

Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection

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Abstract. *Single parents who find themselves in such a position through marital separation and/or divorce are not single parents by choice, but are compelled by circumstances. Due to cultural factors – and thus from legal and other perspectives – it is notable that their day-to-day responsibilities may well be determined by their gender. This article, based on a case-study from Malta, presents a number of factual recollections of a parent who, after the breakdown of marriage, became a single parent of a young daughter. It gives insights into the difficulties encountered in raising and educating a child to the legal age of consent through recollections from everyday life, ranging from use of gendered public restrooms to behavioural and educational ones. It also highlights that most of these difficulties, notably with respect to the former, would not have arisen had the parent's gender been female.*

Keywords: *parenting, single parenthood, single father, single family, gender, separation, Malta.*

Introduction

Research on the consequences of divorce on children and adults conducted by Amato identified that the dissolution of marriage may generate significant changes in people's lives,¹ a conclusion which may equally apply to marital separations, especially those which are turbulent. Instability affects the immediate and future emotional, behavioural and educational well-being of the children. The consequences of emotional and behavioural problems may last decades,² although younger children have been found to have fewer problems after divorce than older ones.³ Children of single parents perform academically less well than those of two-parent families; whilst economic deprivation is mainly the case with single-mother families, interpersonal deprivation is the scenario for single-father ones.⁴ Research at the University of Malta has focused on single parenthood, notably single mothers and their plight.⁵ A comparative study of family literacy programmes published a decade

¹ P. Amato, "The consequences of divorce for adults and children", in *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, (2000), no. 62, p. 1269-1287.

² V.J. Felitti and R.F. Anda, "The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Health, Well-being, Social Function, and Health Care", in R. Lanius, E. Vermetten and C. Pain (eds), *The Effects of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 77-87.

³ P.R. Amato and B. Keith, "Consequences of parental divorce for children's well-being: A meta-analysis", in *Psychological Bulletin*, (1991), no. 110, p. 26-46.

⁴ D.B. Downey, "The school performance of children from single-mother and single-father families: Economic or interpersonal deprivation?", in *Journal of Family Issues*, (1994), no. 15, p. 129-147.

Although children from single-mother and single-father families perform similarly at school, they are outperformed by children from two-parent families (Y. Nonoyama-Tarumi, "Educational achievement of children from single-mother and single-father families: The case of Japan", in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, (2017), no. 79(4), p. 915-931).

⁵ The following is a selection: M. Vella, *Young single mothers: Are they a burden to society?* B.A.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, 2003; G. Bonnici, *Housing and lone mothers: A study of Housing Authority issues, 1996-1999*, B.A.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, 2006; B. Cilia, *Lone mothers and the labour*

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

ago stressed the importance of policies in education as the father was becoming a more 'visible parent'.⁶

The latest comparative study, published in November 2020, addresses trends in single parenthood throughout the EU.⁷ It includes a number of conclusions and policy recommendations for short- and long-term investments to improve the position of single parents.⁸ A recommendation which relates to the former is “to facilitate joint physical custody, examine and remove barriers”,⁹ whilst one relating to the latter involved the reconsideration of “the gendered nature of single parenthood”.¹⁰ With respect to Malta, Nieuwenhuis established that (i) it fell within the group of EU countries with highest poverty rates; (ii) the share of low-educated single women with child(ren) has declined substantially, a finding associated with a decline in poverty; (iii) in-work poverty rose markedly; and (iv) the growth in employment did not allow single parents to escape being at risk of poverty. Citing Chzhen and Bradshaw, the study notes that Malta is one of the Southern EU States in which single parents residing in multi-unit or multi-generational households produces higher estimates of single-parent households.¹¹

market: The situation in Malta. B.A.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, 2006; R. Darmanin, '*Super mum: The lived experience of single mothers at university*', B.Psy.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, 2006; E. Mifsud, *Like a Phoenix rising: Separated women struggling through motherhood*, Dip. Soc. Stud. dissertation, University of Malta, 2006; and B. Fenech, *The increased incidence of single-mothers: A change in values?* B.A.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, 2011.

