

Women Resource Centres - Efforts and hopes of a politically aware society.

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The WRCs (Women Resource Centers) arise from European measures with the aim to support and accelerate women integration into the labor market and in the processes of socio-economic development. These Centers, promoted by public authorities or by private organizations regionally accredited, are intended to ensure women integration by developing and improving social and economic local initiatives, creating a network for sharing resources, ideas, good practices, information and intervention models for local development and gender equality policies.

The WRCs, responding to local needs and depending on each development context, have taken different forms and names while maintaining the same purposes. Depending on FES financing, they have known hard periods and suffered the effects of the economic crisis that has instead increased the need for them.

We have asked to **Patrizia Gobat**, Chairman of Ali Cooperative society for Education, who followed the birth of such Centers in the Province of Venice “how are born the WRCs in Veneto Region?”, .She explains:

Patrizia Gobat: Thanks to the European Equal programme! With the Equal RI.DO. project, thematic help desks were born together with more generic gender sensitive offices for guidance and counseling, both in the municipalities and other partner Institutions involved in the project. Since 2003, the Veneto Region has sought to consolidate these realities financing them with its own budget, willing to "support permanent services sustaining gender equalities, such as Woman Help Desks and Women Resource Centres". The Regional plan has favored the aggregation of several municipalities, thus creating real networks for public awareness on gender issues.

Silvia Codato: *Why there is such a distinction between the nomenclature “Women Resource Centres” and “Woman Help Desks”?*

P. G.: This distinction was initially related to the activities of these initiatives: the "Resource Centers" focused on specific topics such as, for example, labor market, immigration, etc. While the "Woman Help Desks" provided general information services on gender equality. As time went by, this distinction passed by because the Regional Call, funding these initiatives, establishes yearly programming lines for them to follow. The most critical point is that it happens that these Help desks are not funded some year and so Municipalities themselves have to find the resources to keep them functioning. So, everyone knows that the available resources are always limited and sometimes we tried, as in the case of the Municipality of Fossalta di Portogruaro, to keep on information and consulting services together with experts of

Ali Cooperative, ensuring, thus, continuity through years.

The Provincial Women Resource Centre instead functioned as animation and coordination subject for the network of local WRC and Help Desks in its territory, promoting synergic actions and the dissemination of information and best practices through their website.

S. C.: Why the Centers opened in fits and starts?

P. G.: The main problem is that these Centers have only regional funding and they too are limited, and so their activities cannot be guaranteed over time. This is the present situation. These initiatives were anyway successful in spreading the culture of gender equality, for the first time, in the territory of the Province of Venice"

We are one with them in the effort to keep the enthusiasm to build and these centers while seeing them closing from time to time.

Despite the fact that we are talking about these Centres as important initiatives to enhance the interaction between man and woman in Italy from more than a decade ago, we are still fighting to give an identity to them and acknowledge their Mission.

Generally speaking, we can say that enhancing the elements that generates a free and grateful interaction between the two perennial opposites, male and female, the respect for the Other, the defense of culture and freedom of expression , and the support to personal fulfillment, are still far from being recognized as an effort of those who work for gender equality.

The first Women Resource Centres were born with the "Recite II" European program (1996), whose purpose was assisting the "interregional cooperation" i.e. the exchange of experiences, ideas, methods and practices among local operators in the European Union (1).

In December 2000 the European Association of Women's Resource Centres was established between Bic Puglia Sprind, Centro di Iniziativa Europea – CdiE, Bic Emilia Romagna and the municipality of Sydra (GB) with the purpose to support the permanence of the European network of Women Resource Centres (2).

The Lombardy, Puglia and Veneto regions had the opportunity to participate to the Interreg III B project WEFnet (Women Engendering the Finance Network) which aimed to consolidate best practices and create appropriate synergies and common intent for the application of the principle of gender mainstreaming (3).

The Province of Venice and the Sardinia Region participated to Interreg III C project Winnet (2003-2006) aimed to create a European network of Local resource centres for women with the goal of improving the quality of local development processes through a tight integration of economic, social and gender policies (4).

The main objective of Winnet was the creation of a European network of Women Resource Centres, being able, through interregional cooperation, to increase and improve policies and instruments for gender equality at local, regional and European

levels, promoting the role of women in local development.

