

The Motherhood Penalty in Malta, EU and Non- EU Member States

Vania Tabone¹

¹University of Malta, Malta

Abstract: Many research studies from all over the world sustain that mothers face a motherhood wage penalty on their return to work after a career break. In fact, in general mothers face a penalty of seven per cent that can be lowered to five per cent if only they attend training or enhance their education while on their career break (Budig and England, 2001). It is interesting to note that the longer the career break the harsher the penalty. The penalty also increases by every additional child. The motherhood penalty can be partly explained due to the fact that women after becoming mothers reduce their working hours in order to juggle work with family responsibilities. Others may also find themselves discriminated by their employers who may perceive them as less productive once now they are burdened with childcare.

This paper provides us with statistics that show us how Malta is trending within EU many of which show that the motherhood penalty can be the reason behind certain issues such as the gender pay gap. It is interesting to note also that the more the participation of women in the world of work, the wider the gender pay gap gets (Arulampalam, Booth and Bryan, 2007; Tijdens and Van Klaveren 2012; Doherty, Levine, Moldavskaya and Xiong, 2017). The motherhood wage penalty could also be the reason behind the issue of low fertility rate which happens to be the lowest in Malta and which is a headache to many countries since while the birth rate is decreasing the ageing population is increasing making it very hard for governments to fund future pensions.

Keywords: Motherhood Penalty, Fatherhood Bonus, Fertility Rate, Gender Pay Gap

1. Introduction

This paper primarily focuses on the factors that cause the motherhood wage penalty in order to try to find out whether these are only specific to any country. Many research studies have discovered that the motherhood wage gap deviates drastically across countries and cultures. Up till now, no such research study has ever been conducted in Malta and it would be ideal to get an indication of the relation between the motherhood wage penalty and the gender wage gap. Surprisingly enough the more women are engaging in paid employment, the more the gender pay gap widens (Arulampalam, Booth and Bryan, 2007; Tijdens and Van Klaveren 2012; Doherty, Levine, Moldavskaya and Xiong, 2017). The causes are various; nevertheless, the main root cause remains the lack of egalitarian division of labour within the public and private sphere (NCPE, 2021).

Governments in EU member states are aware of this problem and are striving hard in order to try to eliminate it. This is mainly due to the fact, that this problem could also be affecting the fertility rates of various countries. They are hence introducing more family friendly measures such as free childcare facilities, free productive health treatment (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015), and flexible time schedules.

The next section discusses the factors that may lead to the motherhood wage gap that varies upon the number of children.

2. The Factors that Lead to the Motherhood Wage Gap

Many research studies sustain that the motherhood wage gap deviates drastically upon the number of children, their ages and in some cases even whether they are boys or girls (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). They

found out that the younger the children, the wider the wage gap which narrows as they grow older (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). Agüero and Marks (2011) have investigated twenty-one low-income countries and discovered that mothers who have young children under three years of age are destined to higher penalties. However, as the children start growing and become teenagers, reaching the age of thirteen, the wage gap narrows dramatically for the mother (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). A seminal research study which was conducted in the United States way back in 2001 by Budig and England, reveals that the average motherhood wage penalty for the first child is seven per cent but can be brought down to five per cent if the mother takes part in some form of training while she is on the care related career break. Agüero's et al.'s (2011) results as well as those of Davies and Pierre (2005) repeated these studies and found out that the penalty increases with every additional child. In fact, Davies and Pierre (2005), Cukrowska-Torzewska (2020), Agüero et al. (2011), and Budig and England (2001) all found out that the higher the number of children, the more the motherhood wage penalty.

Studies that were conducted offshore show that the highest wage penalties that scored 42 per cent were found in less developed countries. These results were followed by China, Germany and UK. In 2008 a research study carried out by Zhang, Hannum and Wang (2008) in China revealed a motherhood wage penalty of 37 per cent, while in Germany the motherhood penalty was 16 per cent (Gangl and Ziefle, 2009). In 2005, a study carried out by Davies and Pierre in the UK revealed a motherhood penalty of 13 per cent. Other studies conducted by Davies and Pierre in 2005 found out that the penalty in France had no motherhood penalty while in Denmark it had a negative motherhood penalty of -4 per cent.