Only one dissertation addressed widowers as single fathers, namely A. Catania, *Widowers as single fathers: social and practical aspects*, B.A.(Hons) dissertation, University of Malta, 2006.

⁶ A. Rose and C. Atkin, “Family literacy programmes: a comparative study of gender roles in England, Ireland and Malta”, in *Early Child Development and Care* (2011), no. 181(6), p. 775–790.

⁷ R. Nieuwenhuis, *The situation of single parents in the EU*, Brussels, European Parliament, 2020. Retrieved on 02 September 2021 from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU\(2020\)659870_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU(2020)659870_EN.pdf).

⁸ This study, commissioned by the European Parliament’s Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, reached the following noteworthy conclusions: (i) single-parent households are mainly led by women, (ii) “single parents do have higher rates of living in a household with low work intensity, at-risk-of-poverty, or material deprivation”; (iii) over the period 2010-2018, at-risk-of-poverty rates for single parents in the EU did not improve although the “rates of severe housing deprivation, severe material deprivation, at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion, and very low working intensity decreased”; (iv) “both parents continue to be involved in the care of their children after separation or divorce, and an increasing number of children live equal amounts of time with both parents. This practice of joint physical custody is associated with good outcomes for the well-being of both children and parents”; (v) “separating parents can retain (joint) legal custody in most cases (given that they had it prior to separation), which also suggest that the large variation across Europe in how common it is for children of separated parents to live with both parents relates to other factors”; and (vi) parental leave for fathers has the potential to create more gender-equal caring relations that last even when parents separate (*Ibidem*, p. 76-77).

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

Y. Chzhen and J. Bradshaw, “Lone Parents, Poverty and Policy in the European Union”, in *Journal of European Social Policy*, 22 (2012), no. 5, p. 487–506.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

This article will focus on the factual recollections of the author as a single parent in Malta of a young daughter until she reached the legal age of consent of 18 years.¹² At the time only matrimonial separation was possible.¹³ Divorce legislation in Malta came into effect in late 2011; annulment by the Catholic Church – divorce the Catholic way – was the only option.¹⁴ The article gives insights into the difficulties faced in raising the child by providing examples from daily life ranging from personal hygiene to education: – difficulties which would have been non-existent if the parent’s gender were female. It explores the pragmatic realities which go beyond theoretical and policy frameworks. Relevant to the factual incidents referred to in the article are the following: (i) the joint custody was agreed amicably and formalised through mediation, (ii) during school weeks, the child spent the weekends (from Friday after school until Monday morning with the father) and, during holidays, she spent a week alternating with the other parent. Although she slept at the home of the grandparents of both parents and at relatives/friends, this was not regular and thus she was neither exposed to multi-generational nor multi-unit households. To appreciate the context in Malta, this article includes a section illustrating cases where men were discriminated against, and classifies recollections of the author under two themes: (i) issues arising in taking a female child to public restrooms, and (ii) issues relating to the personal hygiene. It concludes by noting (i) how this parenting style impinged on one’s career and (ii) on significant others, namely grandparents, partners and friends, who provided support. One element that needs to be given serious consideration is the issue of child abuse.

¹² The theme of the author being a single parent was brought up in a film directed by Matthew Carbone entitled *Bijografija tal-Prof. Perit Lino Bianco - 24 05* (2014). Retrieved on 06 September 2021 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBgyQMXoKIU>. This 27-minute documentary was one in a series prepared by ONE TV with respect to prospective candidates for the European Parliament elections of 2014.

¹³ Traditionally, Malta is Roman Catholic. Article 2 of the *Constitution of the Malta* explicitly states (Retrieved on 19 August 2021 from <https://www.parlament.mt/media/82078/constitution.pdf>):

“(1) The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion.

“(2) The authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong.

“(3) Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all State schools as part of compulsory education”.

¹⁴ See S. Abdilla. *Marriage annulment in the Catholic Church: Divorce Catholic style? The Maltese Situation*, LL.D. thesis, University of Malta, 2012.