So we have, on one side the willing to participate in projects for gender equality that could be effective and permanent, and on the other side a myriad of little projects that appeared on the Italian scenario and walked away without making noise or leaving traces.

These Centers, willing to offer strategies to fight the remoteness between different worlds, truly strategies effective for the everyday life, willing to be Useful to the society, enriching and enhancing the community they served, for most cases they didn't succeeded in putting down roots.

We wanted to retrace in broad terms the story of WRCs to understand how Italy responded to this solicitation and we found that it often happen that the people working for the same objectives do not know each other actions and activities. And we too have had big difficulties are in finding information and contacts. Why is that? There is no coordination?.

Maybe there is not a common language through which effectively looking for information? Or maybe it was abused?

Maybe too many needs have been carried on the track leading to gender equality?

Maybe in the collective imagination gender equality stands for uneasiness and exclusion, therefore these centers stands for weakness and cause shame?

Maybe the emergence of the female uneasiness is considered an attempt to abuse or prevaricate women?

Maybe women and disadvantaged groups in general should be cared for only in urgent situations, while their need to grow and to gain strength is not considered important?

We asked these questions to **Maria Elena Tomat**, President of the provincial Commission for Gender Equality:

Silvia Codato: President, as we face this situation, what do you think about it and what's your opinion on such concerns?

Maria Elena Tomat: Actually, Equal Opportunity policies aren't of high repute and therefore receive only episodic and fragmentary funding. This of course affects the way they are carried out. It is not acknowledged that the status of women represents a crucial problem in the structure of our society, and these concerns should be faced and solved. If politicians – both men and women – were aware of the importance of gender perspective and followed a gender mainstream school of thought, there would be no need for equality legislation; however, the truth is that even those who have institutional roles often don't know the problems Equal Opportunity policies deal with.

It's not about helping a population bracket that is weak per se, but about giving women adequate instruments in sectors that traditionally, because of social and cultural reasons, were born and grew without anticipating the presence of women within them. Work and politics-wise there are cycles

and rules which don't adhere well to women's life rhythms, especially when taking into account that our society considers the role of women to be predominantly caretakers. When, in a time of economic crisis, we see a decrease of job positions and services, it is women who undergo the most severe consequences in both sectors. When the general consensus assigns women to a domestic role, which is innately private, we understand why there are not investments aiming at balancing their presence in other sectors. Moreover, men aren't interested in giving up positions that they consider to be "naturally" of their competence. Actually, promoting a bigger presence of women in the labor market should be pursued for convenience, if not for equity: womenomics shows that to increase women's participation to the labor market leads to better economic results, and represents not only an opportunity, but also and foremost a necessity.

If Italy wants to move with the times, we must make Equal Opportunity policies the focus of our actions, otherwise we are destined to remain a country culturally and economically in arrears, a country that gives up using half of its human capital.

S. C.: How can we bring some energy and confidence to those supporting Equal Opportunity?

M. E. T.: Europe and our Constitutional Chart are the sources and guarantees that we have the chance of reaching some of our goals in this field. EU legislation provides us with directives and recommendations that bind even the most reluctant countries to adjust, sooner or later, and abide to modernity.

Article 3 of our Constitution reminds us that "It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic and social nature which, really limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, impede the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country." Can we imagine a nobler mission, on the basis of this mandate, than to work so to give equal social dignity to the female citizens of this Country? I consider this commitment worth primarily civilian rather than political militancy.

Therefore, there are some reference points both of legal and practical policy.

Numerous initiatives have flourished and this means that many people have committed part of their lives in start trading for the exploitation of such resources.

But the question that haunts us more than others is: what are the strategies to communicate clearly that actions undertaken in pursuance of the principles of gender equality are of mutual enrichment and not for overthrowing Kings?

The question of "power" is very important. Power corresponds to the freedom of action, movement and management then it's not easy to communicate that sharing power mutually it means co-enriching and so more freedom returns through the other's potential.

On the other side power corresponds to responsibility and discovering own potential and becoming aware of what you could do, it is boost for change... that corresponds to an

identity crisis! So it's growing the need to understand how it's possible reassuring and supporting the crises that are produced by proposing a change and how clearly envisaging mutual enrichment. Thinking policies targeted to gender equality that are seen like useful and tangible actions shaping and depending on the context without releasing well-being.

