



## STRENGTHENING GENDER EQUALITY BODIES AND NGOs - EQUAL creates think-tanks, resource centres and networks

### 1. FROM TOKEN INSTITUTIONS TO VALUABLE AND VALUED KEY PLAYERS

There is probably nobody in the whole of the European Union who could actually tell you the exact number of **gender equality bodies** that exists in each of the Member States. The national machinery includes **ministries** with exclusive responsibility for equal opportunities or for integrating it into other portfolios, but often also **more or less independent authorities** whose remit is to combat discrimination based on gender and sometimes also on religion, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. In many countries, gender equality bodies form part of regional and local governments and parliaments at all levels have gender equality commissions or committees. The same is true for **trade unions** and for an increasing number of **employers' organisations**. **Companies**, particularly large corporations, have created positions for equal opportunities advisors, as have **universities and research institutions**. In addition, specific centres dedicated to **gender research** have been emerging across Europe and their results are being fed into policy development.

Many of these mechanisms go back to the 1970s when the first European Gender Equality Directives were being transposed into national legislation. In the early days these structures were often regarded as being merely token institutions without much influence on the decision-making process. Yet, over the years **gender equality bodies have become key players** whose knowledge and expertise are being valued not only by their ultimate beneficiaries, women and more recently also men, but in the political arena and in the business world. Despite this undeniable progress, the gender equality infrastructures themselves are often far from satisfied with their situation. Equality counsellors, particularly at regional and local level, often feel they are engaged in an up-hill battle, suffering from a **lack of permanent staff and financial resources** and not sufficiently well anchored in the administrations or organisations.

The “landscape” of women’s NGOs that has emerged across the EU is even more multi-faceted than that of gender equality bodies. **National umbrella organisations** representing the full scope of female interests in all policy fields are playing an important role in government negotiations. In addition, there is a large number of NGOs which are **bringing together professional women**, ranging from entrepreneurs to scientists, and engineers to medical doctors or even journalists. Last but not least, thousands of **grass root groups** are addressing single issues such as violence against women, sex traffic, health and reproductive rights or are advocating the rights of specific target groups. The membership of the **European Women’s Lobby (EWL)** ([EWL](#)) mirrors this large diversity, at EU level.

### EU POLICIES: LEGISLATION IS NOT ENOUGH

The EU’s **equal treatment** legislation is a firmly established and integral part of the “*acquis communautaire*”. Considerable progress has been achieved, but in day-to day life **gender equality is still not a reality for women and men**. Therefore the Commission has established a comprehensive strategy, which embraces all Community policies in its efforts to promote gender equality, either by adjusting their policies through pro-active intervention or **gender mainstreaming** and/or by implementing concrete actions designed to improve the situation of women in society through reactive intervention and the implementation of specific actions. **Re-enforcing cooperation with national gender equality authorities** and improving coordination of the relevant activities is an important part of the European Gender Equality Framework Strategy<sup>1</sup>. **Partnerships with social partner organisations** as major players in economic life **and with NGOs** as representatives of the civil society are another priority. Following requests from the European Council and the European Parliament, the Commission announced, in spring 2005, that a **European Institute for Gender Equality** would be set up to support the EU institutions and the Member States in implementing equality between women and men and in combating sex discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> [Community Framework Strategy on Gender Equality \(2001-2005\)](#).

## 2. EQUAL IS BUILDING LANDMARKS OF GENDER EQUALITY

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EQUAL partnerships have, particularly in southern countries, created and strengthened gender equality bodies and established fruitful cooperation with women's associations and often also with other NGOs whose remit is not specifically gender equality. Whilst most of these successful strategies were implemented at local and regional level, in some cases cooperation with national equal opportunities authorities has further enhanced both the visibility and dissemination of the new approaches.

### 2.1. OPTIMISING THE IMPACT OF GENDER EQUALITY BODIES

New infrastructures, created thanks to EQUAL, are making a real difference to the lives of women and men. **Addressing the most burning gender equality issues**, they focus on the dilemma of reconciling work and private life, the persisting gender gaps in the labour market and, last but not least, on the eternal problem of overcoming traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In addition to tackling these well known challenges, EQUAL has generated positive change by **linking gender equality strategies to local development**. The idea is to enable municipalities and local development agencies to value and use the potential of women, whilst at the same time helping guidance and training providers to tailor their activities to the needs of specific female target groups and to the skills requirements of the economy. Moreover, EQUAL funding has been used to train the staff of gender equality bodies to ensure that the **needs and roles of men** are better taken into account and to lay the foundations for gender mainstreaming in their territories.