Malta was one of the three remaining states which did not permit divorce; the others being the Philippines and the Vatican City. The question posted in the Maltese divorce referendum resembled the one included in the Irish divorce referendum of 1995.

For the text of the divorce legislation in Malta, see *Civil Code of Malta*, Act XIV of 2011 (Retrieved on 19 August 2021 from <https://legislation.mt/eli/act/2011/14/eng/pdf>). For a legal opinion on the more onerous alimony obligations contemplated by the said legislation, see T. Sciberras Camilleri, “Divorce and... maintenance”, in *Times of Malta* (August 19, 2011) (Retrieved on 19 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/Divorce-and-maintenance.380840>). For a concise historical background to secularisation in Malta, see R. Pace, “Growing Secularisation in a Catholic Society: The Divorce Referendum of 28 May 2011 in Malta”, in *South European Society and Politics* (2012), no. 17(4), p. 573–589.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

The context

Child abuse is a challenge for paediatric practice. Due to its multi-factorial and socially complex aetiology, its eradication at source is a mammoth task. By 2007, the authorities in Malta established tracking and processing protocols ranging from social and legal to policing aspects.¹⁵ The *Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act* was enacted in 2020.¹⁶ Following the introduction of mandatory reporting standards in terms of this Act, any professional who is in contact with children is legally obliged to report suspicion of child abuse or face prosecution. They will be exempt from prosecution if the suspicion proves to be ill-founded.¹⁷

Aware of such haunting, potentially abusive reality which men face, often encouraged by third parties in case of matrimonial problems, single fathers have to cope with realities which are not an issue if the parent is the mother. Of course, one may argue that the converse applies, when the parent is a woman and the child is a male – an observation which applies throughout this article – but this scenario is still less frequent in Malta.¹⁸ Paternity and maternity are not only about nature but also about nurture. There is a perception that associates men with abuse. Thus, there still exists a particular prejudice against them. Abuse is the exception not the rule. Malta is a child-friendly country with zero tolerance for abuse, especially of the vulnerable: children, the aged and persons with special needs. Although the country advocates gender equality and gender neutrality, society still does not implicitly tolerate certain roles being undertaken by men. Respectful individuals can end up victims of this mentality. There are several cases in Malta where the lives of men are being ruined – including being suspended and/or resigning from their work, having their personal and professional reputation destroyed, being exposed to heavy legal fees, and sometimes imprisonment – and these problems can also impact on their relatives, whether members of the nuclear or the extended family, a significant issue in a small island state where people know each other. All it takes is for someone to allege abuse. Two seminal cases are those of Emanuel Camilleri and André Callus, a teacher and an assistant head of a secondary school, respectively. These cases also illustrate how the young are corrupted, a point not taken up by the public authorities.

¹⁵ S. Attard Montalto and M. Mangion, “Child abuse in Malta: a review”, in *Malta Medical Journal*, (2007), no. 19(2), p. 6-11.

¹⁶ Laws of Malta, Chapter 602: *Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act*. Retrieved on 20 August 2021 from <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/602/eng/pdf>.

This act substituted the *Child Protection (Alternative Care) Act* (Laws of Malta, Chapter 569) “to provide for protection orders for minors, for alternative care and for suitable protection for those minors deprived of parental care or in the risk of being so deprived, and for matters that are ancillary or incidental thereto or connected therewith” (Laws of Malta, Chapter 602: *Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act*).

¹⁷ For a brief report with respect to these standards, see Anon, “Professionals now legally obliged to report child abuse suspicions: Mandatory reporting standards come into force”, in *Times of Malta* (13 April 2021). Retrieved on 20 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/professionals-now-legally-obliged-to-report-child-abuse-suspicions.864558>

¹⁸ Surely, when it comes to reporting, it is non-existent.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

Camilleri was undergoing matrimonial separation when his wife alleged that he had sexually abused his 10-year-old daughter. The man, convicted and jailed for almost 400 days, was released after the daughter pleaded guilty to perjury and claimed that she was forced to fabricate the story by the mother.¹⁹ The police inspector investigating the claims against the daughter admitted that “the police went ahead with the case even though they had no hard evidence”.²⁰ Although Camilleri was awarded financial compensation through the Court – his fight to prove his innocence took over a decade – his life was shattered and he only survived through the support of his second wife whom he married following his release from prison.²¹ Camilleri faced difficulties in finding a job after his release, mainly due to mental health issues; he ended up as a bus driver.