The motherhood penalty varies across countries. The discrepancy may be due to various cultural expectations, and definitely the social policies of the countries per se (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). The career breaks taken by mothers so as to raise their children explain much of the motherhood penalty which according to studies seem to be higher in the UK and in Germany due to cultural family expectations (Davies and Pierre, 2005). Certain family policies in these countries may be imposing a motherhood penalty that affect negatively women's career progression once they become mothers (Harkness and Waldfogel, 2003). Unfortunately, Malta cannot yet be compared to other countries with regards to the motherhood penalty, given that no such research study has ever been conducted in Malta. However, it is evident that the motherhood penalty makes up quite a large segment of the gender pay gap (Crittenden, 2001). The next section is devoted to the gender pay gap in order to try and give an indication of how Malta is ranking in the motherhood wage gap when compared to other EU member states.

3. Gender Pay Gap

3.1. Gender Pay Gap in the EU and Malta

In 2020, Malta generated a low gender wage gap of 10 per cent when compared to other EU member states. The average gender pay gap in EU was that of 13 per cent (Eurostat, 2020). Nevertheless, this percentage rate might not be clearly indicating the real picture, given that the gender difference in employment in Malta was quite high in 2020. In fact, there was a discrepancy of 17.8 per cent in the male to female employment ratio (Eurostat, 2023). In 2020, the highest gender pay gap within EU was recorded in Latvia with 22.3 per cent and the lowest was recorded in Luxembourg with 0.7 per cent (Eurostat, 2020). Having said that, a low gender pay gap is not necessarily associated to gender equality given that it could in reality turn out that countries with a narrow gender pay gap could have a rather low female employment rate – as in the case of Malta.

The next section discusses the employment patterns with regard to the employment rate, part-time employment and the employment rate by presence of children. It also discusses the unemployment rate which turns to be higher for women and the inactivity rate by sex within EU.

3.2. Employment Patterns

The highest gender employment difference was found in Romania in 2021 with 19.7 per cent while the lowest was found in Lithuania with 0.9 per cent. Malta stood at a gender difference of 16.1 per cent which is rather significant and may in fact raise questions as to whether this difference is due to those mothers who quit work in order to take care of their children or other caring responsibilities. Having said that, there was another study conducted in 2020 in Malta by NSO that revealed that women who are under 34 years of age and have tertiary education do not leave employment to take care of their children. Therefore, the gender difference in

employment may also be due to the fact that many women change to part-time work on becoming mothers in order to juggle with children and outside work (Budig and England, 2001).

Childcare may dampen any career aspirations. It is interesting to note that the gender employment gap varies upon the number of children in the family. The more the children the larger the gender employment gap. In 2021, on average within EU, the gender employment gap was that of 10 per cent. Nonetheless, the gap widens with the number of children. The gender gap between men and women with one child was that of 12 per cent, between men and women with two children rose to 17 per cent and for those with three or more children was 27 per cent (Eurostat, 2022). Those mothers who cannot afford reliable childcare and/or are culturally expected to take care of their own children, quit work or else take up part-time employment or work reduced hours. This outcome renders a gender difference in the employment rate where men are still dominating the place of work (ILO, 2022).

