID-19). <https://urbact.eu/exploring-gendered-impacts-covid-19>

measures and support services which are available. They need to be reached through the use of different outreach channels and means of communication.

Apart from these Malta can follow the examples set by other EU countries. Some EU countries have set up messaging services to dole out advice, emotional and psychological counselling via WhatsApp.

Other countries set up chat services equipped with geolocation possibility so that the police can trace the call in the case of emergency. These apps should be useful also post-pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Hotlines, online chats and other support and report mechanisms can save lives when they can be accessed safely.

Some EU countries took the opportunity to work with perpetrators of domestic violence, via Zoom. These are avenues to explore.

CCWR underlines that women with disability who might have to escape an abusive relationship might have to leave behind assistive apparatus or medicine. Perhaps an emergency one-time fund can be given to assist them find their feet when they escape.

Recommendations:

- The authorities need to provide women's organizations and shelters with resources to make extra space during a pandemic.
- The services and support needed by victims should not be deprioritized during and after the pandemic. Shelters and related support services are essential services. Their accessibility needs to expand during such a crises.
- Make use of hotel chains to give accommodation to women escaping dangerous situations would help increase safe spaces for victims of domestic abuse.
- During and after the pandemic multi-lingual information campaign on the support and report services available needs to be disseminated via multiple channels of communication.
- Use modern technology to continue providing advice, emotional and psychological counselling.
- Ensure that hotlines, online chat services and other support and report mechanisms are equipped with geolocation possibility so that the police can trace the call in the case of emergency.
- Use modern technology to work with perpetrators of domestic violence.
- Introduce a one-time emergency fund that will enable women with a disability who escape an abusive relationship to acquire assistive apparatus or medicine they might have to leave behind when they escape.

## **Health and Reproductive challenges**

The pandemic has impacted access to healthcare, especially sexual and reproductive health. Safe and confidential access to health services can be undermined by among others social

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<sup>16</sup> OSB Consulting. (2020, May 19). The EU mutual learning programme in gender equality. Good practice in tackling gender violence in the context of COVID-19. Summary Report.

norms, gender-based discrimination, criminalization (of for example sex work, etc.), restricted freedom of movement, lack of income, the need of third party authorization and lack of childcare among others, maintains OHCHR.<sup>17</sup>

Sexual and reproductive health was also affected by the reallocation of resources, the shortage of medical supplies and the disruption of the global supply system. Access to contraception and hormone therapy for trans women were a case in point.

Migrant workers and undocumented ones together with family members might be more hesitant about accessing health services, especially the latter since they might fear repatriation. Keeping people safe is the main issue at moments like this.

Recommendations:

- Deliver/post contraceptive pills to women at home or an address convenient to them. Women with young children and/or mobility issues might find it difficult to access pharmacies.
- Malta needs to make sexual and reproductive health services accessible even during a pandemic in different areas of Malta, including Gozo
- Ensure that Malta is not affected by the shortage of medical supplies and the disruption of the global supply system where contraception and hormone therapy for Trans women is concerned.
- When hospitals are geared to deal with the pandemic, maternity care can be provided in hotels close to the main hospital, a practice adopted by other countries (OHCHR 2020) to ensure that mother and child/ren are not exposed to virus.
- Malta needs to set up virtual health care services available in multiple languages to allow patients to access sexual and reproductive health services (birth control, contraception, Trans/non-binary hormone therapy, STI treatment) with the help of phone and/or video conferencing. This can help free up overloaded health systems, during and after the pandemic.
- Information on the services available, on the precautions to take, and available help should be provided in different languages, using different means of communication and/or working with migrant group leaders or associations.

### **Self-employed**

A number of women become self-employed because it helps them juggle work and family responsibilities. They may however face restrictions around sick leave. They also tend to have irregular incomes which leaves them vulnerable. The CCWR notes how helpful the support being given to the self-employed by Malta Enterprise is. The fear is that this might be tapered off when business resumes as usual.

Recommendations:

- Support given by Malta Enterprise should be tapered off once the economy gets back on its feet and not before.

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<sup>17</sup> OHCHR. (2020). COVID-19 and Women's Human Rights: Guidance. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/COVID-19\\_and\\_Womens\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/COVID-19_and_Womens_Human_Rights.pdf)

- Ensure that Malta Enterprise measures are available to all self-employed, including professionals<sup>18</sup> and those working part-time since for women part-time work is often their primary occupation.

### **Data and gender sensitive research**

We need gender sensitive research and data to find out how COVID-19 affected men and women with regards to health, social and economic impact. This research should take gender and other parameters into consideration, namely, migratory status, geographical derivation (native, EU, non-EU), age, marital status, health status, occupation, disability, among others.