Callus is a member of Societas Doctrinæ Christianæ, a society of Christian doctrine respected by the Roman Catholic Church and Maltese society at large.²² He suspended himself from the society and from the school run by same society. It was reported in the media that he was accused of “violent indecent assault, harassment, offending public morals and corruption of a minor”.²³ The boy claimed he was inappropriately touched during a swimming trip. He was remanded in custody until bail was granted almost simultaneously when the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) wrote to Prime Minister expressing its concern “at the way cases of alleged child abuse are being treated by the police force, especially where educators are concerned”.²⁴ Callus was cleared of all charges of child abuse; the Court remarked

¹⁹ In September 2011, he was found guilty and sentenced to 24 months’ imprisonment; this judgment was confirmed by the Court of Criminal Appeal in May 2013. He did not serve the full sentence as he was released from prison following legal proceedings. The case of perjury against the mother is still ongoing.

²⁰ M. Xuereb, “Father wrongly accused of sexually abusing daughter to seek compensation: Entire case ‘a disaster’”, in *Times of Malta* (30 September 2016). Retrieved on 19 August 2021 from [https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/father-wrongly-accused-of-sexually-abusing-daughter-to-see.626490](https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/father-wrongly-accused-of-sexually-abusing-daughter-to-see-626490). Through forensic science, it could have been easily proven whether the child had been sexually abused.

²¹ See video in English, also with subtitles, at <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/watch-i-considered-suicide-after-my-daughter-falsely-accused-me-of.862914> (J. Arena, “I considered suicide after my daughter falsely accused me of rape”; Emanuel Camilleri spent over a year in prison for a crime he did not commit”, in *Times of Malta* (April 6, 2021). Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/watch-i-considered-suicide-after-my-daughter-falsely-accused-me-of.862914>). On winning his case for compensation, Camilleri publicly claimed that the victory was not a monetary by a moral one. For him, “it is not a case on compensation. It is a case of three words ... wrongful conviction, innocent and miscarriage of justice.”

²² The Societas Doctrinæ Christianæ, locally known as M.U.S.E.U.M.), was founded in 1907 by cleric St Ġorġ Preca (1880–1962). It is comprised of lay men and women who take vows of obedience to the Church and of celibacy (L-Arċidjoċesi ta' Malta, *Socjetà tad- Duttrina Nisranija – M.U.S.E.U.M.* Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://knisja.mt/movimenti-kattolici/socjeta-tad-duttrina-nisranija-m-u-s-e-u-m/>)

²³ W. Johnston, “Church school deputy head denies child sex abuse”, in *Times of Malta* (29 August 2014). Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/Church-school-deputy-head-denies-child-sex-abuse.533531>

²⁴ C. Calleja, “MUSEUM member accused of defiling boy granted bail”, in *Times of Malta* (2 September 2014). Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/update-2->

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

“that while it was important that young children received sex education, the education authorities needed to make children realise the consequences of any false allegations they made”.²⁵ Although at law genders are equal, and there are contexts in Maltese society which are accepted as gender neutral, there are specific ones which definitely single fathers are not at a par with single mothers in the eyes of those who enforce the law. Cases in point are taking female child(ren) to public restrooms and teaching them about personal hygiene – a traditionally female role – when still young. The obverse case, although a logically valid argument, is not the case in Malta.

Using restrooms in public places

Socialising, or at least going to an outdoor play area, is a must for a child. Having a bag with clean clothes, underwear, and basic first aid, food and drink supplies etc., when going outdoors is common to both genders. Playing on swings, slides etc., mostly in warm months, calls for a drink, with the consequence that one soon needs to use the restroom. Until recent years, most of the public sanitary facilities in Malta did not have restrooms for the disabled, a scenario which is still present in continental Europe. They were for either sexes. A mother could take her child, irrespective of gender, into the ladies’ restroom but a father could neither take a daughter to the gents nor to the ladies. The only alternatives are to make a rushed and uncomfortable run for home, or to risk an ‘accident’.