The highest gender gap in 2020 in part-time employment as a percentage of total employment was noted in the Netherlands with 41.3 per cent. This may be due to the fact that the Dutch families are still following a traditional family model. Men in this country are still expected to be the breadwinners and therefore to hold a full-time job while being career minded. The women, however are expected to bring in that extra cash by holding a part-time job. For the Dutch women, family comes first (Scroope, 2017). As regards to the gender part-time employment, the lowest percentage rate was noted in Bulgaria which stood at a percentage of 0.7 per cent. The reason behind this slight difference may be the result of many Bulgarians who are constrained to increase their weekly working hours rather than reducing them (Eurofound, 2009; Leinonen, 2023). A study conducted by Concova and Ory (2014), which was a comparison between Bulgaria and the Netherlands, revealed that family policies in Bulgaria are more oriented to include the father as much as possible in childcare than they are in the Netherlands. In Bulgaria policies are in place to try to prevent discrimination at the place of work, providing fathers with more flexible working arrangements to enable them juggle childcare with work and give shorter maternity leave to mothers. In the Netherlands, family policies are different. They are mainly targeted towards mothers which may be imposing a concomitant effect on their career aspirations (Concovy and Orly, 2014). In 2021, in Malta, there was a gender discrepancy of 13.5 per cent for those working part-time. This comes to a ratio of 1:3.5 and could mean that some Maltese men also hold a part-time job, apart from their full-time in order to make up for either the reduced salaries of their wives or else to support stay-at-home mums. Nevertheless, many Maltese women are engaged only in part-time work as their principal job (Eurostat, 2022). This could also be deriving from internalised gender role expectations (Camilleri and Cutajar, 2023). It is worth noting that the presence of children has a negative effect on women's employment rate mainly in central and eastern countries. The widest gaps are noted in Czechia with -19.6 pp., Malta with -16.6 pp., Romania with -10.8 pp., Germany and Estonia both with -8.8 pp. Having said that, it is also interesting to note that Malta, Romania and Czechia reported the narrowest gaps in the employment rates between men with children and childless men (Eurostat, 2022). This could be a result of women who still might be working in the black economy. In 2022, while Bulgaria registered the highest score that amounted to 33.1 per cent of the official GDP of people working in the shadow economy, Austria registered the lowest score that amounted to 6.6 per cent of the official GDP. Malta ranked quite high and registered a score of 23.4 per cent of the official GDP (European Parliament, 2022). As regards to the gender unemployment rate, in 2021 the rate registered within EU member states was 0.7 per cent. The unemployment rate was higher for women in 14 member countries, the highest rate being noted in Greece which was closely followed by Spain. However, another 12 member countries registered a higher rate for men and in Poland it was gender equal. Malta experienced an insignificance difference of 0.5 per cent, where women more likely experience unemployment. This could mean that few women are seeking employment and most probably will be seeking part-time work registering under Part 3 Scheme were Maltese married women who are not the breadwinners, will not be eligible for unemployment benefits (Government of Malta, 2023).

It is interesting to note that although the gender unemployment rate is narrow, it is good to know that the data was collected during COVID-19. Maltese women before COVID-19, generated one of the lowest labour market participation rates within EU. Thankfully this has increased due to measures adopted in order to try to encourage and retain more women into the labour market (EUR-Lex, 2020). The government has been addressing this problem and has introduced free childcare facilities, however the gender employment gap rate remains high when compared to other EU countries (EUR-Lex, 2020). It is worth noting however that the high inactivity rate among Maltese women lowers the gender wage gap. As a matter of fact, Malta registered a high gender inactivity difference of 17.5 per cent in 2021 and 14.4 per cent in 2023 respectively. The highest inactive female

rate was documented in Romania in 2021 and 2023 with 20.3, and 19.1 per cent respectively. The narrowest gender inactivity gap was in 2021 was recorded in Lithuania with 2 per cent and in 2022 it was noted in Finland with 1.1 per cent. This may explain how cultures and traditions are shaping society. It is important to remember how women were forced to quit work during the pandemic, especially in the service industry where the majority of workers tend to be women (Yavorsky, Qian and Sargent, 2021).

The next section focuses on the fertility rate since surprisingly enough employment patterns may be predetermining the future of pregnancies which are imperative to the country's future economy.

4. Fertility Rate

It is worth noting that the motherhood wage gap can also impact negatively the fertility rate of a country. Women today are well aware that they must shoulder the lion's share in childcare themselves and they are also aware that childrearing may impede them from fully focusing on their career. Apart from that today couples have to face hefty repayments in order to pay their house loans. This may even put them off, or rather restrict them from becoming parents at a young age and therefore, they might think it twice before deciding to have a child. This outcome may lead many women to decide to have one or two children mostly while others may even forgo having children (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015).

The highest fertility rate in 2020 was recorded in France with 1.83 per cent per couple while the lowest rate recorded was in Malta with 1.13 per cent. Reasons may vary as to why Malta has registered the lowest fertility rate ranging from structural and cultural barriers. The Maltese government has in fact introduced measures to encourage more female participation at the workplace by for example offering free childcare and a tax system where the tax rate of the partner or spouse is not affected by the women's employment. However, the gender employment gap rate remains high within EU (EUR-Lex, 2020) - and in Malta, the low participation rate of women in employment does not increase the fertility rate, but in the opposite, it results into the lowest fertility rate across EU member states.

