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**“The role of national mechanisms in promoting
gender equality and the empowerment of women:
achievements, gaps and challenges”**
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**The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality
and the empowerment of women: Italian experience**

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

If one should sum up in a few words what the Italian experience in the issue of national machineries for gender equality has been since Santiago's meeting over six years ago then he/she would be entitled to say that things have been moving in numerous ways and several fields. Obviously, this is not to say today that we only had achievements and no gaps; but the general impression is that at last the equal opportunities topic has been taken seriously both at political level and in the light of general feelings.

First of all, it has to be observed that the perception in political, economic and social Italian circles has been that a multi-disciplinary approach was needed in order to tackle the problems Italian women are faced with when they try to obtain the acknowledgment of full status in all matters where their condition is implied either in the workplace or within their families or in the access to the upgrading and completion of their political and economic careers.

So, it was a generally shared opinion that if one really wanted to implement an efficient policy for gender equality throughout the Italian society, then one would have to start off by proposing brand new cultural attitudes. In particular, it was felt that the traditional stereotypes according to which the female presence in society should be confined to the family sphere in terms of housekeeping and upbringing of children should be modified to the extent that not only men should get involved in the equal share of their duties and responsibilities but also that the same chances men have been exploiting over the years should be given to women and girls notwithstanding any cultural and social barrier.

On this relevant occasion, it would be improper not to have a glimpse at how the Italian society is moving in terms of the widespread perception of women's role in order to evaluate whether or not the Beijing objectives may be said to have been at least partially fulfilled. Nowadays, it seems to belong in the past the picture of women from the South of Italy being clad in black shawls sitting in front of their ancestral houses shyly staring at people passing them by during the afternoon stroll and doing nothing but running their rosary granaries through their fingers.

One direct proof of how the stereotype has been turned upside down is the ever growing rise of female employment in the last prosperous Italian regions, even if, one cannot deny, Lisbon's standards are far from being reached.

The same applies when professions and jobs historically attached to the male figures are evoked: we have an higher and higher number of young women employed in the legal field, in the academic career, in the scientific research, in the medical world. We have got higher numbers, but I am not saying we have got an average parity of the two sexes presence in every field.

The second approach that has been adopted in Italy when trying to come to terms with the harsh reality of the still persisting gender gap has generally been political and institutional. That is precisely the prospective we have to look from in order to encompass the theme of this meeting.

Before looking in depth into the manifold manifestations of the political agenda towards gender equality, mainly through the channel of gender mainstreaming, we have to stress that a new notion of the centrality of women's role in society has finally established itself in Italians' thought.

As a matter of fact, politics and institutions agreed that it would be fruitless to try and pursue a useful policy of gender equality if a number of concurring and negative factors bound to impair gender equality were not eliminated, combated or at least strongly dealt with. I would like to refer here to the eradication of such practices that do actually hamper women's role and image in society, such as trafficking, slavery, prostitution, sexual violence, domestic violence, etc. Each and every phenomenon has been the object of important and meaningful pieces of Italian legislation over the past few years or is expected to be under the Parliament scrutiny in a very short span of time. The political design and the Governmental strategy have been that women's dignity must firstly be reaffirmed before any concrete and helpful action is taken to make sure that gender equality is not a mere day-dream and consequently to realize that all attempts to exploit women's body and mind should only be a nightmare of previous nights never to be repeated again.

All these steps have been taken by the Parliament in the complete awareness that it was not the nature and scope of the penal intervention and sanction as such to contribute to the fixing of a principle of women's intangibility in all fields where their personality might manifest itself, but that the impact of those measures had a symbolic character apt to prevent degrading treatment and tolerating abuses against women.

The premise as just set out is aimed at underlining that the fundamental preconditions to try and implement a gender equality policy have been sufficiently satisfied in Italy in the last decade and since the prodigious Beijing days. If we now turn to the problem of how Italian legislation and institutional context have adapted themselves to the sets of interventions made necessary by the Beijing provisions related to the setting up of national machineries for the advancement of women I have to comment as follows.

In the aftermath of the 1995 principles the office of the Minister for equal opportunities was finally created, within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, with a broad competence to all matters regarding non discrimination against women, positive action in their favour, the general establishment of a framework inside which to encapsulate the thematic picture of female presence in society.

By doing so, it was thought that the national machinery should be put under the Government's auspices in the conviction that this would make its action more vigorous and its programs easier to be translated into practice.

Of course, one does not have to overlook that in the early 1990s a national Commission for equal opportunities had been installed by law in the hope that that would

result in the promotion of ideas and strategies and monitoring of how the institutional would react to a new born concept of gender equality into the life and blood of Italian society.

