

Caroline Tonna and Maria Cassar were entrusted by the National Council of Women to come up with an idea for an exhibition to commemorate its 50th anniversary. The curators dug up and displayed 80 photos that take visitors on a journey of female activity and breakthroughs in Malta since the beginning of the 20th century.



A Pictorial Diary of Maltese Women in Society marks the National Council of Women's 50th anniversary. How far do you feel women have come in the last half a century and what have been their biggest achievements to date?

Indeed women have come a long way in the last half a century and the exhibition was conceived precisely with the idea of taking the visitor on a journey... We wanted to capture the widest possible spectrum of female activity and to convey the vision embodied in the words of one of the founders of the National Council

REACHING HIGHER

of Women, Mary Jane Spiteri: 'To work for the service of the country, not only to witness its progress and development but to help forge it and give it shape, possibly also from the planning tables in decision-taking board rooms.'

There is so much to write about as women were discriminated against over the years and did not enjoy the same rights as men. But some milestones stand out. For example, in 1967, the government gave equal pay for equal work in government employment [which was extended to the private sector in

1974], while in 1991, Malta ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which culminated in widespread amendments to the Civil Code in 1993 that made men and women equal partners in marriage.

A research historian would narrate the story through events and dates – but we are newly-graduated art historians, so what better way to represent such a journey than through a photo album of female advancement and achievements?

If it were 50 years ago, how different would your life have been and in what way would it have been better?

If I lived in Malta 50 years ago and was married, it would have meant that I'd have had no say in family matters. I would have had to recognise the husband as the sole head of the family with all ➔



Women carrying bags on their head. Courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology.

the rights to choose where we lived and how to bring up the children. I would not have had a say if my husband wanted to sell our property and would have been responsible for the debts incurred by him. Anything I would have inherited would have been administered by my husband. I think I would have felt very dissatisfied and challenged then!

It was only in the 1980s that the role of women as mothers was recognised and full-time employees became entitled to 13 weeks of paid maternity leave and were protected from losing their job during that period.

That said, one has to recognise that life back then was slower and offered less distractions, which I'm sure would have made the family nucleus more cohesive. Our exhibition portrays this with affectionate images that contrast the simplicity



MTV... the first years. Courtesy of Public Broadcasting Services plc.

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of women attending to everyday household chores 40 years ago or so with those working in the more demanding jobs and professions today.

The exhibition includes 80 photos. Which one says it all in your view?

We chose two particular photos to end the collection. One shows a lady hanging clothes on a washing line and a contrasting

photo shows a group of new graduates, tossing their hats in the air at the Jesuits' Church, Valletta, as soon as the celebratory Mass had ended. The caption for the first photos is 'aiming high', playing on the pun of the woman stretching her arms to hang the clothes, a daily chore of a housewife, who dreams of achieving more in life; and the caption of the second photo of the graduates reads 'reaching higher'. Today, Malta can boast of a higher

percentage of females in tertiary education than men. Out of 11,202 students during the academic year 2013-2014, there are 6,468 females.

Where did the photos come from; which is the oldest and the latest; and how hard was it to source them?

Maria and I put aside our work, rolled up our sleeves and used our contacts to get the ball rolling. We grouped our ideas into themes to create a storyline, starting from women's hard days, working the fields, clearing rubble of demolished buildings during the war and queuing for rations of water and food for the survival of their families. ➔



Aiming high... Courtesy of Fr Julian Cassar.



Reaching higher... Courtesy of the University of Malta.

Our aim was not to focus on particular women but to have photos that represented their various activities in society: the pioneers in academia, the first females to join the police and the Armed Forces of Malta, the factory workers, the new female cabin crew of Air Malta, the journalists and broadcasters of Television Malta, women who excelled in performing arts and sports, women in volunteering organisations and women politicians, two of whom reached the highest rank in civil authority becoming President of Malta.



Business as usual at a makeshift grocery shop during the war. Courtesy of the National War Museum.

The themes are not exhaustive and we could only present the viewer with an idea of the many achievements of women in Malta. The oldest photos came from the archives of Richard Ellis and the newest one came from photographer Austin Tufigno, who was one of the official photographers at the inauguration of President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca. Austin also digitised and printed all the photos on display at the exhibition.

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Worldwide, what woman do you admire most?

I [Maria] admire Malala Yousuf, the 15-year-old native of Pakistan, who wrote about the dangers her people face every day, living under the Taliban regime. She was shot in the head when it was discovered that she was a BBC blogger, but this ugly experience did not stop her from continuing her studies in the UK. Malala has become a spokesperson for millions of girls who are unfortunate and she wants to dedicate her life to improve theirs.

I [Caroline] admire Nadine Labaki, who is a talented young Lebanese cinema director. She is a great observer of the social situation in Lebanon and manages to capture the antics of the Lebanese women to keep their men from starting a religious war. Labaki gives a good insight into what is happening in Syria and Lebanon today and to the role women can play in such a society.

And what type of woman puts the female race to shame?

Any woman who treats another woman badly at work or in friendship. It would benefit us all if we helped each other and stopped feeling like we are in competition.

Is photography as an art as appreciated as it ought to be now that everyone can be a photographer simply by using their phone?

Although most of the photos selected for this exhibition were taken by photo-journalists, a few were chosen from the archives of well-known artist photographers like Patrick Fenech, Kevin Casha and Daniel Cilia. Taking a photo is not just using a digital camera that can do the job on its own. An artistic photographer looks at the subject matter from the vision of an artist as a photographer.

What is women’s place in Maltese society today and what should they be striving to achieve?

In Malta, we like to say that the woman is the cornerstone of the family and that is, indeed, very true. It also means that women have been, and continue to be, the bedrock of Maltese society. Hopefully, more women will be recognised for their strong qualities and will be involved in the decision-taking of national policies. It would help us women to be more confident and assertive in our opinions and decisions.

What did you enjoy most as curators of this exhibition?

Firstly, we enjoyed working together, spending long hours discussing, researching and chasing people, with a few coffee and biscuit breaks every now and then.

It was a privilege to work for the National Council of Women on their golden anniversary, working closely with the president Mary Gaerty, general secretary Doris Bingley and office secretary Marie Demicoli.

We are indebted to all the organisations and individuals who have trusted us with their precious photos for this exhibition. ●

A Pictorial Diary of Maltese Women in Society is sponsored by Nexia BT, financial advisory services. It is at the President’s Palace in Valletta from May 26 to June 8 and at the Banca Giuratale in Gozo between June 9 and 20.