If the goal must communiting, principles must be shared and really lived, otherwise, we assist the sinking of good intentions and actions.

We must establish priorities and cooperate on few objectives but well-defined and rooted in intention and in the consciousness of those who believe and those who work for equal opportunities.

In support of these actions, the Province of Venice has joined to **Winnet 8** project (5), keen to identify purpose priority, redefining and recalibrating the direction to which investing efforts and resources, identification of good practices to refine tailored reality that will inherit them, along with already proven strategies from previous projects and identified by European experience.

Therefore, it's an opportune moment to make a just and correct discrimination: the evaluation of what has already been implemented and that has led to results and developments. This context wants develop and facilitate the meeting of representatives from business, institutions, research institutes, women resource centres, NGOs and social volunteering (MAG-Multi Actor Group), to discuss and foster a dialogue which will lead to effective policies and

strategies already supported by a set of concrete actions to be proposed on the action plane that will be delivered to the Region of Veneto.

This path is not easy but heard and supported unanimously by the MAG, study and working group established to carry out that intention, being composed of elements from different realities, they are putting into play personally its ability to share, discuss and Exchange to put aside the habits and leave space to the new vision of

(1) in 1998 the Recite II Enrec project which has included 6 regions: Piemonte, Emilia Romagna, North Savo (Finland), Vastra Gotaland (Sweden) and Norrbotten and Sydra (Greece) developed the first models of WIP (Women in progress) Centres.

In 1999 with the project Recife (Recite Femmes) that involved six regions of 5 European Countries (Navarre, Santarém, Lombardy, Sardinia, Ile-de-France and North Karelia) other "Ri. do Centres" have been created. In the Lombardy Region the Resource Centre for integration into economic and social life and the network of local Women Resource Centres, have acquired the character of a permanent structure with the art. 4, c. 11 of regional law No 3/2001. In Sardinia the *Istituto formazione lavoro Donne* (Ifold) was responsible for the establishment of local centers called "women resource centres", aiming to develop female entrepreneurship: these centers didn't survived to the project.

(2) Thanks to this initiative has created a "European guide resource centers," vademecum for other organizations, both public and private individuals who would like to create resource centers.

(3) the project provides for the activation of 7 new resource centers of 1st level (those are addressed directly to the end-user and the female population) and a resource center of 2nd level CADSES areas involved in the project. Specific objectives of the project (2004–2006) were:-promoting a network of women resource centres in **Central Europe, Adriatic, Danubian and South East** offering information, advising and technical assistance to the women of target countries; -finalising the resource centres to the problems of the difficult relationship between entrepreneurs and credit system through the identification of a standard operating model for the provision of support services to entrepreneurs, which can be reproduced in the individual regions; - creating ad hoc financial instruments (microcredit, guarantee funds, etc.) to support women entrepreneurs of targeted geographic areas.

(4) with The County Administrative Board of Gavleborg, Sweden; Euroimpresa Legnano SCRL, Italy; Business Innovatio Centre of Navarre, Spain; City Council of Viladecans, Spain; Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, Presidency of the Giunta Regionale, Italy; Municipality of Barletta, Italy; Municipal Enterprise of Development Zographou, Greece; Province of Venice, Italy; City Council of Molfetta, Italy; Municipality of Teskand, Hungary; CNIDFF, National Centre of Information and Documentation for Women

and Families, France; Equal Opportunities Ombudsman Office, Lithuania; Province of Lecco, Italy; North Pareli Polytechnic, Finland; The County Administrative Board of Vasternorrland, Sweden; Sofa District Council, Latvia; Municipality of Sykies, Greece.

(5) the aim is to encourage the promotion and redevelopment of women in the labor market, with particular reference to: horizontal segregation in employment of women; lack of women in the areas of science – technology; lack of women entrepreneurs. Partners in 8 countries (Sweden, Finland, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Greece) and 9 regions through the interregional exchange of best practices, study visits and research will develop action plans. Fundamental is the contribution of Multi Actor Group (MAG) composed of representatives of local and regional authorities, companies, research institutes, women resource centres, NGOs and other realities of volunteerism. For more information: www.winnet8.eu