

Bringing young women into politics: The project “From Woman to Woman”



From Woman to Woman – 2nd edition – Lisbon and Oporto

Faced with the very slow trend towards balanced political representation for Portuguese women, the Network of Young People for Gender Equality in Portugal (REDE) carried out an innovative project called “From Woman to Woman” to help young women, including from ethnic minorities, to participate in politics. Run during 2008-2010, it was developed from a similar project operated in 2005-2006, and supported by the European Social Fund.

It had four components:

The mentoring of 30 young women from the Lisbon and Porto areas by women active in politics

Competence development through a course of six weekend sessions using non-formal techniques and covering human rights, intercultural dialogue, media and press, politics, and gender equality concepts and priorities

A batch of nine social transformation projects for gender equality (with a focus also on young men)

The publication of useful handbooks

Gender balance far from a reality

Despite a rising trend, gender balance in politics is far from a reality in Portugal, where only 7.5% of mayors, 26.5% of members of parliament and 17% of the government are **women**. Women's representation in the European parliament is rather better, at **38.1% since 2014**. So it is at municipal level where the subconscious idea that leaders have to be male surfaces most blatantly.

To try to redress this balance, the Portuguese Network of Young People for Gender Equality in Portugal (REDE) developed an affirmative action project, based on a previous programme which ran from 2005-2006. The second project, which ran from 2008-2010 introduced some innovative approaches such as an additional focus on ethnic minorities and the involvement of young men.

Inspired by its Swiss predecessor (De Femme à Femme), the From Woman to Woman ("De mulher para mulher") project aimed to:

- Promote intra and inter-generational communication and cooperation between women;
- Contribute to the integration of young women's concerns and needs in decision-making processes in different types of organisations;
- Increase young women's participation in decision-making;
- Develop young women's skills;
- Contribute to the creation and strengthening of networks for young women;
- Identify additional obstacles faced by women with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in accessing the political and civic spheres;
- Raise the awareness of boys and men of the importance of promoting gender equality.

The project targeted young women (16-30 years old), particularly from ethnic or cultural minorities. The beneficiaries – 15 young women from the Lisbon region and 15 from the Porto region – were mentored by women who were already active in politics or in civil society organisations. These included Members of the European Parliament, a Secretary of State, the president of a women's rights NGO and Member of the Portuguese Parliament.

Besides the mentoring programme, the project also ran a competence development programme and had a part dedicated to the development of social transformation projects for gender equality, with a special focus also on young men. Mentees were invited to participate in several parallel activities organised by the project team, such as institutional visits and meetings (e.g. to the national and European parliaments), events focused on gender equality and other political and civic experiences.

The project was co-funded by the European Social Fund under the Operational Programme for the Promotion of Human Potential (POPH).

Focus on young women and minorities

The selection procedure was as follows: REDE published a call for participants, requesting the following profile: young women between 16 and 30 years old, with or without experience in activism, NGOs or politics, interested in political and civic participation and available to participate in all the project activities. The open call specifically stated that the project was intended to favour applicants from ethnic and cultural minorities.

This open call was disseminated amongst youth associations and youth wings of political parties, universities, high schools and immigrants' organisations. Applicants who matched the profile were invited to attend for interview. The decision took into account both the results of the interviews and the diversity the project was looking for: young women with experience in activism, young women with no experience in the field, and young women from ethnic minorities.

The project activities took account of the diversity of the target group and addressed such topics as intercultural dialogue, cooperation and development and multiple discrimination. The main objective was to raise awareness about the multiple faces of feminism and women's concerns. Mentors were also selected based on their experience in working in international and intercultural environments.

Mentoring and competence development

The Mentoring Programme had four different phases. At the start, the project team paired up the mentees and mentors, by matching the mentees' ambitions with the mentors' expertise. Then a kick-off meeting was organised at which the mentoring pairs could each define a strategy for conducting their relationship, including the number of meetings and other forms of contact that they would have during the 12 months of the mentoring programme. The activities were regularly monitored by the project team.

The Competence Development Programme was based on non-formal education activities and covered a wide range of areas – human rights, intercultural dialogue, media and press, politics, and gender equality concepts and priorities, such as engaging men in gender equality issues. The programme was composed of six weekend training sessions spread over a year, plus other complementary activities, such as visiting city halls, the national and European parliaments, taking part in conferences and debates, and assisting the political campaigns of female candidates in local elections.

The weekend training sessions strengthened the social bonds among the young women and covered six themes, the first five of which were:

- introduction to gender equality (concepts and historical movements)
- citizenship and intercultural dimensions (intersectionality and multiple forms of discrimination against women)
- activism and intervention projects
- democracy, parity and politics
- communication and media

The sixth topic was prepared by the mentees themselves, addressing such themes as women in the arts, women and literature and women and science. The group of mentees had the help and support of the project officers in organising the activities and the overall preparation of the weekend.

Social transformation projects

Groups of mentees carried out nine Social transformation projects on gender equality according to their interests. The project team supported the whole process with the ultimate goal of providing experience in developing and implementing a gender mainstreaming or an affirmative action project in gender issues. The projects were required to be sustainable and multiply their results, as well as taking into account a gender perspective throughout the project cycle with a focus also on young men. Issues addressed by the projects included for instance work-life balance, fighting gender stereotypes or strengthening intercultural dialogue.

Some examples of **Social Transformation projects** developed under the “From Woman to Woman” umbrella were:

Parity for Young People

This group worked on parity, gender and political decision-making in the youth wings of political parties. They developed a flyer on the subject and worked with young men and women in these political parties, addressing the underrepresentation of women in political decision-making and how young men could contribute to a more gender-friendly political system.

Deconstructing inequalities

This group worked with students from Cape Verde studying in Portuguese universities. They developed some debates with the students, addressing gender stereotypes from an intercultural dialogue perspective, leading the discussion towards cultural influences regarding gender stereotypes and the role of men at home and in the family life.

Taking into account that Cape Verde had one of the most egalitarian governments in the world – its government achieved gender parity in 2006 and since autumn 2014 has a majority of women – these young women also interviewed female leaders from Cape Verde, in order to eliminate the stereotype that women don't belong in politics.

Key achievements of the project

The underrepresentation of women in politics cannot be tackled effectively without attracting youth and young women in particular. The project From Woman to Woman developed strategies to engage young women and men and to get them interested and involved in politics and gender equality.

Furthermore, the project was able to raise its visibility in the media and through social networks. A set of handbooks, guides and other materials were published in the context of the project which attracted much attention and are still widely used by teachers, schools and gender equality and youth NGOs. An example is the toolkit for empowering young women in civic and political decision-making.

An internal evaluation was made using an online survey which was answered by mentees and mentors. Both considered that the objectives established for the mentoring relationship were achieved. The project succeeded in empowering young women and improving their confidence and skills. REDE's very solid network was crucial to the project's success as it enabled the mentors to be identified and the social intervention projects to be put into practice.

The project is relevant and transferable and the focus on youth represents a particularly important aspect to inspire other countries.

Contacts/Further Information

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TOOL: Competence development