

The Association of Italian Women Historians and the Promotion of Gender Culture in Italy

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The *Società Italiana delle Storiche* (SIS, Italian Association of Women Historians)¹ was founded in 1989. Its aim was to promote women's and gender history through research, teaching and the conservation of documents and source materials. Over more than 25 years, the Association has worked to highlight women's experience and subjectivity through research and to further enrich the legacy of knowledge that has stemmed from women's and gender history: it is already a well-recognized and acknowledged player in academia and not only in the field of the history and politics of women. The SIS is an association of professional historians, but also a women's association that is very active in the dissemination of a gender culture that has its roots in history. Two SIS conferences, organized on very current issues, should, we believe, be read in an historical perspective: a recent one on "Violence against women in an historical perspective",² and one on "Women, citizenship, and religion in the history of the Mediterranean," held in Rome in November 2016.³

This paper aims to present, very briefly, two of the SIS's main activities in the dissemination of a gender culture: the summer school and the training courses.

History and politics of women: The SIS Summer School

Right from its beginnings the SIS has privileged the relationship between research and training. In 1990, the SIS summer school (*Scuola estiva*) was founded, in partnership with the University of Siena; since then the school has taken place annually at the Certosa di Pontignano, during two weeks at the end of August-beginning of September. The SIS wanted its school to be open to a wide group of women from very different backgrounds: students and academics, but also school teachers, librarians and archivists, workers in public administration, women involved in trade unions, political parties, and cultural organizations focused on equal opportunities between men and women, etc. The *Scuola estiva* aimed to offer training both in women's and gender history and in gender culture

¹ Online at this address: <http://www.societadellestoriche.it>.

² *La violenza contro le donne in una prospettiva storica. Contesti, linguaggi, politiche del diritto (secc. XVI-XXI)*, Rome 27-28 November 2015; the proceedings of the conference will be published by Viella Editrice in Rome.

³ *Donne, cittadinanza e religione nella storia del Mediterraneo*, Rome 4-5 November 2016.

and politics. Across the years, the SIS summer school has proved to be an innovative and successful format of interdisciplinary training that interweaves the skills of historians, philosophers, sociologists, jurists, etc. In 2003 the *Scuola estiva* moved to Fiesole, near Florence, and is now open to male participants.

Starting from a historical perspective open to the contemporaneity, and the changes at work in the world of women, some of the last editions of the *Scuola estiva* dealt with specific themes, including: *The challenge of feminism to the movements of the Seventies* (2004); *Women in the monotheistic religions: Faith, politics, freedom* (2006); *The construction of motherhood: History, science, feminist reflection* (2013); *Disobedience: gender, power, resistance* (2014).⁴ The 2016 edition of the SIS summer school took place from 31 October to 2 November and focused on the very current issue of *Procreation and motherhood, between history and biotechnology*.

Training for leadership

Starting in 2010, the SIS has also undertaken a wide-ranging educational program, initiating a fruitful collaboration with local administrations, first of all with the Toscana region and the province of Florence (Department for Equal Opportunities), continuing with the cities of Narni and Rome, in the Lazio Region, and with the Veneto Region (provinces of Venice and Padua).

The implementation of a new and innovative law (16/2009) of the Toscana Region on “Gender citizenship-equal opportunities between men and women”⁵ gave SIS the opportunity to improve its own original style of training, combining a conceptual approach of high scientific level with a solid professional training facility.

From spring 2010, in order to implement the law, the Toscana Region considered – among other initiatives – funding projects proposed by associations whose statutes provide for “the dissemination and implementation of the principle of equal opportunities between men and women; or the promotion and enhancement of the status of women; or help to protect in court in case of violation of rights” (Art. 6). Selection and funds were to be managed by the Departments for Equal Opportunities of the nine Toscana provinces.

Between 2010 and 2014, four SIS projects were selected by the province of Florence, the first three being fully funded.⁶ In these years, the thematic areas of the SIS training courses were: Gender Stereotypes (language and images);⁷ Relationship between women and work (work-life balance; leadership);⁸ Leadership: work and politics.⁹

⁴ See the programmes of all the editions from 1990, online at this address: http://www.societadellestoriche.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=105&Itemid=117&limitstart=0.

