

# The Situation of Women in the Mediterranean

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The year 2006 ended with a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on “Strengthening the Role of Women in Society” held in Istanbul in November, quickly followed by the publication of the 2005 Arab Human Development Report, which came out in December 2006, entitled “Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World.”

In both the Mediterranean and Arab perspectives, the position of women is on the agenda for regional and international institutions and, in this regard, seems to confirm for these women the imperatives of general change and democratisation of societies and more specifically, the crystallisation of civil society.

In this perspective, central to establishing good governance in the Euro-Mediterranean order and checking religious resurgence in the Arab order, women are called upon to play an active, leading role. Yet do these concerns, which crowned the year 2006, correspond to a tangible reality? In other words, are women so concerned and involved in current affairs? To what degree do they see themselves in a role of fostering imperatives and acting as barriers in the face of socio-economic and cultural sluggishness?

## **Shifting Yet Constant Divisions**

The dividing lines between the male and female

universes have certainly shifted. Whereas earlier, these lines separated the public and private spheres, they are now slowly but surely moving. Nevertheless, these shifts do not mean the end of the divisions but their reproduction in the public sphere itself. Two lines of discrimination are most visible: discrimination between marginalised or socio-economically devalued sectors and leading or profitable sectors, on the one hand, and between the lower and upper echelons of the hierarchy, on the other.

Hence, girls practically everywhere have taken the educational system by assault and, in a number of Arab countries, their enrolment rate surpasses that of boys at all school levels<sup>1</sup>. Though the amount of girls enrolled in school is less than the total possible number of girls eligible to go to school, the fact remains that access to education for them has become a fact, as the average school enrolment rate for girls in Arab countries is 77%. In the Arab mindset, it is becoming more and more difficult to conceive of girls not having this basic asset to ensure minimal chances of success in life. One could even speak of a reversal of the traditional image, as educational establishments seem to have become places for girls.

In fact, just as in the 19th Century it began to be considered imperative for girls to be initiated into the profession of being a good wife and good mother by acquiring the elementary knowledge to such an end, at the turn of the 20th Century, the diploma or degree has become a female attribute as well. This can be clearly seen when considering the two parameters mentioned above: the higher the educational level, the less the number of girls enrolled; and the more the market value of the diploma or degree depreciates, the more it is

<sup>1</sup>The statistics cited in this report are taken from the 2005 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), “Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World,” UNDP, 2006

## FEMINISM, ISLAMISM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

EuroMeSCo was asked by the European Commission to participate in preparing the EuroMed Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, held in November 2006. The main goal of the resulting report, entitled *Women as Full Participants in the Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States* – issued in Arabic and French as well – was to provide a comprehensive assessment of the situation of women's rights in the Mediterranean region and, more importantly, to propose concrete steps to enhance gender equality within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The premises underlying the Report is that the issue of women's rights has been omitted or only marginally addressed within the Barcelona Process to date, and that this omission must be corrected. The leitmotif is that enhancing the role of women is essential for the emergence of a democratic Euro-Mediterranean region.

The Report recognises that the legal status of women in many southern partner states remains exceptionally discriminatory as a result of family laws or personal status codes, in spite of recent improvements in some countries. Furthermore, women are often barred from specific professional areas, have less access to justice than men, and are often de facto denied the right to vote or to stand for election despite being entitled to those rights by law. Based on empirical data about the enjoyment of specific civil and political rights in the region, the Report notes that concrete obstacles to women's full exercise of the rights recognised in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women exist in all areas of life. Similarly, in Europe, even though women's legal status is by and large comparatively better, they are still faced with deeply rooted discriminatory practices. All in all, the lack of equality for women at all levels, both in the law and in practice, is a common problem to countries on both sides of the Mediterranean and therefore can only benefit from a common approach within the EMP.

Among other issues, the Report posited that full democracy cannot exist where half the population does not have equal legal, political and socio-economic rights and opportunities: *"Equal status of all citizens is a defining feature of democratic life, as is the principle of non-discrimination. However, granting women their rights cannot be equated with the existence of democracy. Democracy is about equality and non-discrimination for all persons, in legal and substantive terms."* It also noted that EMP states have failed to recognise that women's rights must be addressed as an integral part of both political and socio-economic transformation, and not merely as a secondary cultural or religious issue. A further issue stressed by the Report is the need to make the crucial distinction between Islam on the one hand, and political Islam on the other, and to take into account the *diversity* of Islamism and its various interpretations of women's rights. With respect to the growing

importance of Islamist feminist organisations, it argues that they *"are now an undeniable part of the growing movement for gender equality in the south, and part of the wider transnational effort of women's groups to combat the negative effects of patriarchy and intolerant religious groups on gender equality, not just in the Muslim world but also in Europe and beyond."*

The Report then makes a series of legal, political, socio-economic and cultural policy recommendations focussing on lending women a more prominent role in the Partnership and promoting their political and civil rights, taking into account the indivisibility of all human rights. Key among these recommendations are the establishment of an EMP Women's Rights Council to propose mainstreaming and rights promotion policies to be adopted by governments, as well as benchmarks and time frames for the achievement of established goals. Although the EuroMed Ministerial Conference failed to take on some of the key recommendations of the EuroMeSCo Report, its conclusions proposed a set of measures to enhance the role of women at all levels and suggested a "EuroMed ad hoc meeting at expert senior official level" be held at least once a year to review their application.

