

## MAKING THE CITY A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK

Situated in a traditional industrial area in Italy's Tuscany region, the city of Prato has been undergoing major economic and structural change for more than a decade. To face the various challenges related to the reorganisation of production systems and its impact on the labour market, the municipality has set up a multi-annual action plan. The idea was to make Prato a better place to live and work for all the different groups in its population, whilst at the same time improving the productivity and competitiveness of the whole area. This ambitious task started in 1995 when the Mayor of Prato commissioned a number of studies to identify the interests and needs of the citizens, as well as those of the local enterprises. The results were fed into a process that was intended to take better account of those needs in current and future urban planning, employment and territorial development policies. One of the most striking outcomes of the surveys was everybody's concern about time. Employees claimed that their increasingly irregular and atypical working hours did not coincide with the 'times of the city' such as the opening hours of local authorities, shops and stores, childcare facilities, schools and other service providers and even the public transport schedules, whilst employers expressed an urgent need for more flexible working time to enable production rhythms to follow the trends of global markets.

Based on these findings, the city set up the "[Consulta permanente degli Orari e dei Tempi della città](#)", an agency that ever since has sought to gradually harmonise the times of the city with the requirements of people's working and private lives. As it appeared that women, who in most cases bear the brunt of care and other family tasks, were suffering more from time pressures than men, gender equality was introduced as a transversal issue in Prato's time policies and practices.

### A TIME LAB TO TEST INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

EQUAL provided a great opportunity to further develop and test a large number of activities that are important components of this concept. In fact, the "[Laboratorio del tempo](#)" DP was launched by, and has closely cooperated with, the Prato Time Agency and this helped to forge a partnership, linking the municipality, a large employers' consortium and the University of Florence. Together they designed a 'time lab' consisting of a local resource centre and a series of pilot actions that were implemented in companies and public administrations.



The main thrust of the DP was aimed at helping women reconcile working and private life, whilst at the same time convincing employers that flexibility in the production process should not only accommodate their business needs but also allow for an improved work-life-balance of employees. *"Flexibility today is rarely a blessing to women with care responsibilities for children or ageing parents. Flexibility requires almost permanent availability and adaptability to the changing demands in the workplace, which can cause huge problems for women. They can't always manage to squeeze in overtime or an extra-shift at short notice, as the existing childcare provision is not accommodating these working patterns,"* says project manager Chiara Mellini, *"Also, unemployed or inactive women encounter more difficulties than men in finding a job, since employers tend to assume that, given their role as mothers, they can't respond sufficiently to the needs of flexibility. This is why we have set up the 'Laboratorio' as a support centre for all those who seek to reconcile work and family obligations and the different demands on their time."*

The new community centre, created thanks to EQUAL, has established a wide range of services for both women and men of all age groups and from different life situations. For instance, baby-

sitting and childcare services provided in the afternoon, when kindergartens and schools are closed, became a life-line for parents with irregular working times. Entrepreneurship training and courses in ICT, Internet use, knowledge management and foreign languages were scheduled to meet the needs of various target groups and always included the offer of childcare. Clearly, ICT was at the top of the demand list, as mastering new technologies is extremely important for women who wish to become entrepreneurs or to re-enter the labour market in an industrial area like Prato. ICT courses also linked the generations, as the youngest and oldest visitors to the centre were learning basic computer and Internet skills together. Over time, these two groups have become 'regulars' in the Laboratorio's much frequented Internet Café.

Activities were organised to follow specific daily or weekly rhythms. In the morning, special offers attracted older and unemployed people. The afternoon was children's time and evening courses catered for employed people who sought to acquire, or up-date, professional knowledge and skills. Under the title of 'Fiocco Rosa, Fiocco Celeste,' based on the Italian tradition of decorating the front door of the house with a pink or a blue ribbon when a baby is born, a weekly programme provided advice and support for all the tasks and problems in taking care of babies and toddlers. The programme was led by a family mediator and it enabled young couples to discuss problems of role sharing in a daily life that involves small children and also to learn from each other. Saturdays were dedicated to fathers and children who could spend quality time together in all kinds of indoor and outdoor activities.

Involving men, and particularly fathers, was a top priority in the DP's strategy to overcome gender stereotyping and the traditional patterns of a male centred culture. Based on the assumption that men like to plan and implement projects over a certain period of time, as opposed to being permanently 'condemned' to household or care tasks, the Laboratorio team used project work to pave the way to lasting male involvement in family duties. This included, for instance, completing the 'Fiocco Rosa, Fiocco Celeste' programme or preparing a meal for the family once a week, including shopping and cleaning up the kitchen afterwards. A course entitled 'S.O.S - Il Casalingo' (SOS Male-Household) invited men to improve their skills in household management. The course, which is also available in an Internet version, is based on learning by doing domestic jobs such as ironing, cooking, washing and cleaning a house. Becoming a housework trainee required quite a lot of courage. *"I approached that course with a mixture of respect and fear,"* admits Davide Angeletti, *"I was afraid to reveal my ignorance of these matters. But afterwards, when the teachers began to talk and explain, my fear turned into curiosity. I developed an ambition to learn the things that are usually dealt with by my partner and, why not, to accept making mistakes, which is after all inevitable in growing up."* Like Davide, most participants in the scheme, not only acquired new skills, but also came to value the unpaid work of women in the home.

