

Women: Good Practices and Development in the Mediterranean

Serena Romano. President of Corrente Rosa, Italy

Economic development underpins the empowerment of women and is stimulated by it. To this end, women's economic rights and good gender practices in the private and the public sector are critical and must be followed by consistent proposals. This applies to all Mediterranean countries, where major and minor discrimination in the region stem from the same prejudices.

“Freedoms are not the primary ends of development they are also among its principal means.” - Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*

A link between women and development

The economic potential of women acquired its *lettres de noblesse* in 2006 when the Economist newspaper coined the word “Womenomics”.¹ The World Bank and the United Nations had already been looking at women as an instrument for development.² In 2009, the arrival of Irina Bokova at UNESCO's helm made gender issues a priority element of culture and for the pursuit of development.

It is now widely accepted that women, who often attain the highest levels of education with the best marks, must be eligible for the

best jobs. It is also, increasingly, the position of companies that want their human capital made up of the best available talents, as well as of governments that want to avoid wasting the resources and capital invested in women's education.

Governments facing immigration issues now consider that employing and retaining highly educated national women, namely in science and engineering, reduces the need for non-national experts.

Finally, research indicates that measures that result in more income available to rural women also brings better child nutrition, health and education.³

1. *The Economist*, “A guide to womenomics - The future of the world economy lies increasingly in female hands”, 12 April 2006.

2. The last report on the issue is *Gender Equality and Development*, 2012.

3. The state of food and agriculture FAO 2011.

Recognition and enforcement of women's economic rights

Women's economic rights refer to legal and regulatory elements, such as constitutional rights and personal status laws, which influence women's ability to engage independently in an economic activity.⁴

In all Mediterranean countries except Syria⁵ women can autonomously get a job, pursue a trade or profession, register a business, sign a contract, open and manage a bank account. Quite surprisingly, women working in all these countries have a right to equal pay. Only in Egypt and Jordan are women not protected by non-discrimination laws. Sexual harassment in the workplace is not sanctioned by law in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Turkey and Syria. By law, married women need to obey their husbands in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Men and women in all Mediterranean countries have the same property rights, but in Muslim countries societal and family pressures make their application a delicate issue, especially in the case of unmovable property. In fact, this generally relates to asset inheritance and disposal, which, with the exception of Turkey (a no confessional state), are different for men and women. This often impacts negatively on women entrepreneurs who cannot use their assets as collateral to access financing.

Societal pressure often dissuades women from challenging infringements in Court. In Egypt and Jordan women even need a guardian to initiate court proceedings. In Syria and Lebanon a woman's evidence does not carry the same weight as a man's.

Finally, customary law remains the primary source of law in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon,

Libya, Morocco and Syria. A prospect that can in fact put in question all the above rights.

The seven European Union Member States that border the Mediterranean must implement the EU Directives on gender parity. In case of infringement, the Commission of the European Communities can bring this to an end.⁶ Herein lays the main difference between the countries bordering the Mediterranean: supra-national institutions protect EU women against their own State if it does not apply the rules. This is a strong incentive for civil society to act, either by putting pressure on the Member State to enforce the rules or by requesting the Commission to act directly against the Member State.

Men and women in all Mediterranean countries have the same property rights, but in Muslim countries societal and family pressures make their application a delicate issue, especially in the case of unmovable property

Still, even where protection mechanisms are in place, they are no guarantee of a fair treatment. On average, 62.1% of EU women work against 75.1% of men.⁷ In the EU, the man-woman pay gap remains high: women's salary is on average 16.4% less than men's. As of January 2012, women had only 13.7% of board seats of the EU's largest publicly listed companies.

Enforcement of existing laws remains problematic in all places where customs, culture and even religion preserve strong deterrents to an empowerment of women that would benefit all society. This can be especially true for rural women who, although often more discriminated than their urban sisters, have fewer and feebler means of defence.

4. *Women Business and the Law*, IFC, World Bank 2011.

5. Syria has restrictions on married women getting a job.

6. Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

7. European Commission, Report on Progress on Equality between Women and Men, 2011.



Women demonstrating against the practice known as «dimissioni in bianco».

Best practices

On the bright side, a number of initiatives and projects may help the growth of women's role in the economy.

