

# Strengthen Women's Role in Society

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One of the potentials and, at the same time, one of the most important challenges of the Euro-Mediterranean region, concerns the status of women and their citizen participation. A key aspect in measuring conditions in different countries, as shown by the Human Development ratings: illiteracy, the low rate of employment and the scarce political representation of women does not favour the Southern Coast. It is true that there has been an advance regarding some criteria and that legal reforms have also made progress.

If we have to evaluate the relative condition and status of women in the region we should point out that considerable progress has been made over the last decade. In fact, women nowadays marry later than in previous years, giving priority to their education and professional training to the extent that they represent more than half of the university graduates in many of these countries. They are also more active in the different economic sectors and they are increasingly reaching high level public and political positions. These advances have favoured the awareness for the need to reform their legal status in the region and have recently led to an incomparable reform dynamics, both in Maghreb and Mashreq, initiating a process that is breaking away from centuries of discrimination and violation of women's fundamental rights.

This progress promotes considerable positive impacts, in societies on the

Southern Mediterranean Coast, both in the medium and long term future. However, in spite of this progress and the new opportunities it provides, there is still inequality. Based on this information and within the framework of the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration (and, on the other hand, coinciding with the 10th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action) the Euro-Mediterranean Conference for Women was held on 24th and 25th November 2005. This forum has, beyond doubt, awakened great expectation and novelty during the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Summit. From this perspective, and in tune with the evaluations carried out by the various Euromed bodies and by those European institutions linked with the Barcelona Process, as well as by other forums (like the Sana'a Regional Conference 2005 and the Arab League in their Algiers meeting during the same year), the starting point for the work of the Women's Conference 2005 is the conviction that equal opportunities for both men and women is a transversal topic which influences the economic and human development of all the countries and people living in the Euro-Mediterranean area. In this respect, achieving equality between women and men is one of the most important common topics which bind Euro-Mediterranean societies.

The Euro-Mediterranean Women's Conference Barcelona+10 has been organized around three work sessions related to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership main topics: i) women's rights as a guarantee of Human Rights and democratic development, and as a mean for a more united society; ii) women's contribution from a microeconomic and macroeconomic point of view, to achieve

sustainable development; and, iii) women's access to professional training, education and culture, as a means to improve work opportunities, competitiveness and active citizenship.

Besides the numerous reflections in the conclusions presented to the Commissioner Benita Ferrero in the closing act, the participants state that:

- they consider that the women's movement has been gaining strength in all of the Partnership countries. Nevertheless, more funds need to be assigned, there needs to be an improvement in the legal framework for the running of women's NGO's as well as giving more acknowledgment to their work. In this way, it should be remembered that civil society can give a great impetus to social advances which are, eventually, integrated into government policies.
- they consider necessary to promote better information related to women's networks in the Euro-Mediterranean region with the aim of exchanging information on active groups, achieving cohesive communication and discussing medium and long-term objectives.
- they underline the importance of involving civil society in this reflection, both on the level of listening to them in decision-making processes, regarding the need to support and strengthen their institutional development, and their capacity to work in networks as a dynamic force in the Euro-Mediterranean area.
- they propose to establish a Euro-med regional mechanism of a qualitative nature, involving societies and governments, in order to observe women's situation in the Euro-Mediterranean

area, to promote good practices and to report the deterioration or the lack of application of Human Rights in gender policies.

- they emphasize the need to integrate the cross section of women's policies into the various European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plans.
- they value very positively the European Commission's initiative to organize a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference, with the participation of civil society, centred on women's difficulties, and they appeal for it to be held in the second semester of the year 2006.

### **The Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference to Reinforce Women's Role in Society (Istanbul, 14/15 de November 2006)**

Its objective will be to adopt a Euro-Mediterranean Plan of Action with an aim to reinforce women's role in society (2007-2011), intended to promote equality between men and women in the region. The Plan of Action will be elaborated in accordance with the objectives of the 5 year Work Plan's, adopted by the Euro-Mediterranean members during the Summit held during the Tenth Anniversary event of the Barcelona Declaration.

The elaboration process of this Plan of Action has been developed over the course of various months throughout the year 2006 and will be approved during the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference, which will be held exactly to this effect, on the 14th and 15th November 2006 in Istanbul. The preliminary reports at the debates of the preparatory conference are intended to offer dynamic, crosscut approaches regarding the Euro-Mediterranean and regional context, in terms of opportunities, adversities and experiences of the reforms in process concerning the promotion of the status and condition of women in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

With the prospect of extending the queries, the elaboration of three preliminary reports was entrusted to three Euro-Mediterranean networks favouring

those constitutive elements which make for best practices:

- EuroMeSCo: to elaborate a report synthesizing the fundamental Human Rights for women and about legislation in the remit of family and public life in the region;
- FEMISE: to obtain a report on the Economic Integration of women in the region;
- Anna Lindh Foundation: to prepare a report on the sociocultural sphere and gender relationships in the region.