Operating in two northern regions of [Spain](#) an EQUAL partnership has succeeded in **integrating a gender perspective into the policies and practices of local governments** through strengthening both the status and role of equality agents. The experience shows that the best way to "empower" equality agents is that the city governments should hire them as regular staff members but place them under the direct responsibility of the mayor. To convince the mayors and city councils of the validity of the approach, the project used **financial incentives**. These resources were allocated to each equality agent and this turned out to be a decisive factor in the municipalities' decision to join the EQUAL activities. These included introducing gender mainstreaming into employment policies and social services in each local area. To this end, the equality advisors carried out training for career counsellors, social workers and local development agents. **Building lasting gender equality alliances** with these actors was the goal and the sustainability of this inter-agency approach was ensured through "Cooperation Agreements", by which the various players are now bound.

Another partnership based in the Italian [Province of Venice](#) has created a **network** linking two different categories of gender equality infrastructures. The first consists of **local resource centres** in a large number of local communities that offer **counselling and support** related to any problems women may encounter when trying to access employment and/or to find a more satisfying balance between work and family tasks. The remit of the second category of resource centres is to provide **advice and services** to public authorities at local, provincial and regional level, to social partner organisations, enterprises and other key players with responsibilities for equal opportunities and local development. In extending the network, the project involved the gender equality bodies in all the provinces of the Veneto region, which increased the influence and mainstreaming capacity of these units. The enlarged network was instrumental in drafting and passing **regional legislation** that secured the sustainability of local gender equality centres by stipulating that regular and reliable financing of those bodies must be provided through the budget of the Veneto Region.

### 2.2. SYNERGIES ENABLING WIN-WIN SITUATIONS

Creating synergies between public sector gender equality advisors and their counterparts in private companies, in trade unions and employers organisations proved to be an excellent **strategy to boost the impact equal of opportunities policies**.

Coordinated by the [National Gender Institute](#), a Greek EQUAL partnership linked existing **regional gender equality bodies** to new **company based equality units**. To promote the adoption of "equality plans" in organisations and enterprises the project designed a training programme, which was implemented in Athens and in six of the twelve Greek regions. Trainees came from three large corporations (banking, transport, mass media/new technologies) and from regional centres that

support female employment and entrepreneurship. Whilst the employees seconded by the enterprises acquired knowledge and skills to develop company specific equality plans and units, the participants working in the regional structures learned to support local businesses to set up positive action plans. The training included the most recent developments in equal opportunities policies with a special emphasis on the labour market, and also methodological skills to plan, implement and monitor equality action plans in companies. The approach convinced a growing number of employers to launch initiatives that ensure equal opportunities for women and men. In addition, the trainees have become local resources on all issues related to equality in the labour market. This **cooperation between public and private sector equality structures** has also enhanced the coordination and efficiency of their various actions and helped to forge coalitions linking key players such as the regional governments, local authorities, chambers of commerce, trade unions and employer organisations in each region.

In Portugal, EQUAL has benefited greatly from the accumulated knowledge and experience of gender equality bodies. Both the [National Commission for Gender Equality on the Labour Market](#) and the [National Commission for Gender Equality and Women's Rights](#) played a leading role in EQUAL projects. In some cases, the two organisations provided **gender training to teachers and trainers** enabling them to widen the vocational choices of pupils and young people in others they trained women and men as gender equality advisors in public and private enterprises and organisations. Furthermore their input was crucial in promoting policies for recruitment, selection, pay, access to training, career progression and job security which are not discriminatory in terms of gender and also of ethnicity. Joining forces with [gender equality units of trade unions](#) and municipalities strengthened the impact of the different activities. Encouraging and [supporting companies](#) to integrate gender equality into their personnel policies resulted not only in **equality plans** and specific actions for women, but also in **influencing the social dialogue and eventually in collective agreements**.

The only project in the first round of EQUAL that addressed **equal pay**, a [Scottish partnership](#), is another outstanding example of the capacity of gender equality bodies to engender change. Led by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), it brought together the Scottish Executive (the devolved government for Scotland), trade unions, local development agencies and a grouping of government funded projects that presented the business case for equality. To tackle the biggest gender pay gap in the EU, the EOC developed a model for an **Equal Pay Review Process** which helps organisations to test their pay structures and to ensure that they are not discriminatory. From the beginning, it was made entirely clear that this was not simply a data collection exercise, but that it entailed a **commitment to remedy any gender pay inequalities**. This meant that the review had to have the involvement and support of managers with the authority to deliver the necessary changes. Thanks to the active support of the partners, this was exactly what happened. Scotland's employers are now increasingly embarking on Equal Pay Reviews and on the implementation of **Equal Pay Action Plans**. By the end of 2004, some 50% of Scottish employers had either completed an Equal Pay Review or were planning to introduce one.

