

# Women in diplomacy: the case for a better orchestra

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Whether in the private sector or in government, the talents of women are still an untapped resource in most countries. The US is leading the way toward a solution that should be embraced by European countries.

When, in December 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched “Women in the Public Service Project,” an initiative aimed at increasing the visibility and awareness about the role women play in the public service, I immediately thought Italy should follow suit and develop a complementary project, aimed at putting women in international careers back on the agenda. The point is to frame this issue in a post-ideological, pragmatic and constructive way.

The Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs has gladly taken up the challenge. As an opening move, we have organized an international conference: “Women in Diplomacy: building a network for a better world.”

This will only be the first step of a larger and multifaceted initiative, including a winter school for young female graduates from Europe’s neighborhood, jointly organized by SIOI and ISPI.

The conference in Rome will generate a powerful network of women in both public and private sectors who will act as mentors to future participants of Women in Diplomacy (WiD) initiatives. Building a network based on sharing firsthand experiences and empowerment will be a valuable asset for all women involved.

The “WiD” initiative is not limited to women in politics and diplomacy, serving their country. It includes women working in a global dimension – be it in the public or private sector.

The importance and timeliness of this issue is not only linked to fairness, as rightly underlined by Secretary Clinton; it’s also about expanding the pool of talented people necessary to tackle today’s complexities and challenges.

The assumption should not be a (questionable) conviction that women leaders behave in a different way as compared to their male counterparts, but rather that each society needs its best talents, at all times, to move forward.

When half of these talents is either explicitly or implicitly marginalized, society as a whole will suffer from it. Raising awareness is particularly important in addressing implicit biases: one of the leading European orchestras has for decades re-

frained from hiring any female musician, under the pretext that none was qualified enough. Once “blind” hearings were introduced, however, with musicians and reviewers unable to see who was playing, female musicians have entered the prestigious orchestra.

Once the playing field is leveled, merit emerges in an open and transparent way.

In other terms: merit does not come on its own. It needs fertile ground and preconditions. However, there is not one simple formula for empowering women and facilitating the process toward gender equality in the job market. Each country will have to devise its own strategy and tools.

It is a fact that women – accounting for half of the world population – still hold less than 20% of parliamentary seats across the globe. Within Europe, differences are striking, with Sweden boasting almost perfect gender equality in parliament (other Nordic countries are around 35%), followed by Italy and other countries with only 15% female members of parliament. France, however, is a case in point of how significantly numbers can change: with the last elections, women now represent 26% of members of Parliaments, a rapid surge from the previous 18%.

Percentages and data are useful not in themselves but because they point to realities difficult to ignore, and exemplify long-term trends. Even looking in perspective, the presence of women in international careers today remains dramatically limited.

In Europe, only 62% of women are currently employed, and in Italy the picture is even less rosy with less than 50% of women actively working. Among them, only 13% reach top leadership positions in Europe, and half of that in Italy.

Quotas, with their pros and cons, remain on the agenda. Since 2011, the European Commission and the European Parliament have been actively lobbying European enterprises to introduce gender quotas in the composition of their Board of Directors. It should not surprise that these calls for voluntary action encountered limited success (only 24 enterprises accepted to introduce quotas).

In the meantime, several European countries, among them Italy, France, Belgium, Spain and the Netherlands have

US Secretary of State  
Hillary Clinton opened  
the State Department’s  
first Women in Public  
Service Institute at  
Wellesley College.



passed new laws institutionalizing quotas in the industrial sector’s boards.

Data comes in handy: reports from both McKinsey and Ernst & Young have shown that women in leadership positions improve the economic performance of their company (companies with equal gender representation reported profits 56% higher than those uniquely led by men).

Leaving monopolies is hard to digest, it takes time and a change of mentality.

Monopolies create inequalities and imbalances, suffice it to think to the percentage of women on top, and their pay. The gender gap is higher among high wage earners. The glass ceiling is no myth: it exists and is in good health. Moreover, even when women reach top positions, they are

paid on average 20% less than their male counterparts.

Lastly, the public sector, while traditionally more welcoming to women, suffers from the same shortcomings as the private one does when it comes to women in upper echelons of its administrations.

Much debate is going on with regard to the need to improve conciliation between work and family life. Studies of the OECD show that taxation, provision and parental leave, plus availability of part-time work can have a big impact on women’s working patterns.

This is where we could start, by putting conciliation and the measures necessary to fulfill it, on top of the agenda. Last but not least in diplomatic careers.

Women in Diplomacy aims at framing this kind of pragmatic debate, geared at the advancement of ideas and proposals. In the meantime it will reinforce one of the usual tools employed by men for professional advancement: the creation and use of networks. A tailored mentoring network – with an American leg, a European one and aiming at helping women gain access in Europe’s neighboring countries – will represent an invaluable asset for all women eager to undertake an international career.