For a male parent, travelling alone with a young daughter can be difficult. Tours proved to be the best option; they have a predetermined programme – wake up, shower, have breakfast – and with transport arrangements fixed. The use of the restroom was always an issue on such trips, and it was necessary to adapt to the

museum-member-accused-of-defiling-boy-granted-bail.534122. Besides a deposit, a personal guarantee and signing at the police station once a week, the bail conditions included that he did not frequent places where children attend lessons at the Societas Doctrinae Christianae. The letter sent to the Prime Minister, signed by the President of MUT, is reproduced in full by Gozo News (“MUT writes to PM asking for investigation – Does not rule out directives”, in *Gozo News* (2 September 2014). Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://gozo.news/52100/mut-writes-to-pm-asking-for-investigation-does-not-rule-out-directives/>). It requested the Prime Minister to scrutinise the methodologies employed in such investigations and amend the legislation, “to protect all parties concerned from the abuse of a system which appears to be flawed and incongruent. ... This methodology is ruining the lives of educators ... who end up being suspended from their work and/or having to resign, after their personal and professional reputation is literally rubbished on a simple allegation. The methodology apparently being applied ... literally means that all one needs to do to ‘get rid’ of the educator who disciplined his/her son/daughter is simply turn up at the police station and allege abuse. [An] ... educator would need years to clear his/her name. In the meantime the person passes through hell, ..., with an automatic suspension especially if in the civil service, a rubbished reputation and thousands of Euro expenses in defence lawyers. The methodology in question is also proving to be a death blow for many initiatives taken by educators within the context of extracurricular activities, and an even harder blow on NGOs who provide voluntary service to children. Outings, live-ins, exchanges abroad and similar activities will most definitely be affected. The MUT has been inundated with calls and emails from educators in various schools and volunteers in various organisations expressing their concern.”

²⁵ Anon, “MUSEUM member cleared of child abuse allegations”, in *Times of Malta* (24 September 2015). Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/museum-member-cleared-of-child-abuse-allegations.585639>

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

context. For example, on a trip to a theme park, a family consisting of a single mother, her daughter and grandmother struck up a conversation whilst having breakfast on an adjacent table. The mother shared her concern about getting lost as they went through the various attractions, thus both families decided to explore the park together. Going to the restroom in between attractions was no longer an issue, as the mother could take the young daughter when need arose whilst her daughter waited with the grandmother.

Teaching personal cleansing

When young, the child may be toilet trained but s/he needed assistance with showering as a matter of personal cleanliness, of staying healthy. Toilet hygiene – handwashing, especially between fingers, and proper drying hands after using the restroom – is gender neutral. When in good mood, s/he may insist on teaching others how to wash hands. The most critical – and surely not gender neutral – issue is shower hygiene. The daily routine to shower was no mean feat. Although able to shower on its own, a child needed directions on how to wash different body parts properly and how to dry them. This is where the gender of the parent matters.

If the child is not in the mood to shower, that is when matters became critical. In such a situation, if the father enters the bathroom and wash him/her, he would have been incriminated. Nor was it possible, if s/he did shower, to help her/him to get properly dry. The temperature in Malta is typically Mediterranean; summers are dry, hot, and sometimes humid. It is not a matter of being obsessive-compulsive about hygiene but in such a climate one desperately needs to shower and change into clean clothes regularly. Whether the child is female or male, such issues would not have arisen if the parent were the mother. Irrespective of how much a child protests, the mother can take her/him into the shower and get the job done, inclusive of drying.

