

IMPROVING THE GENDER BALANCE IN POLITICS

The under-representation of women in parliaments, governments and other political power structures is a democratic deficit, since half of the population is not adequately represented in the decision-making processes that affect all citizens. Furthermore, the predominance of men in the political arena deprives Member States and the European Union as a whole of a large part of female talents, skills and experiences and risks that women's specific interests and needs are absent from the policy agenda. The Italian Development Partnership (DP) [Esserci](#) was aimed at a fairer representation of women in politics and the run up to the European Elections was a test bed for its strategies. The results of the DP's multifaceted activities that took place throughout the country were impressive: the female proportion of the Italian Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) rose from 11.5% in 1999 to 19,2% in 2004.

The Esserci DP was coordinated by [Arcidonna](#), a women's organisation founded in 1986 to promote freedom and equal opportunities for women and to combat gender discrimination. "From the very beginning", says Valeria Ajovalasit, the president, "we have argued that making gender equality a reality on the labour market and in daily life requires – at the same time - to achieve a more equal share of women in political decision-making. After having successfully introduced job-rotation schemes and support programmes for female entrepreneurship in Sicily thanks to EMPLOYMENT-NOW, we have decided to tackle the under-representation of women in all the areas of political, social and economical power in the framework of EQUAL." The ultimate objective of the project, parity in the relevant leadership positions, is still light years away. Yet, joining forces with local governments, political parties, trade unions, trade associations, women's NGOs, banks, financial and credit institutions has paved the way to change.

THE POLITICAL ARENA – AN INNOVATION FOR THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

Whilst measures to overcome sectoral and occupational gender gaps (horizontal desegregation) on the labour market have been a regular feature of the ESF in general and of NOW and EQUAL in particular, programmes supporting women's access to senior management were clearly less frequent, and mainly targeted at industry and commerce. Thanks to EQUAL Esserci was able to break new ground by addressing political and financial power structures.

Women account for less than 10% of all positions in Italian parliaments and governments, be it at municipal, regional or national level. To identify the dynamics underlying this poor representation of women in political decision-making, a survey of the condition of women in society and in the government of the country was carried out. Data collected were fed into an [Observatory](#) to map out women's role in Italian institutions such as the banking sector, trade unions and in national, regional, provincial and local government. Jointly with its transnational partners in Austria, the Netherlands, Spain, Esserci also created a [European Observatory](#) on female presence in decision-making bodies, which continues to exist even after the end of the EQUAL project.

In a sample survey on the perceptions of gender discrimination, amongst slightly more than 1000 adults over the age of 18, 650 young people aged between 16 and 17 and 3.000 women in managerial positions, the DP used the data of the Observatory to assess opinions about the gender gaps in decision-making bodies in Italy. 42% of the women and 51% of the young women (but only 27.9% of the men) found it important to put more women in charge of senior positions in institutions. Only 5.3% of the overall sample did not find it desirable to have a more equal representation of women and men in the national Parliament. In elections, candidate lists with increased gender balance would attract a positive reaction from 24,5% (men 18,5%, women 30,2%) from Esserci's sample of potential voters.

The data of the Observatory and the results of the survey were then used to put pressure on a number of key actors. The idea was to influence public opinion, institutional players, such as the government and parliament and also the political parties, all of these being, in some way, responsible for the appallingly low participation of women at the different decision-making levels. A huge awareness raising campaign was launched in several stages, which carried two different messages.

"Democrazia. Al maschile è un errore" (Democracy. In the masculine form, it is a mistake). This message was displayed in Rome, Catania, Palermo and Milan airports for 15 days at the end of 2003.

Starting in March 2003, the second part of the advertising campaign targeted the forthcoming election to the European Parliament in June 2004 with the following message: *"Democracy needs women"* and the slogan



"More Italian women into the European Parliament" printed on a fan showing the distribution of seats in the EP.

Extended media work was carried out to present the Observatory and the findings of the sample survey. Press conferences were organised in Rome, Florence, Milan, Genova, Naples, Turin, Salerno, Perugia, Palermo and Ferrara. Esserci's messages were well received by the media and reports and interviews were broadcasted on regional and national television, including prime time news¹. [Many parts of the country](#) were included in the activities and swamped with Esserci's promotional materials ranging from leaflets, stickers, postcards, and playbills to fans, t-shirts and flags. The campaign won two prizes in Italy: an Agora Silver Award for the best social campaign and an Acorn Award in the Piedmont Region. But most important were its results: Following the previous elections, only 11% of Italian MEPs were women. After the campaign, this number rose to 19,2%.