But the birth of a Minister for equal opportunities carried a variety of good prospects with itself. First of all because the Minister herself (all Ministries in this sector have luckily been women ever since) could participate with a deliberating vote in the Council of Ministers and was responsible for the coordination of general politics for equal opportunities inside other departments of the same Government. Secondly, the institution of the office meant that the staff working for it should gradually be trained in order to acquire new professional qualifications and competences in the matter. The process has been constantly going on throughout the years and, even if a considerable stretch of road still has to be covered, the overall impression is that finally a new class of personnel among civil servants is now gaining a sufficient degree of expertise to cope with the needs and exigencies raised by a fastly growing demand of actions and initiatives by women at large, whether they are represented by groups, associations, NGOs, or acting on their own.

This is an achievement made possible by a specific cultural attitude that the political world has gladly picked up on: the institution of special post lauream degrees, courses, classes, in the matter of equal opportunities financed out of European structural funds. Since the beginning of 2004 the Italian Minister of equal opportunities has invested very largely in these courses in the southern universities of Italy and the response by young female students has been much higher than expected, with so many of them not being able to participate in the courses themselves for lack of availability. So it is understood and foreseen that the program will be reiterated in the next future.

It would be unrealistic to state that the very introduction of a Ministry for equal opportunities has turned out to be the magic wand: eventually, it is far from being so. The budget that is annually assigned to the Ministry cannot cover all the initiatives that in the abstract might be thought out to implement its essential policies. Furthermore, the powers that have been conferred upon the current Minister exceed the topic of equal opportunities to include other relevant and financial resources demanding areas such as international adoptions, women trafficking, paedophilia, etc.

Besides, the efficacy of the Ministry's action is largely dependent on the broad context in which it is exercised: i.e. it would be of scarce or no point if women's participation in the more active centres of the political, economic, institutional, working life were not raised to acceptable standards. That is why the Minister's political perception has always been, and is likely to be in the future, that you have to introduce compulsory legislative measures to guarantee a well-balanced representation of both sexes in those decision making centres with the parity objective well borne in mind.

Today, it is still difficult to imagine other forms of political action than quotas for, for example, political elections: the 'at least one third' rule has effectively been approved by the Italian Parliament on the eve of last June's election of MEPs. A similar strategy

has recently been proposed by the Minister herself for national political election and is undergoing the Chambers scrutiny.

The incidence of the role of the Minister for equal opportunities and the realization that it was the Minister who had to be fully in command of all policies in that matter and should coordinate all competent bodies for the purpose of strengthening gender mainstreaming oriented policies has recently led to the redrafting of the tasks and composition of the previous national Commission for equal opportunities. As a matter of fact, a new Commission has been set up in July of 2003 with the duty to support the Minister's action in the pursuing of equal opportunities policies and to propose specific measures to eliminate or remove all discriminatory practices. It is important to note that the new Commission's activity has just brought about an important result, in that it has formed a sub-committee with a view to collaborate with the Minister's offices in the drafting of a consolidated body of rules in the matter of equal opportunities (the so-called 'code of equal opportunities') so bringing to unity a long list of dispositions scattered all over Italian legislation. And heaven knows how much legislative clarity and consistency is the path to the actual implementation of legal rules.

The ripe fruits that the functioning of this new machinery has brought along reveal themselves through the reshaping of essential subjects reasonably considered to be falling within the equal opportunities' boundaries.

In fact, the issue of reconciling working and family life has resulted in the combination of legislative and administrative dispositions: respectively the ones regarding parental leaves following pregnancies and the setting up, thanks to State funding, of kindergartens in workplaces, both public and private.

Also, it should be underlined that gender statistics tend to be acknowledged as irreplaceable tools to measure what progresses, if any, have been achieved in the fair representation of both sexes in all spheres of social life.

On this respect, it is worth recalling the European Resolution that was approved during the Italian Semester of Presidency of the European Union last December regarding the indicators for that purpose.

As it was anticipated at the outset the way ahead is long and sometimes, as the Fab Four would have called it, winding.

This is why if adequate results are to be obtained the wider possible participation of relevant actors is needed: international institutions and bodies, NGOs, employers and employees organizations and unions and stakeholders in general.

The Italian political world has long been in no doubt about the fair share of action and responsibilities that these actors should get: social cohesion is needed and plural ideas are rather a resource than a disgrace, even if, at the end of the day, a coordinating authority must take the situation into its hands to facilitate the process of gender equality.

Along this same line of synergies it should be remembered the role that local level authorities can and do play: once again harmonization can prove to be a stimulating factor for more general policies.

One may conclude that judging by the way it has been working over a not irrelevant space of time the Italian machinery has the potential to function as a helpful catalyst in facilitating gender mainstreaming, provided that its deeper and deeper embeddedness in the national context makes its way through political good will and individual consciences and help them make the decisive challenge.