

### **Advancing the role of women in politics**

Safeguarding equal treatment between men and women in leadership and decision-making positions is fundamental to ensure equality of opportunities for both genders. Although women are underrepresented in the National Parliament with 8.7% in 2008, currently 20% of local councillors are female given that out of 444 local councillors, 89 are female. Nonetheless, the large majority of mayors are male with only 9% that are female. The number of female candidates that participate in the European Parliament elections has also increased throughout the years although Malta did not elect a female MEP. A very slight increase in the percentage of female candidates participating in the general election is also evident.

Given these statistics, empowering women and giving them opportunities to enter this public sphere should be a relentless commitment for Malta. With politics seen as a male domain, there are various reasons as to why women are underrepresented in the political and public participation which have to be surmounted. Long hours and lack of support tend to be challenging obstacles for women to obtain such positions in the public sphere. Women may be perceived as lacking experience and as carers and primarily responsible for the family and child-rearing, not for other matters such as politics.

As time goes by, there is a growing understanding why women's meaningful participation is essential to building and sustaining democracy. The willingness of citizens to accept new ideas about gender roles in society is a dire need and hence a mentality change towards more female participation. Women should not be discouraged from competing directly with men or consider childcare and housekeeping to be the exclusive domain of women. In this case, further use of family-friendly measures and adequate support structures are to be fostered and promoted.

Political parties should be encouraged to train women so that they can be recruited more widely and develop more skills. Ensuring a better balance amongst candidates is the political parties' start. The electoral system in itself does not favour any one person or gender, but more women candidates usually means more women elected. According to a study published in 2009 by the European Commission entitled 'Women in European Politics – time for action', an election with 50% women candidates would result in just 39% women members. Therefore, according to this same study, there would need to be 63% women candidates before equality is achieved.

The media have a social responsibility which is based on their power. They can either forcefully promote a change of representations of gender roles or, on the contrary, curb the process of securing gender equality by perpetuating existing stereotypes in this specific field.

For a continuous achievement of *de facto* equality in society at large and in this particular sphere, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) offers training for interested parties and individuals who want to become involved in the public sphere. NCPE can be contacted on 2590 3850 or [equality@gov.mt](mailto:equality@gov.mt)