Considering the different contributions requested by the European Commission, the subject of stereotypes is, without a doubt, the most transversal between the North and South Mediterranean, since although the legal and participatory aspects still present serious differences, the changing mind is much slower process and it requires constant attention so that it can be carried out in different areas in the North as well as in the South.

One of the events necessary in order to carry out an evaluation of the work and proposals was the Preparatory Conference in Rabat, Morocco, 14/16 June 2006. A regional meeting programmed in the framework of the *preparatory process* for the Ministerial Conference, where the participants came from all over the region, including Libya and Mauritius. Some qualified participants have been invited to discuss and expand their analysis and put it to debate, recommendations from the heart of the three established boards regarding these three major topics. These boards will establish large time margins for the debates, with the objective of deepening and diversifying the exchanges, as well as compiling recommendations to be introduced in the Euromed Plan of Action 2007-2011.

The objectives assigned for the Rabat Preparatory Conference are the following:

- to establish a diagnosis/evaluation in terms of progress, opportunities and setbacks concerning women's situation in relation to men's situation, with reference to: (1) women's fundamental rights, with regards to the essential democratic element, (2) the status

and economic participation of women in the region and, finally, (3) social and cultural questions concerning social gender roles in the region;

- to highlight and share the teachings taken from the experience of the reforms in process in the three aforementioned fields, including the contribution and the role of the different people involved;
- to formulate the proposals for changes considered relevant, specific and precise, both on a regional and national level, with the aims of integrating them into the *Euromed Action Plan to reinforce women's role in society (2007-2011)*, which will be presented to the Ministerial Conference in November 2006 in order for it to be introduced.

The Euromed Action Plan to strengthen women's role in society will contain measures which will have to be put into practice, both on a bilateral and regional level, within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership framework. It will help to capitalize the heritage of the Partnership within the framework of the Barcelona Process and will allow the reinforcement of the equality aspect in action plans elaborated within the EPN framework, with the objective of specifying the measures listed in the Plans of Action.

The Plan will capitalize knowledge, analysis, initiatives, current actions and strategic recommendations as well as all the existing contributions, both on national and regional level, from the group of national (Official Institutions, NGO's, Investigation Institutes), regional and international representatives (the process of setting into motion the Beijing Platform for Action, Objectives for Development of the Millennium, etc.)

The conference will not be limited to ratify large financial funding on behalf of the Commission; it will also demand the commitment, which had already been demanded during the Barcelona Women's Conference in November 2005, for the 35 countries to introduce the Action Plan measures into their bilateral cooperation policies, and for the Southern countries to introduce them into their national budgets.

The women living within the different Mediterranean cultures have been references for important cultural assets

which have been transmitted throughout time like, for example, language, religious beliefs, oral literature, as well as ecologic and artistic knowledge. On the other hand, with regards to Education and Professional Training, women have been able to revitalize the business, political, scientific, academic and cultural world over the last decades. But women's status on the Southern Shore is evolving very slowly, not only because of the mentalities but also due to a lack of funds and a true political resolution.

The question presents a higher pitch in the context of globalization, where the preservation of cultures faces a tendency to standardization, which makes necessary to protect the world's cultural heritage, which has revealed to be the fourth pillar of sustainable development; it has also resulted in the inter-

cultural dialogue process where women must voice their opinion. Women, absent from this dialogue, become victims of Cultural Relativism, which tends to marginalize their rights and their condition. (World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002). On the other hand, women's place in culture is also recognized in artistic production. Even though women are not absent from the aforementioned production, in both schools and in the young artist's exhibits, there is little of their work and names included, both in important collections and in academic studies.

Even in Europe, as an educational priority, some governments do not have a non-sexist education established, however at times we find that several regional or municipal communities present interesting programmes in the field of ed-

ucation. In this field, the awareness campaigns carried out by governments can help to change mentalities, starting by their own leaders.

Without a doubt, it is necessary to identify, sustain and reinforce regional, national and local initiatives which favour the presence of women's roles and their participation in government, as well as their participation in actions carried out to transform society, in order to be able to respond to the new roles and demands of women.

## References

Conclusions of the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Conference Barcelona+10  
[www.iemed.org/documents/concludonesang.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/documents/concludonesang.pdf)