

LANDMARKS OF GENDER EQUALITY

The Italian "Con-Tempo" Development Partnership (DP) is trying hard to make a big difference to the daily lives of women and men. To attain its ambition, it is creating local resource centres for gender equality in four provinces in the Lombardy region. It is also promoting the activities of the European Cities for Reconciliation and seeking new members for this network.

The DP's objective is to increase female labour market participation but it also wants to secure a more satisfying work-life-balance for both women and men and here, the local resource centres come to the fore. In addition to helping people find individual solutions to reconciling their career and family obligations, the resource centres are assisting public authorities, enterprises, co-operatives and job centres in the development of a more supportive working environment for employees who have care responsibilities.

All of the centres provide counselling and they also organise events that promote information about the relevant legislation, public and private services for vocational guidance and training, job openings and care facilities for children and other dependants. However, each centre has developed its own "specialty services" that address the particular needs and priorities of the community in which it is based.

In Pavia, the local gender equality centre provides a meeting point for both women and men, and is also setting up an employer network. In addition, it hosts several local associations including the Time Bank. Through this Time Bank, people can barter their own time and their skills as an alternative to paying money for goods or services.

In Lodi, the DP has set up the centre within the municipal authority - an authority that is already focusing on reconciliation issues and, particularly, on promoting a culture of sharing unpaid care and housework between women and men. The centre is located in an area where there are a number of existing meeting points and information facilities. Thanks to EQUAL, cooperation and exchange has been strengthened between the town's services for young people, its centre for elderly people, the Provincial Centre on Women and Work and the promoters of various cultural activities. The DP has also created a special "family desk" within the municipal Health Care Unit and through awareness raising and training it has helped the employees of that unit to integrate a gender dimension into their work.

In the province of Cremona, the DP has established three local resource centres based in Cremona, Crema and Casalmaggiore. The first two are specialising in support to women's business creation and entrepreneurship. The Cremona centre has also convinced a major employer to open a company-based kindergarten. This is an important step in accommodating the needs of women shift workers and, at the same time, it helps the company to reduce absenteeism and staff turnover. This new childcare service is managed by a local cooperative and only a small part of its financing comes from EQUAL, as the firm committed itself to provide most of the set-up and running costs. The local resource centre has now opened a branch within the childcare facility and this move has greatly improved the access of shift workers to its services.

The Mantua centre focuses on intercultural approaches and mediation. It has designed specific programmes for women immigrants, including empowerment schemes and individual pathways to social and labour market inclusion. In Mantua, the DP is also testing the viability of basing a "work-life-balance desk" in a large enterprise. This help desk supports employees in a number of ways such as assisting them in identifying the most suitable childcare services and in finding a speedy solution to almost any kind of emergency. The help desk also ensures that people on parental leave do not lose touch with the company. Opportunities are provided for part-time work, on a regular or occasional basis, and for participation in training.

These experiences enable parents not only to maintain, but to up-date, their skills and so they are well prepared for their full-time return to the workplace.

All of these local resource centres are open at least two days per week (one day in the morning and the other in the afternoon). Mantua manages to stay open three days a week, including a Saturday morning, and a few centres are making their services available during lunchtime.

MAINSTREAMING AT REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL

The DP created a working group in order to guarantee the sustainability of its EQUAL achievements. This working group involved social partner organisations, public authorities and NGOs and all of these players signed an "agreement of understanding" committing themselves to mainstream the results of Con-tempo's experimental activities throughout the provinces involved.

In terms of its transnational achievements, the DP and its partners in France (two DPs), Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal have established a permanent network of European Cities for Reconciliation. The core members are the 20 cities or areas that have already worked together within this EQUAL Transnational Partnership but every effort is being made to attract new town councils and local authorities into the network. This cross-border alliance is continuing to promote viable solutions to balancing working and private life at the level of neighbourhoods, cities and wider areas, whether these are primarily rural or urban. European Cities for Reconciliation also lobbies to ensure that the issue of reconciliation is towards the top of the policy agendas at local, regional, national and, of course, European level.

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