Other studies reveal that the birth rate decreases the more the average household income increases. This can be partly explained by the growing costs of childrearing (Elfac, 2019). Other reasons could be due to a high disability rate in Malta since abortion is still prohibited, as well as an ageing population (European Council, 2022). Women who take care of relatives who are chronically ill, with a disability or old age, might find it hard or even impossible to hold a job. The fertility rate might also be low given that the Maltese women today are postponing motherhood (Azzopardi, 2007) making it more difficult for them to become pregnant at an older age. In fact, women over 30 find it more difficult to become pregnant (Delbaere, Verbiest, and Tydén, 2020; OECD, 2011). Another factor could be that more women than men aged 34 and under possess a tertiary level of education. This could also be impacting on the fertility rate since women might prefer to invest in their career before they plan to become mothers (NSO, 2021). Inflation could also be affecting negatively the birth rate, considering that income in Malta is minimal in comparison to the inflation and the cost of living (Micallef, 2023). Nowadays it is common for couples to postpone parenthood or else even forgo having children at all (Letablier, Luci, Math and Thévenon, 2009).

Motives behind low fertility rates vary across countries, nevertheless the most major reason trending in Western countries are the male-dominated families and policies within the place of work which may only seem to be advantageous to women without children (Population Reference Bureau, 2001). Fertility rates might be drastically improved only if policies considerate seriously the economic needs of parents. These might include paid parental leave for the birth of a child; encouraging/enforcing the sharing of childcare leave; allowing employees to work less hours but having the option of returning to full-time employment once the children enter nurseries or schools; providing affordable and reliable child care for/during and after school hours; and implementing a tax-system which recognises the costs of children (Population Reference Bureau, 2001).

In Malta we have reliable free child care facilities and "both male and female workers have the individual right to be granted paid parental leave upon birth, adoption, child fostering in the case of foster parents, or legal custody of a child, to enable them to take care of that child. Parental leave entitlement is of four (4) months per parent until the child reaches the age of eight (8) years" (Government of Malta, 2020, p. 1).

Governments across the EU are trying to set up measures in order to encourage an upsurge in the fertility rate and at the same time promoting a population growth. Europe today is ranking at the bottom as regards to the fertility rate around the world (The ESHIRE Capri Workshop Group, 2010). One can say that almost each EU

member state has gone through a drastic fall in the fertility rate, while an increase in life expectancy (Lutz, 2006). Population growth is vitally important for a strong economic growth given that young adults will ultimately be contributing towards elderly dependents (The ESHIRE Capri Workshop Group, 2010). Considering that back in 1960 only the Estonians were having less than two children and today only Albania and Iceland remain the countries having more than two children. This could be related to socio economic incentives that could be contributing towards a delay in the offset of child bearing and reduced interest of having children. Having said that, there could be other reasons contributing to a low fertility rate such as institutional factors such as the lack of reliable and affordable childcare facilities (NBER, 2009).

From 1980 till 2019, it was noted that the fertility scenario within EU and obviously the Mediterranean countries are having less and less children. This is experienced in Malta which currently trends at having the lowest fertility rate across EU member states. Malta started off with a fertility rate of 1.99 in 1980 and decreased to 1.14 in 2019; Spain which started off with a fertility rate of 2.2 and decreased to 1.23. Italy which started off with a fertility rate of 1.64 and ended up with 1.27 and Greece which started off with 2.23 and ended with 1.34. It is interesting to note that the countries that had the highest fertility rate in the 1980s for instance, Ireland which started off with 3.21 also experienced a decline in its rate to 1.71. We also note that those countries which increased their fertility rates were Nordic countries. This may say a lot about the policies in place of the countries that encourage couples to have more children. In fact, Denmark increased its fertility rate from 1.55 to 1.7 and Sweden from 1.68 to 1.71 (OECD, 2023). Research studies show that in Sweden parental leave directives govern the behaviour of fathers. In Sweden fathers enjoy long paid parental leave breaks which simultaneously encourage more female employment (Pylkkanen and Smith, 2003). Women who can't juggle work and family responsibilities or who feel that they are the primary carers, resort to career breaks when children come along. This will be the focus of the next section.

Childcare centres facilitate parents to engage in employment and which eventually helps them to improve their quality of life. Six million women between 25 and 49 years of age within EU state that it would have been impossible for them to hold a job or else they would have had to resume to part-time employment in order to be able to take care of their children (Eurostat Labour force Survey, 2006).