In the public sector in Spain, the 2007 Ley de Igualdad⁸ pointed to effective gender parity by implementing far-reaching principles in areas that affect women's lives: political, civil, economic, workplace, social and cultural. Innovative measures included the prevention of violence against women, a two-weeks paternity leave, a 60% maximum representation of one gender on local or national electoral lists, a balanced presence of genders in the administra-

tion and on the boards of state companies. The Zapatero government, the first parity cabinet in Spanish history, included eight female and eight male ministers and a female Vice-President and, in a major example of cultural shift against stereotypes, the review of the Spanish troops posted in Afghanistan was carried out by the seven-month pregnant defence minister Carmen Chacón.

In Italy a State-guaranteed fund has been set up⁹ for Small and Medium Enterprises with conditions that are more favourable for women entrepreneurs: for female-owned or -controlled companies the loan guarantee may cover up to 80%, with a maximum of 2.5 million and no

8. Ley Orgánica 3/2007, de 22 de marzo.

9. According to Law 215/1992.

access commissions. In comparison, other loans are only guaranteed up to 60%.

In the private sector, Sodexo of France, a large restoration and quality of life services company operating worldwide, which aims for a 25% female representation among its senior employees by 2015, created the Sodexo Women International Forum for talent to support this goal. Its worldwide senior executives meet regularly to review local gender indicators and provide input to the subsidiaries to reach gender diversity objectives, thus enhancing the morale and motivation of its 54% female workforce and 41% female managers. The effect is not lost on a company that pays great attention to its clients' satisfaction.

Around the Mediterranean, there are mixed results: islands of equality can flourish next to the most blatant infringements of rights

Nestlé of Switzerland, an international leading nutrition, health and wellness company, integrated gender issues in the duties and incentives of its leaders. It focussed on developing awareness on discrimination issues amongst male and female managers, a rare feat considering how difficult it is to involve males on gender topics. Maternity is approached pragmatically, with open discussions on career paths that can sometimes lead to unusual decisions: a young and competent female manager in Italy was promoted to plant manager and to head a research centre, on both occasions during her pregnancy. As Nestlé knows that 80% of its customers are women, women's point of view is a critical element of the company's strategy.

Intesa Sanpaolo of Italy, a major European banking group, has devised an insurance and assistance coverage policy to sustain the conti-

nunity of the activity of women entrepreneurs and self-employed women who face difficulties or serious personal events (such as divorce, stalking or physical aggression). The policy includes a flat financial contribution that allows women to decide autonomously how to address transient financial problems.

When will islands become continents?

Globalisation brings benefits to locally employed women when their multinational employers embrace inclusiveness. Local companies of similar size in the country will then compete with their multinational rivals by granting better career opportunities to their female staff. However, family-owned local SMEs often have policies that hark back one or two generations. Gender issues are simply not on their agenda while the current crisis tends to freeze any form of innovation rather than promote it.

Around the Mediterranean, there are mixed results: islands of equality can flourish next to the most blatant infringements of rights. In Italy, many employers force women, upon their hiring, to sign a blank-date resignation letter that will be used in case of pregnancy.¹⁰ Central governments and local administrations may mandate a quota of female representation on the boards of publicly listed companies but do not pursue a balanced presence of women in public and elected office.

Politicians, governments and local authorities have a critical role to play. Long-term, widespread and far-reaching strategies similar to the Spanish Ley de Igualdad need to be put in place. All local and national laws and regulations should contain an analysis of their impact on gender. If that is too ambitious, where

10. 800,000 women faced the practice called "dimissioni in bianco".

necessary, labour laws should promote women's empowerment and their effective enforcement especially in Court must be made easier.

Gender-based and consistent government statistics for all the Mediterranean countries are currently not available. They should be, in order to allow for meaningful comparisons between countries. Governments should report on the gender situation to Parliaments on an annual basis. Many civil society representatives are calling for a regional observatory on gender. I am wary of creating new, cumbersome and costly institutions on a supra-national level that

may discharge local institutions from building and pursuing their own gender agenda.

Civil society is already very active in the Mediterranean region and should organise its representation towards governments and companies in a more structured and focussed manner. Women's associations should find common denominators on which to agree upon on fundamental issues such as political representation to ensure that soon decisions affecting women will be taken by other women.

Hopefully, in this way the islands of parity will evolve into continents of parity.