

A party strategy to increase women's political representation



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Increasing Women's Political Representation through Capacity Development by a Political Party (Labour Party)
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Malta has one of the lowest levels of women's political representation in the EU. Of the political parties, it has been Labour that has traditionally been the first to adopt measures for the advancement of women – since women's suffrage in 1947. Nevertheless formal and informal practices are blocking further progress.

Accordingly the party has adopted a fourfold approach to promoting gender equality within itself, and is acting on quotas, party structures, capacity development and awareness-raising. It has introduced a voluntary 20% women's quota on electoral lists and a 1/3 quota within its national executive, opened up its women's section to men, ran a training programme in Brussels, drafts press releases and articles and organised courtesy visits and seminars. There are signs that the strategy is bearing success, with two-thirds of Malta's MEPs now being women.

Slow progress to women's representation

In Malta, political parties and their leaders are in general supportive of gender equality and agree that women should be better represented in political and economic decision-making. Nevertheless the number of women in elected office in [Malta is one of the lowest in the EU, as a result of various structural, social and cultural factors](#). The main gatekeepers of women's representation in [national legislatures](#) are the political parties, and although they have gone beyond lip-service and have devised strategies to facilitate women's advancement, formal and informal practices within the parties are still hindering progress.

The Labour Party (PL - Partit Laburista), one of Malta's two main parties, has historically been the one that has supported gender equality in decision-making. It supported women's suffrage by giving Maltese women the right to vote in 1947, and was the first of the main parties in Malta to adopt quotas for women on its national executive.

Despite this commitment, progress towards effective gender parity in political decision-making has been slow. The party has therefore adopted a multifaceted approach to promoting gender equality within the party, by acting on electoral quotas, party structures, capacity development and awareness-raising.

Electoral and executive committee quotas

Since the 1990s the Labour Party has put a set of quotas in place which make it easier for women to get involved in its decision-making. It operates a voluntary 20% quota for women on party lists, and its rules require that at least four of the 12 ordinary members of the party's national executive have to be women. The party has also set a quota of one-third of women within its local government section.

Women currently occupy four of the 12 elected places on the national executive, plus another two seats set aside for the women's section, Nisa Laburisti. Other sections (the parliamentary group, young people, pensioners, local government, etc.) are also free to appoint female representatives to the national executive. At present the total number of women on the national executive is 13 out of 47 members (28%). Meanwhile there are 189 women out of 673 general conference delegates (also 28%).

It does not stop there: Nisa Laburisti executive members were active in the 2014 EU election campaign and in 2015 will be conducting a campaign for more female representation in local councils.

Bringing men into the ‘women’s section’ and raising awareness

The Labour Party has also undergone structural change. Its women’s section (Sezzjoni Nisa Laburisti) was set up in the 1950s. It eventually became Għaqda Nisa Laburisti (‘Labour Women’s Unity’), and all female party members are automatically members.

When the Labour Party was returned to power in the March 2013 elections, the new Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat, announced that he intended to make it the most [feminist government ever](#). As part of the accompanying culture change, he announced a reform of Għaqda Nisa Laburisti. At its annual general meeting in January 2014, he said: “After wide consultation I-Għaqda Nisa Laburisti will enter a new phase, as it will go through changes which are also innovative.” He revealed that Għaqda Nisa Laburisti would no longer be exclusively for women, since the issues it discusses affect not only women but also men. He emphasised how important it is that women – including career women, young people and mothers – are represented in all sectors. He mentioned that the role of women is changing all the time and that the glass ceiling is still to be broken. Stating that exciting times are in store for the organisation, he urged it to assume an active role and to spur the work of the government and the party. On 8 March 2014, Nisa Laburisti – NL (‘Labour Women’) was re-launched.

Since then Nisa Laburisti issued 25 press releases dealing with a wide range of issues related to women’s role in private and public life. It has also undertaken a programme of courtesy visits to important figures including the president and the speaker of the House of Representatives as well as a number of ministers and ambassadors. It was active in seminars on ‘Women in Political Decision-Making’, ‘Female Business Café to Promote Female Entrepreneurship’, ‘Women’s Political Participation in Malta’ and ‘Women within the Party of European Socialists Women’. Nisa Laburisti became more visible and is well featured in the media. [This](#) helps to challenge the stereotypical image that a politician is a male.

Capacity development

In 2013 Fondazzjoni IDEAT – which is the party’s think-tank – launched the LEAP project together with MEP Claudette Abela Baldacchino, supported by the S&D group of the European Parliament. This initiative aimed to encourage and support more women to enter politics by running a training programme in Brussels. This included a seminar entitled ‘Women in Politics and Public Life’, as well as theoretical and practical training in politics and mentoring by established politicians. Some of the members who participated are now active members of NL.

Nisa Laburisti supports equal opportunities and promotes women’s interests, and one of these is to increase their participation in decision-making. It is building the capacity of the pool of potential female candidates through a diverse range of activities such as strengthening their networks, media campaigns, awareness-raising, working with NGOs (especially women’s NGOs) and raising women’s profiles. For example it has held seminars on topics such as ‘Two Women – Two Presidents’, ‘Women in ICT’, and ‘Local Committees for Women’. The seminar entitled ‘Women – Leaders in an Evolving Society’ included a visit from the women president of the Party of European Socialists, Zita Gurmai.

A successful strategy

The result of the 2014 European Parliament elections – women now make up two-thirds of the Maltese delegation – provides evidence that this strategy within the party is yielding fruit. The situation is also very encouraging at local level, with many women playing an active role in running their local council. However obstacles remain: parliament and local councils operate on a part-time basis, and consequently tend to meet after office hours with sittings running late into the night. This conflicts with family obligations and therefore constitutes a particular problem for women. The situation at a national level is still a challenge but the critical mass of female representation within the Labour Party presages change.

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Further information

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