

# Improving the gender balance in politics

Women account for less than 10% of all positions in Italian parliaments and governments, be it at municipal, regional or national level. This is a serious democratic deficit. It means that half of the population is not adequately represented in the decision-making processes that affect all citizens. It also deprives Italy, and the EU as a whole, of a large pool of female talent, and risks leaving women's interests and needs off the policy agenda.

The Development Partnership (DP) Esserci aimed to get a fairer representation of women in Italian politics. It used the run up to the European Elections as a test bed for its strategies, and the results were impressive: the proportion of women elected as Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in Italy 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. They joined forces with local governments, political parties, trade unions, trade associations, women's NGOs, banks, financial and credit institutions to pave the way for change.

## Getting the public ready to embrace change

The project's first step was to conduct a survey on the position of women in society and in government. They found that only 5.3% of all respondents (comprising a sample of around 4 500 people) opposed a more equal representation of women and men in the national Parliament. Furthermore, 18.5% of men, and 30.2% of women said they would react positively to a better gender balance in candidate lists for elections.

The survey results have been fed into an Observatory that maps out women's role in Italian institutions such as the banking sector, trade unions and in different levels of government. Together with its transnational partners in Austria, the Netherlands and Spain, Esserci also created a European Observatory on female presence in decision-making bodies, which continues to operate now the EQUAL project has ended.

Using the survey results and observatory data, the Esserci DP then launched a massive awareness raising campaign, focusing on two key messages. Posters carrying the slogan

"Democrazia. Al maschile è un errore" ("Democracy. In the masculine form, is a mistake") were displayed in Rome, Catania, Palermo and Milan airports for 15 days at the end of 2003. Then the slogans "Democracy needs women" and "More Italian women into the European Parliament" were printed on a fan showing the distribution of seats in the EP.

The extensive media work proved particularly successful. Press conferences were organised across the country, and interviews were broadcast on regional and national television, including prime time news. Several regions participated in the distribution of other promotional materials such as leaflets, stickers, postcards, 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. The number of women among the Italian MEPs rose from 11% in the previous election, to 19.2% in 2004.

Through its network of women's NGOs across Italy, the DP also cooperated with schools throughout the country, to train students on the issues of citizenship and gender equality. Over 6 000 students, aged 16 to 18, took part in the courses, which included sessions on gender identities, their impact on participation in economical and political life, and EU and national legislation on equal opportunities.

## Mainstreaming: making law – making history

The Esserci DP was instrumental in lobbying for improvements to, and compliance with, regional and national legislation on equal access for women and men to public office. In 2003 article 51 of the Italian Constitution was modified and now provides for positive action to promote equal opportunities between women and men. In 2004, the Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men introduced a new bill into the legislative process, requiring that one third of candidates must be women. This new provision brought support from women from all political parties, but the outcome is yet to be decided. Networking, campaign tools and methods developed by Esserci are helping to increase public pressure on parliamentarians.

At a regional level, Arcidonna challenged the under-representation of women on candidate lists in court. 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. 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.

*"Women have become protagonists of the long journey towards modern democracy. In the new perspective of development and growth linked to social change, they represent a valuable resource to support the process of renewal and progress".* The Secretary General of the Presidency Gaetano Gifuni in a public address in 2003, in which he also conveyed the "warm support" of the President of the Republic for Arcidonna's initiative.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/equal/activities/search\\_en.cfm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm)

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