⁵ Regione Toscana, Legge regionale 2 aprile 2009, n. 16 ‘Cittadinanza di genere’.

⁶ In 2014, the project was ‘financed but not funded’ due to dire lack of funds (only four years after the enactment of the law 16/2009).

⁷ 2010 – *Fuori dal senso comune. Corso di formazione per combattere gli stereotipi all’origine delle discriminazioni di genere (dicembre 2009–marzo 2010)* (Out of common sense. Training course to fight against stereotypes at the origin of gender discrimination). Project by Isabelle Chabot and Anna Scattigno. More information available online at this address: http://www.societadellestoriche.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=245&Itemid=303.

⁸ 2011 – *Sebbene che siamo donne... Corso di formazione per promuovere la parità nel mondo del lavoro (febbraio–maggio 2011)* (Although we are women... Training course to promote equality in the workplace). Project by Isabelle Chabot, Elena Martini, Alessandra Pescarolo, Anna Scattigno.

Women's leadership emerged rapidly as a crucial issue, so we decided to devote the third course to it. But leadership is also an open concept, not reducible to a single definition, and it did not seem to be an easy subject to handle in a training course.

To begin to circumscribe our object and better tackle the related issues, we decided together with the Assessora Sonia Spacchini, to organize seven meetings between May and June 2012 in seven different places, across the territory of the Province of Florence.¹⁰ The aim of these public debates was to stimulate a collective reflection, gather ideas, needs, aspirations, and experiences of leadership both in politics and work. We involved several local administrators (mayors, assessori, city councilors, etc.) because local government seemed to us a strategic field, where interesting forms of female leadership had developed in recent years. We asked for their help to involve workers, entrepreneurs, and women active in the organizations in the area.

Participation in these debates was large and active, and contributed to raising many issues and to highlighting some keywords (summarized in a report).¹¹ Examples of themes that emerged during these public discussions are as follows:

- Power: the different attitudes of men and women with respect to power; exercising power with others (but not over the others); women gaining power not for themselves but to generate changes in the social, economic, political order and to transform gender relations (an issue addressed by Anna Loretoni in the opening conference);¹²
- Leadership models: is there a different leadership model from the male pattern? Is there a necessity to build a leadership in which even men can recognize themselves?¹³
- Participation and representation of women: the urgent need to increase this, both in the political parties and in organizations, in order to affirm a women's leadership;

⁹ 2013 – *Leadership femminile: diciamo sì al cambiamento. Corso di formazione per promuovere e valorizzare le competenze di leadership femminile nelle organizzazioni, nella politica e nel mondo del lavoro (marzo–giugno 2013)* (Female leadership: Say yes to change. Training course to promote and enhance women's leadership skills in organizations, in politics and in the workplace). Project by Isabelle Chabot, Elena Martini, and Anna Scattigno. More information online: http://www.societadellestoriche.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=242&Itemid=300. See also, 2014 – *Esercizi di leadership (al femminile)* (Female) leadership exercises. Project by Isabelle Chabot and Anna Scattigno (not funded).

¹⁰ The 2012 'tour', and the following training course on female leadership (spring 2013) were a very exciting experience that we quickly gathered in a 'Quaderno di formazione', a digital training notebook entitled *La leadership che fa la differenza. Esperienze femminili. Quaderno di formazione*, Anna Scattigno (ed.), with Isabelle Chabot, Barbara Imbergamo, Elena Martini, Francesca Maria Casini, Vanessa Moi (November 2013). The book can be downloaded for free from this address: http://www.societadellestoriche.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=494&Itemid=293.

¹¹ See the report of the seven debates: A. Scattigno, *Una discussione a più voci attorno alla leadership*, in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 12–19.

¹² Anna Loretoni, *La leadership femminile tra Empowerment e Gendermainstreaming*, in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 21–24.

¹³ See the report of the lectures: Maria Cristina Bombelli, *Esercizi di leadership*, in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 35–36.

- Laws: to remove discrimination, promote equality (much was said on “quotas”, with differing opinions);¹⁴
- Education and training: to fight against stereotypes; to empower women;
- Empowerment: develop and strengthen the skills and abilities of women;
- Courage: train women to take a step forward;
- Value: recognize the value of women, recognize valuable women; awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem (issues elaborated upon by Carmen Leccardi in her lecture);¹⁵
- Visibility: communication, the need to train in public speaking.