Thinking outside the box

Recalling the account of Dora Diamant (1898–1952) when she and Franz Kafka (1883–1924) met a little girl in Steglitz, one fabricated a fictional alter ego, that of St Martin.²⁶ His feast falls annually on 11 November, the commencement of a forty-day fasting period before Christmas, a tradition which dates back to Middle Ages – the Quadragesima Sancti Martini – which later became known as the

²⁶ The narrative runs as follows: whilst on a stroll in a park in Steglitz, Kafka and his last love, Diamant, met a little girl who was crying because she had lost her doll. Kafka told her that he received a letter from the doll as she left on a trip. On asking him for the letter, he told her that it was not with him. He promised to meet the girl the following day with the letter. Each day of the subsequent three weeks, he met her in the park, each time with a new letter from the doll. The story ended with the marriage of the doll, and thus it was no longer possible for her to visit the little girl. Mark Harman gave an interesting insight about this story; see, M. Harman, "Missing Persons: Two Little Riddles About Kafka and Berlin", in *New England Review*, 25 (2004), nos. 1/2, p. 227. For reading Kafka in the broader context of Jewish literature in German, see R. Seelig, *Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature Between East and West, 1919–1933*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2016.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

Advent.²⁷ In Malta, there is the cult of St Martin.²⁸ One of the traditional festive treats on the eve of St Martin’s day is ‘il-borza ta’ San Martin’, translated as ‘St Martin’s goodie bag’.²⁹ Kids look forward to receiving a borza, and parents pay schools token money for their child(ren) to get one. Another important event recalls St Nicholas, better known as Father Christmas. Children look forward to Christmas eve when Santa Claus brings surprise gifts overnight.³⁰ According to the legend, he comes through chimneys and places gifts by the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. In Malta, it is not usual to have fireplaces and thus, in this case study, he came via a shaft. He was generous, delivering several stockings – actually pillow cases – full of gifts ranging from toys to cereal, from colour pencils to clothes.

St Martin’s day and Christmas proved a lifesaver from late autumn to early winter. These two occasions provided inspiration to conjure up a story in which St Martin and Father Christmas are friends, who communicate with one another about each and every child. They surely reward good behaviour, such as obeying one’s parents, doing homework on time, eating properly and showering every day. Father Christmas would bring a larger gift to children who behaved well after St Martin’s delivery of his goodie bag. The father was privy of the email address of St Martin, a statement that triggered the child to have an email address herself, an address which she still uses today.³¹ With respect to St Martin, she developed a rapport with him, albeit sporadic. Although St Martin’s responses were not always prompt – he lived in other parts of the world, was very busy and might have been asleep when she sent it – he always replied. This proved a useful way to encourage her to develop good habits in terms of hygiene, self-organisation, and studying at the respective residences

²⁷ The cult of St Martin [of Tours] was revived by the French during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/1. St Martin was subsequently considered a patron saint of France during the French Third Republic (B. Brennan, “The Revival of the Cult of Martin of Tours in the Third Republic”, in *Church history*, 66 (1997), no. 3, p. 489-501).

²⁸ M. Drury, “Fruit, nuts & wine: Do you know the traditions of San Martin? Discover the traditions of the feast of St Martin in Malta and their origins”, in *GuideMeMalta.com* (4 November 2019). Retrieved on 21 August 2021 from <https://www.guidememalta.com/en/fruit-nuts-wine-do-you-know-the-traditions-of-san-martin>

²⁹ In schools and at home, children receive a cloth bag with fruits and nuts with a ‘St Martin’s bun’, the typically sweet. Traditionally, the bag symbolized the charity displayed by St Martin – known for using his military sword to cut his cloak to share it with a beggar clad in rags in winter – whilst others attribute it to indulgence before the fast. It includes an apple, an orange, a tangerine and a pomegranate, together with walnuts, hazelnuts, chestnuts, almonds and figs. The abundance of such nuts and fruit falls around St Martin’s Day is represented in the Maltese rhyme ‘Gewż, lewż, qastan, tin; kemm inhobbu ’l San Martin!’, which translates in English as ‘Walnuts, almonds, chestnuts, figs; oh how I love Saint Martin!’.