At the recent EQUAL Policy Forum on Gender Equality in Madrid DP manager Anna Cipolla described the media campaign as one of the stepping stones to Esserci's achievements. *"But", she said, "before reaching out to the press we had been working with a professional communications agency that packaged our aims and outcomes into strong messages. In general, we did not face too many obstacles, but it was difficult to get some of the data, particularly from trade unions, banks and the financial sector. Yet, on the other hand their reluctance to transparency has further stimulated the interest of the media which in turn puts these organisations under pressure to embrace change."*

¹ TG1 Economia, Mia Economia – La 7, TG la 7, 24 Ore TV, TG1, TG2, Radio Montecarlo, TG3 Puntodonna, TG3 Lazio, TG3 Toscana, Tsp Raidue, TG1 Raiuno, Uno mattina Raiuno).

PARTNERSHIP WITH SCHOOLS HELPS TO ADDRESS FUTURE VOTERS

Thanks to its vast network linking women's NGOs in [many parts of Italy](#) Arcidonna was able to build a fruitful cooperation with schools. Throughout the country, 6.287 students in 164 general, technical or vocational schools took part in Esserci's "Political laboratory of male and female citizens". Groups of up to 50 students aged 16 to 18 attended a short course of six hours divided in two sessions covering the issue of citizenship and gender equality. This included the history of gender identities and their impact on citizenship in terms of rights, duties and opportunities. Together, the students explored the other half of the planet, i.e. the often hidden female universe and the notions of "equal opportunities", "equality" and "difference".

Acquiring basic knowledge about the legal framework that guarantees equal opportunities for women and men, including European Community law and its application in the Italian legal system was an important part of the course.

A number of pedagogical and didactical tools were developed to stimulate discussion among students and to help teachers and trainers to continue the scheme in the future. Those tools include a dictionary "*Le parole della parità*" explaining terminology, players and mechanisms that control the political and economical life of the country and an historical outline demonstrating both the evolution and the political and social achievements of the women's movement in the 20th century. Other tools were designed to stimulate the young peoples' reflection on gender equality and gender relations and on the positive and negative aspects of being a man or a woman. The "Magic Wand" questionnaire, for instance, helps them to explore how to accomplish an egalitarian democracy: "*If you had a magic wand, what would you do?*"

The students who joined the project took also part in a competition to create an advertising tool aimed to promoting "equal democracy" by proposing a message of up to 160 characters. The winning slogans were:

- Con la parità si vince in due": With equality, women and men win together
- "La democrazia è perfetta quando a decidere sono in due... e uno è donna": "Democracy is perfect when two decide... and one is a woman"
- "Sshh! Silenzio! Le donne stanno parlando e questa volta a gran voce": "Sshh! Silence, please! Women are talking ...and this time loud"

MAINSTREAMING: MAKING LAW – MAKING HISTORY

Thanks to EQUAL, the Esserci DP could play a crucial role when it came to pushing for compliance with regional and national legislation on equal access for women and men to public office. In 2003 article 51 of the Italian Constitution has been modified and now provides for positive action to promote equal opportunities between women and men. In 2004, before the election to the European Parliament, the Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men introduced a new bill into the legislative process. In order to enhance equal opportunities for men and women in European elections, it requires that at least one third of the candidates must be women.

This would a big move towards egalitarian democracy which was not easily accepted by all players. The battle for passing this new provision brought together women from all political parties. The outcome of the battle is, however, still open. Networking, campaign tools and methods developed by the Esserci DP are playing an important part in mounting the public pressure on the parliamentarians.

In the autonomous regions of Italy the concept of equal opportunities and equal representation of women and men had already been introduced in 2001 into the electoral laws. These laws go clearly beyond the national provision since they require concrete action to improve the gender balance. When in Sicily's regional elections of June 2001 those regulations were not applied by

the political parties, Arcidonna went to court to challenge the under-representation of women on the candidate lists. Its proposal to have a man-woman-man-woman distribution (the so-called zip system) on all lists for local, provincial and regional elections opened a debate in the Sicilian Regional Parliament. Arcidonna set up a wide coalition of local associations and committed citizens to push for a revised legislation. Now, thanks to the political activity of Arcidonna and its allies, the Sicilian electoral law has been modified and combines a zip system for majority votes with the requirement that both women and men must be represented by at least 30% of the candidates on parties' lists for proportional representation.

In a public address in 2003, the Secretary General of the Presidency Gaetano Gifuni, praised women for having become "protagonists of the long journey towards modern democracy. In the new perspective of development and growth linked to social change", he said, "they represent a valuable resource to support the process of renewal and progress". In his message, he also conveyed the "warm support" of the President of the Republic for the initiative of Arcidonna.

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)