## **PARTNERSHIP ENABLES THE DEVELOPMENT OF CARE AND OTHER FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES**

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Cooperation between the municipality of Prato and CONSER, an employers' consortium with a membership of 300 small and micro enterprises, generated a number of positive changes in people's daily working lives. Together, these companies have more than 3000 employees and are operating mainly in the textile sector in an industrial zone called the 1<sup>st</sup> Macrolotto of Prato. CONSER is famous for having created an outstanding system of water recycling and energy saving that is minimising the impact of industrial production on the environment. This system provided economies of scale for its member companies that, each on their own, they could never have achieved. CONSER has also set up the first office in Italy of a 'mobility manager' whose task is to reduce the pollution caused by individual car owners and freight transport. As a partner in the EQUAL project, the consortium applied its ambitious, joint-venture approach to the dilemma of reconciliation.

Based on the results of a study that had assessed the most pressing needs of the companies and their employees, it has developed work-life-balance solutions for the whole industrial area. *"From the study we learned how much precious time is being lost because of inevitable every day routines,"* explains Pierpaolo Dettori, CONSER's Mobility Manager, *"We found that, on average, of the 3000 employees working here, 1,000 are going every day to the super market, to the dry cleaners, the post office or bring their kids to school and 2,400 are driving to work in their own cars and causing a daily traffic jam."* To remedy this situation, CONSER set up a transport

service. The city donated ten electrical vans, so that people could travel to work in groups rather than individually in their cars. In addition, by using this service and travelling earlier or later, employees are now saving time and money and are helping to reduce traffic congestion and pollution. This new mode of commuting only exists because the companies involved were prepared to harmonise their working hours with the schedules of this transport system. Another joint venture with the municipality involves the creation of a childcare centre whose opening hours will be adapted to the working times of parents. On a piece of land provided by the city free of charge, CONSER is investing in the construction of a new building that will house the care facility. The centre will be equipped with CONSER's energy saving technology which will help to minimise the fees. In addition, to make the lives of working parents a lot easier, postal services have been set up in the zone and centralised laundry and shopping services are being established. All these services can be accessed by using a credit card that offers special reductions in the local supermarkets and in other stores in Prato.

## **TURNING PILOT ACTIONS INTO REGULAR PRACTICE**

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Linking its activities to existing policy and business priorities has been a decisive factor in achieving the sustainability and lasting impact of the DP's various activities. Manuela Bruscia, who served as a Member of the City Council between 2001 and 2004, and was responsible for equal opportunities and women's rights states, *"It has been not accidental that this project was born in Prato. It could build on years of experience and on the political will of the municipality to further improve its time policies. EQUAL was a unique opportunity to diversify and to enroot them even more firmly in our territory."* Consequently, after the completion of the project at the end of 2004, the 'Laboratorio del tempo' community centre became a permanent institution, managed and financed by the municipality.

The work-life-balance programmes that were tested in the Macrolotto zone have yielded advantages, which the employers wish to perpetuate. Thanks to the new transport and family services, it is now easier to harmonise the increasing flexibility of the production systems with the needs of their employees. Pierpaolo Dettori emphasises that without the EQUAL partnership the cost of the service package could not have been met by the smaller businesses in their own right. *"The transport service has not so far involved any direct cost for the companies since the vehicles had been donated by the municipality,"* he says, *"and the employees, who are saving up to 2,400 € per year on fuel and car maintenance, are more than willing to pay the fares. Within the consortium, we have assessed the costs and benefits of the package and eventually some larger companies have decided to make voluntary financial commitments such as meeting the running costs of some of the electrical vans. We expect similar experiences when the new childcare centre is up and running. I am convinced that over time we shall also see benefits in terms of greater work satisfaction and productivity of the employees."*

According to Christina Pugi, the project director, the Laboratorio del Tempo DP has successfully linked both horizontal and vertical mainstreaming to gender mainstreaming. *"Through visibility events and networks our good practices have been disseminated beyond the partnership. Social, political, economic, cultural and civic institutions that are interested in bringing about change in the city and in the perception of the gender roles of its citizens are adopting our approaches. We are also receiving additional EQUAL funding (Action 3) to multiply and mainstream the Laboratorio model outside the Tuscany region and even outside Italy."* Together with the International Labour Organisation's training centre in Turin and the municipality of Potenza in the south of the country, the DP is currently helping to transfer and adapt the model to other economic and social contexts.

## **BROADENING HORIZONS THROUGH TRANSNATIONALITY**

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The DP has worked with partners in France and Spain who had fairly similar ambitions. The three projects shared a commitment to facilitating women's access to the labour market and to improving the work-life-balance of women and men through local time policies. To enhance the commitment of local key players, transnational meetings not only involved project staff but also political decision-makers and representatives of public authorities, chambers of commerce, trade unions and companies. Learning from peers who have successfully implemented gender equality policies in another national context, led some of those key people to consider similar actions in their own territories.

Peer exchanges were also organised for groups of beneficiaries. For instance, participants in the Spanish language courses offered by the Laboratorio developed a lively exchange of views, news and opinions with women in Spain via an Internet forum called 'Hablar' that was developed jointly by the two partners. Also, women entrepreneurs from Prato travelled to the city of Hospitalet de Llobregat, the home of the Spanish partner, to meet business women in the Barcelona region and initiate a cross-border network

Moreover, successful concepts and tools were traded amongst the partners and adapted to the needs of other target groups and local contexts. The Laboratorio del Tempo imported a training scheme developed in Spain that had proved to be successful in supporting women in the creation of small or micro enterprises, while the French DP showcased Prato's household management courses for men in Rennes and is now planning similar activities.

When asked about the most important asset of transnationality, Christina Pugi put the broadening of everybody's horizons at the top of her list and this was not only true for project staff and key players, but also for many citizens of Prato. *"Through the local press we kept the public-at-large informed about our transnational work. People who were interested could join in during the meetings or take part in the cultural activities we had organised for our visitors,"* she explained, *"and this open door policy has raised the general awareness of European and national gender equality policies and of what the EQUAL programme has achieved in the city."*

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[Link to EQUAL data base description](#)

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