³⁰ St Nicholas, a Bishop who flourished in Myra in Turkey in the fourth century, had a reputation for charity, in particular for providing secret gifts to people in need. After the reformation he became unpopular, but he was ‘rebranded’, notably in England, as ‘Father Christmas’ who delivered presents to children at Christmas; ‘Santa Claus’ is the Dutch hybrid of St Nicholas in the USA. Over the years, both merged into the same figure.

³¹ Getting the hang of writing emails proved to be an effective medium when the parent was abroad on a study/research visit.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

of both parents.³² The virtual debate was abruptly truncated in a more clinical manner than Kafka’s marriage of the doll. This pseudo-game, which proved so beneficial, was unexpectedly aborted when a parcel, supposedly from St Martin, arrived at the address of a relative with whom the child was staying at the time. The child surely received the unexpected parcel; the father received a message admonishing him not to give a private address to third parties. The child was told that neither St Martin and Father Christmas existed, a fact that the child – a smart kid – was growing to realise albeit she was happy to play the role as long as gifts were delivered. ... The passion to visit Lapland evaporated.³³

A career changer

For the parent to resume studying became an unavoidable decision. At the time of matrimonial separation, one’s professional practice was thriving – established as a leading consultancy office in the Malta offering services to government and private entities in environmental management and architecture. This was supplemented by part-time employment as an assistant lecturer at the university.

Initially, taking the child to the private office was an exercise in patience, although she got well with colleagues. Once, after office hours, an urgent meeting cropped up on a construction site of a minor project, a three-storey apartment block. The child was with the father. At the time, health and safety regulations in Malta were much weaker – no temporary hoardings or hand rails were fixed to stairs. On entering the block, the client closed the makeshift entrance and the child was asked to wait downstairs. One coming down, one noticed that she had climbed two flights up, and was standing against the wall of the stair well – the child was afraid to be on her own and wanted to be with her father. It was a heart-stopping moment, seeing her standing there in such a dangerous position. Tough as it may sound, a decision to change career for a lower-paid job that would allow the parent to live in a way that could truly be the father was taken. By the commencement of the upcoming academic year, the teaching and research commitment at the university was on a full-time basis and private practice became part-time. Besides the career change, upbringing the child necessitated the help and inclusion of significant others which proved of great assistance.

Significant others

At the time of separation, the child was still in primary school. Taking her to school and bringing her back on a daily basis was one way to see the child every day. On occasions when one could not take her to school, a female and a male colleague saw to it. On commencement of secondary schooling, the child used school transport. However, it was still necessary to be pick her from her mother’s place and

³² The occasional spelling mistake in the e-mails provided a context for a conversation which would have lasted a morning or an afternoon.

³³ One may argue that the child was being deceived. This was neither the intention nor the case. The child was a very smart, inquisitive kid. By the age of eight, she solved the 3x3 Rubik cube within seconds; she comprehended the notion of algorithms after some attempts, lasting hours into the night; soon later she resolved the 4x4 Rubik cube.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

take her to her paternal grandmother’s from where she could take the bus to school. On the way back, the bus dropped the child at her grandparent’s place and thus (i) it gave some leeway in time to take her to her mother’s home and (ii) surely, she was being taken care of, fed and rested. On Fridays, the same grandparent washed her uniform and prepared it for the upcoming school day. These commitments increased, especially when the child was for a whole week with the parent or when he was abroad on study/research trips. Grandparents may not be kindergarten assistants nor nannies nor school teachers but they fulfil these roles – largely unacknowledged by society and at no charge which, at the current market prices, could amount to a third of the official minimum wage.

Partners and close female friends do fulfil similar roles. It can be particularly helpful if they are from the medical sciences. When a child is growing, s/he not only goes through hormonal changes, with all the feelings and emotions which are alien to the parent of an opposite sex, a case also applicable to grooming issues and the need to buy clothes, including personal items. A father helping a female child changing her bathing suit is highly unusual and, if it happens, it will be noted with suspicion with all the legal risks.³⁴

Conclusions

Love and hate have identical chemistry but they are on either side of human emotions. They are analogous to the natural minerals diamond and graphite respectively – both are composed of carbon, thus have identical chemical composition, but they are physically different.³⁵ The deeper the love, the deeper the hate.³⁶ Marital separation-stress-adjustment is a key for the wellbeing of the child and the parent; irrespective of what happened between the adults, the child is the product of love. Having the backing of one’s immediate family and good friends until the child reaches the age of consent is an unrivalled support for both the parents and the child.