5. Career Breaks

Career breaks were first introduced by the Belgian government in 1985 (Eurostat, 2019), allowing employees to either reduce their working hours or else take up a career break. A study conducted by Devindi and Rajapaksha in 2022, concluded that work-life balance tremendously impacts on career progression. This demonstrates how important it is for each and every organisation to ensure that work-life balance measures are there to encourage employees work smarter and maximise their production. Apart from that, employees should be allotted time and energy to dedicate both towards themselves as well towards their family. This would in return motivate them to take career development initiatives (Devindi and Rajapaksha, 2022).

Career breaks in Malta were first introduced under the umbrella of parental leave way back in 1996 to public officers who were entitled to one year of unpaid parental leave. Up till then, an additional three years of unpaid parental leave, as a career break, was also made available to public officers (ILO, 2023). In Malta, parents are allocated 76 months of post-natal leave for those working in the public sector, and one-year post-natal leave for those working in the private sector. Most of the parents who avail themselves of this unpaid leave are mothers who are also entitled to 18 weeks of maternity leave, 14 weeks of which are paid by the employer (Government of Malta, 2023).

5.1 Career Breaks Versus Parental Leave

5.1.1 Parental Leave

Parental leave is given to parents or foster parents on the birth of a child, adoption and child fostering in order to help them take care of their child. Each parent is given four months of parental leave up till the child is eight years old. Parental leave before 2nd August 2022, was unpaid and those who were benefitting from parental leave before this date will not get paid. New parental leave entitlements effected on 2nd August 2022 grants each parent a parental leave of two months, eight weeks paid at the same rate of the sickness benefit. Fifty per cent of the parental leave is allocated to parents until the child is four years old, another 25 per cent is allocated when the

child is between four years and six years and another 25 per cent from six years up to eight years. Foster parents are entitled for the same rate of payment; nevertheless, they are allocated parental leave for each parent and not for each fostered child.

Career breaks unlike parental leave however are unpaid. They are in place so as to retain employees in the workplace and also to help women juggle with caring responsibilities (Eurostat, 2019). Career breaks might be greatly debated; however, they are the only means that help younger women balance work and private life. Women on becoming mothers may have to decide whether they would take a career break or work reduced hours. They are constrained to follow certain gendered cultural expectations that exist both within and outside their place of work. The organisation's policies in place such as family-friendly measurements as well as national legal support such as free child care facilities are detriments to women's decisions regarding career breaks.

Having said that, career breaks however can impact negatively women's career aspirations. As a matter of fact, many women who take up career breaks lose out on promotions (Clem, 2009). Long career breaks can have a deleterious effect on the mothers' confidence and self-esteem. This also might happen to those mothers opting for short career breaks. This is because women may find it difficult to adjust back to their usual routine at work especially those in higher roles. They might also suffer physical as well as psychologically when trying to move away from being a full-time mother to a professional employee. Other women may also face other issues such as 'office politics' from their own colleagues who might take advantage of their absence. Many mothers during career breaks also lose out on their skills, that ultimately retard their career progression.

6. Conclusion

Various research studies reveal that the motherhood wage gap differs drastically across different countries and different cultures. It also might fluctuate according to the number of children, their age and in some instances depending on their gender (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). It is obvious that it impacts dramatically the gender pay gap (Crittenden, 2001) and surprisingly enough it widens in countries where there is a higher participation rate of women in employment. The reason could be that women mostly work part-time jobs and in feminised jobs that pay relatively lower salaries in comparison to other sectors which need, comparatively speaking the same level of skills, qualifications and responsibilities. Women in general engage in health relating sectors and caring jobs, which unfortunately are undervalued (Arulampalam et al., 2007; Tijdens and Van Klaveren, 2012, Doherty et al., 2017). The European Union is trying hard to establish an equal pay for equal work principle, however although this principle has been transposed into legislation of many member states, still gender pay inequalities remain (European Commission, 2021).

Women today are very well aware of this crisis and sometimes they may even have to postpone motherhood and focus on their career or else just forgo being mothers altogether (Azzopardi, 2007). This causes a problem since the fertility rate is falling drastically, where it reached a stage where there are few births and a large aging population that depends on youngsters to contribute for elderly pensions (Coleman, 2002).

The governments in Malta are trying hard to eliminate this problem and have in fact introduced free childcare facilities and assisting human reproduction (Azzopardi and Bezzina, 2014). The European Union also insists that its member states transpose the work life balance directive into their legislation in order to try to encourage more egalitarian relationships where it comes to childcare and family responsibilities. This does not only help to increase the birth rates but also encourage more women to engage and retain their job (Eurostat, 2019).

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