These statistics are not always available and some entities do not include some of the socio-demographic markers mentioned above. This data is important for policy makers. Leaders and policymakers need to depart from the assumption of a one-size fits all policies but adopt an intersectional approach.

Recommendations:

- Sex disaggregated data collection on disease, economic impacts, measures taken up, care burden, recovery rate, rate of sexual violence and abuse adopting needs to be collect adopting an intersectional approach since data guides policy making.
- Entities – state and non-state - need to compile data by taking into consideration gender as well as migratory status, geographical derivation (native, EU, non-EU), age, marital status, health status, occupation, disability, etc.
- Policy makers need to adopt an intersectional approach and depart from the assumption of a one-size fits all policies.

### **Risk of female talent drain**

Companies and the public service/sector risk female talent drain. Women's careers have become casualties of the crisis.<sup>19</sup> At the same time the pandemic has helped normalize remote and flexible work. Teleworking is a key word in Malta, but less so is flexible work and remote working. This will help companies and the public service/sector retain female talent during the pandemic and after.

The public service/sector as a perceived role model employer together with the private sector, need to accommodate to the challenges faced by working parents and carers. It is high time that Malta starts discussing how to go about responding to the EU Directive (2019/1158) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2017 on work-life balance for parents and carers. Malta needs to come up with workable ideas on paid parental leave as well as family and emergency leave for all sectors not just the public sector.

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<sup>18</sup> Malta Federation of Professional Associations (2020, June 12). Covid-19 measures: Professionals once again 'ignored by government'.

<https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2020-06-12/local-news/Covid-19-measures-Professionals-once-again-ignored-by-government-6736224120>

<sup>19</sup> Gupta, A.H. (2020, May 9). Why some women call this recession a 'Shecession'.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/us/unemployment-coronavirus-women.html>

A substantive proportion of women need to be involved in planning and decision making meetings linked to crisis task force and response teams related to COVID-19. Diversity in teams leads to more sustainable decisions being made.

Companies and other entities need to ensure that they do not relegate women's ideas to the background, but acknowledge and implement them.

Those who insist that workers go to work need to provide safe and appropriate child care options while schools and childcare facilities are closed, and/or grandparents under lockdown.

The CCWR would like to take this opportunity to appreciate the work conducted by Prof Charmaine Gauci in the last three months as she has become a role model to women and men. She is a living example that women can do STEM, and can be effective decision and policy makers.

Recommendations:

- Start discussing how EU Directive (2019/1158) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2017 on work-life balance for parents and carers is going to be implemented. Please go beyond the basic measures outlined in this directive.
- Work-life balance measures should be available to workers in both the public service/sector and private one.
- Introduce paid parental leave as well as family and emergency leave for all sectors not just the public sector.
- Keep digital spaces and face to face decision making processes inclusive, and make sure that women are adequately represented in planning decision making meetings to ensure substantive representation.
- Acknowledge and implement women's ideas – women form half the population. Their ideas are crucial when it comes to dealing with employees and clients. Women need to be involved in decision making levels at medical, political, economic and other social domains. Gender expertise would ensure that the issues and problems created by this pandemic is tackled without leaving anybody behind.
- The pandemic helped to demonstrate to the Maltese that women are quite capable of being good decision makers. The authorities need to come up with effective measures to ensure that more women are given the chance to participate at decision and policy making levels.
- Awareness raising campaign using female leaders like Prof Gauci will help to show that women are effective leaders and decision makers.

### **Opportunity to value work of caring**

The fact that a considerable number of women were essential workers and healthcare front liners work during the pandemic has meant that a number of male partners had to become more involved in childcare, elderly care, shopping and household chores.

The relevant authorities can now use this situation to rethink and disrupt gender stereotypes, to change traditional discourse around caring, household chores, and/or teaching.

During the pandemic a number of entities adopted gender inclusive workplace policies and practices such as flexible work arrangements, family friendly workplaces, remote and teleworking. Let us hope that these family inclusive practices are not discarded post COVID-19.

It is also high time that society places a higher value in the work that goes into caring and realize that this is necessary to support communities and countries. Caring is often invisible work which is usually unpaid, and when it is paid, tends to be underpaid. Caring needs to be given more value in future economic projections and budgets.

Recommendations:

- Change traditional discourse around caring, household chores, teaching through awareness raising campaigns using real life examples that took place during the pandemic.
- Build on the gender inclusive workplace policies and practices used during the pandemic. Enhance on the flexible work arrangements, family friendly workplaces, remote and teleworking used during the pandemic.
- Caring needs to be given more value in future economic projections and budgets.
- Care workers should be paid better, and their work valued.