### **2.3. WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS CAN ACHIEVE MIRACLES**

In many territories, women's NGOs work hand in hand with gender equality bodies. They have played an important role in backing the EQUAL activities and disseminating good practices. As partners, they have frequently helped projects to target female target groups that are difficult to reach and to bring key players on board who are in position to push for the mainstreaming of EQUAL's achievements.

The **active support of associations** in [Germany](#) and [Spain](#) that are committed to **combating trafficking of women** was essential to EQUAL projects in gaining the trust of women prostitutes who had been lured into these countries with the promise of finding employment and getting a work permit. In Germany, the women were allowed to stay under a victim protection scheme, but only until the court cases against their abusers had been heard. During the waiting period, the NGO supported them to apply for asylum and to take advantage of an EQUAL scheme that linked German language training to the acquisition of basic ICT skills, thus **facilitating their labour market access** in Germany or in their countries of origin if they returned. In the Spanish case, the NGO helped the project to identify and convince **ex-prostitutes** to **become "mentors"** of women sex workers who were willing to change their situation, to find a job or to embark on self-employment based on their needs, possibilities and skills. Successful outcomes of such activities include a Brazilian bar, a samba and bossa nova school, the manufacture of fancy dress outfits and a cooking workshop.

In the [UK](#), a national NGO, specialising in the development of training and education for women and best practice on gender equality in learning, used the many contacts of its members to assist an EQUAL partnership in **finding and convincing professionals to become mentors**. **These mentors** supported women during training or the early stages of their careers in the science, engineering, construction and property services sectors. Similarly, in many countries local, regional and national associations of women entrepreneurs have supported EQUAL projects, that were helping women to prepare to set up their own business.

NGOs and grass root groups focusing on cultural, social and recreational activities were at the heart of a [Portuguese partnership](#) that has mounted a successful **support network** for parents, senior citizens and people with disabilities or those suffering from a chronic disease. Donating their time, members of the associations are **providing volunteer services** in six local areas. Senior citizens, for instance, can “book” a volunteer to accompany them when they want to go out or to help them with their paper work. Working parents can rely on network members who take their kids to and from school or help with homework and occasional babysitting. The network is also strengthening regular family support institutions by providing extra services outside of official working hours of paid staff.

### **3. MULTI-FACETTED PARTNERSHIPS AS KEY TO SUCCESS**

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The success stories presented in this document are demonstrating that gender equality bodies and NGOs are clearly **moving beyond the confines of equal opportunities policies**. Besides reinforcing their activities through networking amongst each other, they have made the most of the **EQUAL partnership approach**. In many Member States they have functioned as “bridging agents” that paved the way for lasting coalitions with key players from the business world and decision-makers and practitioners in **education, training and employment policies**.

Even if there are large differences between institutional frameworks and approaches of gender equality bodies operating in the north and the south of the EU or in new and old Member States, they all share the ambition of bringing gender equality into the mainstream. In the framework of EQUAL, they have succeeded in making policy makers adopt the principle of **gender mainstreaming** and understand that the persistent inequalities in employment and almost all societal spheres require the implementation of **specific actions in favour of women**. EQUAL has thus contributed to transferring the European Commission’s dual track-approach to gender equality to the local and regional level, bringing it closer to the daily realities of women and men.

The examples mentioned above represent only a small part of the wealth of good practices generated by EQUAL throughout Europe. Based on these good practices, the **European Thematic Group on Equal Opportunities (ETG 4)** has constructed the European Model of comprehensive approaches to gender equality, which combines strategies and concepts to dismantle the gender gaps and segregation of the labour market; to improve the reconciliation of working and private life for women and men; and to overcome traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The model incorporates all the ingredients required to design and implement comprehensive gender equality policies and practices in a territorial context. It presents the “ideal” composition of avenues to gender equality which – so far – cannot be found in any Member State. The model can serve as a blueprint for all policy makers who are committed to making gender equality a reality for women and men in their territories. More information can be found on the [gender equality pages of the EQUAL website](#).

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/activities/etg4\\_en.cfm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/etg4_en.cfm)