As a single father, the child was not deprived economically but interpersonally. Further to the instances relating to the use of restrooms when the daughter was still young, there were other instances where the child was deprived because the parent was a single father. Neither a single-mother family nor two-parent family will send their child for a party or a sleep-over at a classmate of a single-father family. This is a form of interpersonal deprivation which is gender based. Having the presence of a woman – either a partner (that is, an unofficial stepmother) or a female relative (grandmother, aunt, sister) – is important to balance out this cultural prejudice.

Single fatherhood may take its toll on the physical and psychological well-being of the parent but it has a major benefit – more quality time with the child. Yet, in the

³⁴ Marriage breakdowns are cows which some ‘professionals’ enjoy milking. The bickering – in itself a sign of not letting the other party leave – is often followed by legal challenges which, irrespective of cost, the party which feels injured will go for. Most cases involve the introduction of doubts by a third party which s/he will water.

³⁵ These industrial minerals are on either side of Mohs scale of hardness.

³⁶ W. Jin, Y. Xiang and M. Lei, “The deeper the love, the deeper the hate”, in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 18 (2017), 1940.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal Recollection”, *Astra Sabvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.

long-term, the observation included in Nieuwenhuis’ study, that “children living with both separated parents seem to benefit from this living arrangement, and so do the parents”,³⁷ is valid. As child grew older one could diplomatically negotiate plans for study, hobbies, adventures and travel. As in parasailing, irrespective of the allowable amount of line, the rope is the link to the base. When it snaps, one is swept away whilst the other is kept floating helplessly at the end of the parasailing rope. Irrespective of the uneven road in life, parenting is about raising children with selfless, unconditional love. Recalling Barack Obama’s passionate speech on fatherhood, “what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child.... It's the courage to raise a child that makes you a father”.³⁸

Final Comments

One may argue that making reference to the existing literature on the gender-based challenges in raising children and/or the testimony of more than one person, will make the argument robust and provide a buffer against criticism from peers and/or activists. This article is not a journal of a person who is complaining. Its aim is to share personal recollections; instead of steering clear from such a political sensitive topic, the author opted to outline some hardships in raising a child which are not present if the parent is a mother.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Kevin Aquilina (former Dean, Faculty of Laws, University of Malta, Malta) for his critical comments on an earlier draft of this article. A significant criticism which was endorsed in this revised version is to make the contribution as broad as possible in order to provide less material and not disclose experiences which may give rise to the child suffering bullying and/or discrimination – in the present or future – by some immature individual/s. He would like to express his gratitude to Steve Libreri (Director, Child Protection Services, Foundation for Social Welfare Services, Malta), Martin Micallef (clinical psychologist, Mental Health Services, Department of Health, Malta) and Miriam Tonna (former member of the academic staff, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta, Malta) for their feedback. Final note of thanks to Prof. Univ. Dr. Habil. Ion Albulescu (Director, Department of Education Sciences, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) for his invitation to participate and to be a member of the scientific committee of the International Conference Education, Religion, Family in Contemporary Society, 3rd edition, held between October 15-16, 2021.

³⁷ R. Nieuwenhuis, *The situation of single parents in the EU*, Brussels, European Parliament, 2020, p. 78.

³⁸ M. Gavrilovic, “Obama's Father's Day Message”, in *CBS News* (15 June 2008) (Retrieved on 10 September 2021 from w.cbsnews.com/news/obamas-fathers-day-message/).

Barack Obama (1961-), a father of two daughters, was abandoned by his father at the age of two.

“Parenthood Post-marital Failure is not Always a Gender-neutral Issue: A Personal
Recollection”, *Astra Salvensis*, IX (2021), no. 18, p. 201-211.