This somehow unusual public “brainstorming” was invaluable when structuring the training course (March–June 2013): many of these issues were raised at the opening conference (20 March 2013) through lectures (open to the public) that provided a theoretical framework to the course. Further elaboration on the concept took place within two following workshops: one on *Leadership and Politics*, a second one on *Leadership and Work* (only open to 60 selected participants).

The training course was free of charge and open to a wide range of the public, female and male, coming from the province of Florence. Participants, mostly women, came from different backgrounds and had different expectations: students and school teachers; unemployed and managers; public administration staff; operators of the centers for employment; operators in the sectors of training, human resources within the institutions and the organizations; representatives of the Equal Opportunity Committees (*Comitati Pari Opportunità*) within public institutions and organizations; and women who were politically active (political parties, trade unions, movements).

The first two meetings of the workshops¹⁶ aimed to form a critical consciousness through participatory discussions, with the aim to: a) conceptualize women’s leadership and reach to shared definitions (conceptual map); and b) draw a map of the skills and qualities of women leaders.

The starting point of the reflection was: is it possible to recognize and promote a “feminine” leadership, with its own style and special features, and then different from a “masculine” one? or is it more useful to build and promote new “good practices” of a participatory leadership, not precisely characterized by gender, which could be shared by men and women? Although there was no unanimity on this important point, the participants were nevertheless all convinced that greater access of women to positions of command would be the bearer of changes, both in politics and in organizations. And it was stressed that the economic marginalization and discrimination of women are related to the problem of participation and representation.

In the second stage of this discussion, we aimed to outline a woman leader profile, developing a map of skills and qualities that could be played out in politics as in work

¹⁴ See the report of the lectures: Alisa Del Re, *Le donne nei governi locali*, in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 39–40.

¹⁵ See the report of the lectures: Carmen Leccardi, *Tra generazioni: soggettività femminili in mutamenti*, in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 37–38.

¹⁶ See the report of the two workshops: 1) *Leadership e politica*, in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 41–60; 2) *Leadership e lavoro*, *ibid.*, pp. 61–77.

contexts. This map was divided into three areas: knowledge (what *knowledge* I need to give content to my leadership?); skills (what *know-how* is useful to express my leadership?); and personal qualities (what ways of being can sustain and make efficient my leadership?). The discussion drew a distinction between, on the one hand the knowledge and skills that are acquired through education and training and improved with experience, on the other hand qualities and talents that are part of one's own personality. In general, the participants placed less emphasis on knowledge with respect to knowing how to do and knowing how to be. Moving from these maps, participants had then to identify women leaders in the world, not only politicians, and discuss their profiles.

The third workshop, "Leadership and Politics", was an empirical test: a) to acquire methods and tools useful to the development of skills and capabilities emerged as central to a participative leadership (narrative, active listening, group building management, and public speaking); and b) to simulate a strategy to support the election campaign of a woman in the local elections.

In the workshop "Leadership and Work", learning was rooted in individual work experience, with the narrative of leadership skills, successes and failures, conflicts. This phase ended with the drawing-up of a self-assessment questionnaire then administered to all members of the group.

In subsequent meetings, participants met two women at a different stage of a political career—a young candidate for mayor (group 1) and a regional councilor (group 2)—and had to draw up a grid of questions before interviewing them.¹⁷ In another workshop, a researcher was invited to present and discuss a study conducted in 30 companies in Lombardia on the role and responsibilities of women and young people in times of crisis. A conclusive seminar allowed the different groups to share their experience and findings.

Since its founding in 1989, the SIS has placed at the core of its activities training and transmission of knowledge, even beyond the university, as a tool for the transformation of social reality and enhancement of the female subjectivity. The gender training was designed as a positive action that would allow women to acquire tools, to analyze, and deconstruct stereotypes and mechanism of exclusion, to promote women's work and leadership.

References

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¹⁷ See the report of the interviews to Brenda Barnini and Daniela Lastrì in *La leadership che fa la differenza*, cit., pp. 52–60.