### **Marital breakdown**

The lockdown had an undermining effect on relationships which were already fraying at the edges. Family lawyers mentioned that they saw an increase in the start of separation procedures<sup>20</sup>. The increase in separation rates can lead to added dependence on state welfare.

During the pandemic a number of ex-partners who were supposed to pay child maintenance were not in a position to do so when they lost their job, or were on furlough. This led to recipients to temporarily reverting to social assistance.

Women's precarious location in the labour market, which is due to the fact that they are expected to shoulder the bulk of caring responsibilities means that they tend to feel the financial strain more, and this increased during the pandemic.<sup>21</sup> This and layoffs also led to food insecurity. Women's precarious location within the labour market, means that they are more likely to depend on food aid.

Recommendations:

- Awareness raising campaigns that gender roles are changing and that it is high time that we did away with traditional gender role expectations.
- Enabling women to work by providing the necessary safe infrastructure to help them juggle with work and family related responsibilities might render women, especially those who have to leave non-working or abusive relationships, more financially independent.

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<sup>20</sup> Galea Debono, F. (2020, June 8). Substantial increase in couples seeking separation during lockdown. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/substantial-increase-in-couples-seeking-separation.797118>

<sup>21</sup> Mascherini, M. & Bisello, M. (2020, June 3). COVID-19 fallout takes a higher toll on women, economically and domestically. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/covid-19-fallout-takes-a-higher-toll-on-women-economically-and-domestically>

- Food banks should be managed by state entities rather than relying on the voluntary sector which tend to depend on ‘charity’. The state has the necessary infrastructure in place to provide this help across all Malta and Gozo.

### **Health and safety of workers**

Workers are aware of the potential that they might get sick if they go to work. Workplaces need to be made safe until vaccines start working.

Recommendations:

- This can be taken into consideration with the distribution of smaller offices
- A staggered workforce coming in on alternative days

Malta can also benefit from introducing:

Recommendations:

- Different shifts during the day so that workers avoid using transport during rush hours
- Firms can subsidize home offices – the shift to work from home will liberate working parents and ease congested workplaces
- Set up contactless offices. Government subsidies are needed here. Smartphones can be used to send commands to lifts, staff coffee machine; or use voice activated or motion activated technology to control light, audio, and visual equipment, to open doors or flush toilets (Mudditt 2020).
- Employ extra cleaners to sanitize spaces when there is a change in clients/workers.
- Enhance family friendly measures, flexible work, remote and telework.

These measures need to be introduced now before the onset of the second wave, after consultation with employees. It will help keep the workforce and clients healthy and cut down on sick and quarantine leave.

### **Non-EU migrants and those working in the informal economy**

Certain groups of working migrants may be excluded from accessing COVID-19 benefits and services. A good proportion of non-EU migrant workers are amongst frontline staff. Some migrants have the resources to cope with unemployment, others do not and hence suffer destitution and starvation since they do not have any social networks they could resort to help or do not have any savings to fall back on. These and asylum seekers are more likely to face food and housing shortages.

Recommendations:

- This might be the time to persuade those in the informal economy – migrants and women - to formalize their employment status. These workers were more affected by

pandemic since they were less likely to receive sick leave, have no health insurance, access to contributory social benefits, or any of the COVID benefits<sup>22</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 can be an opportunity to change things for the better. The pandemic drove people into their homes. This meant that for a short while women and girls could use and experience public space without the fear of being harassed or molested. We also had lower incidents of crime, less congestion, lower accident rates and better air quality which we all appreciated.

The pandemic also showed us that teleworking or remote working does work and should be adopted more to lessen road congestion, lower accident rates, improve air quality, and promote family friendly measures.

With teleworking and remote working, women who have dependents to take care of were in a better position to take part in online meetings and conferences in Malta and abroad. The fact that they did not have to travel helped to reduce the carbon footprint.

Without women's invisible, unpaid labour at home taking care of children, sick and elderly and women front liners, the whole country would have spun into chaos. The CCWR underlines that women's contribution to the pandemic needs to be taken on board and rewarded by ensuring that in the near future budgets and services are reviewed with a gender lens.

It is also crucial that any services or policies need to be drawn in close collaboration with women's groups and other civil society organisations. When this is not done, the services or policies enacted tend to punish women rather than promote their rights.

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<sup>22</sup> Eurofound. (2020, May 11). All aboard: Hauling undeclared workers onto the pandemic rescue boats. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/all-aboard-hauling-undeclared-workers-onto-the-pandemic-rescue-boats>

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