Not surprisingly, the Report's section on the role of Islamist feminists was the one that stimulated the most discussion, in particular at the meeting held in Rabat in June 2006 in preparation for the EuroMed Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society. Many, in particular secular feminists, feel that Islamist feminists hold conservative views on the role of women in society and are consequently criticised for being detrimental rather than helpful to the cause of women's rights. The Report contends, however, that although this may be true, the role of Islamist feminism (a contentious term which is clarified in the report) in promoting the political participation of women cannot be discounted or ignored.

The issue of women's empowerment has been addressed in a variety of EuroMeSCo activities, namely in the network's Annual Conference, held in Istanbul in October 2006, which drew attention to the need to firmly place the EMP debate on women's rights in the political arena where it belongs – i.e. beyond the religious or cultural sphere to which some would like to see it confined – and called for the gender-specific impact of EMP programmes to be taken into account. Women's rights were also identified as one of the key areas for benchmarking democratic development within the EMP.

The issue of Islamist feminism will be the topic of a EuroMed seminar to be held in Brussels in late 2007, in preparation for which a EuroMeSCo report dealing with the paradox of individual conservatism and political activism will be drafted.

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relegated to the female population. Hence, according to the AHDR, if the number of girls effectively enrolled at the primary school level represents more than 3/4 of the girls eligible for school, this proportion falls to little over half at the secondary school level and becomes negligible at the higher education level. Returning to the male population, the enrolment rate of girls in the primary school level is nearly equivalent to that of boys but remains lower on higher

educational levels. The statistics in certain Gulf States (Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates), however, indicate that there are more young women than young men at the higher levels. Nonetheless, this figure is deceptive since young men are much more likely to leave the country to pursue studies abroad. By the same token, the apparently primarily female composition of classes or lecture halls is likewise deceptive, insofar as these classes are in

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fields rather abandoned by young men, who flock to so-called disciplines ‘of excellence’, which remain their exclusive preserve.

Generally speaking, there is an increasingly greater disjuncture between the possession of degrees and the possibilities for gain since it is not the jobs requiring degrees that are currently the most lucrative. It is primarily for this reason that teaching is relinquished to women while men turn to networking and memberships to ‘get in on business.’ The professional environment will thus be divided by extension of this initial state of affairs.

Globally, and in contrast with access to education, women’s access to employment in the Arab world remains minimal and, by regional comparison, according to the AHDR, can even be considered the lowest in the world with a female economic activity rate of 33% as compared to the world average of 56%.

Thus, contrary to the aspirations of women receiving degrees but in accordance with the market logic, doubly selective according to both references and genres, the acquisition of education by women does not open the doors of employment to them. Women constitute the majority of young unemployed graduates.

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Within the workforce, we can find the same discrepancies: sectors largely comprised of a female workforce as, for instance, (once again) teaching, and a primarily female presence at the bottom of

the hierarchy, including in the field of teaching. The higher one moves up the ranks, the greater the male composition of the workforce.

Although the business sphere is also hostile to female presence, a certain progress can be noted, with women who have managed to organise and coordinate amongst themselves, organising forums and meetings on an Arab-wide level (a Tunisian woman is the Vice-President of the Council of Arab Women Business Leaders and was elected President of the World Association of Women Entrepreneurs in 1998). In Tunisia, for instance, the number of women business leaders went from 200 in 1998 to 500 in 2005.

Political and public life is characterised by the same ebb and flow. Although progressing, the proportion of women in elected positions remains symbolic. Thus in Morocco, the statistics went from 1% women elected to Parliament in 1995 to 11% in 2003. In Tunisia over the same period, female representation went from 6.8% to 11%. By the same token, Maya Jribi was elected in the latter country in December 2006 as the head of an opposition party, the second woman to occupy such a post in the Maghreb after the Algerian, Louisa Hanoun. In Palestine, women won 17% of the posts at the municipal elections of 2004. In Egypt, on the other hand, they only hold 2% of the seats in Parliament. Another significant event was the election in April of 2007 of the Tunisian woman, Souhayr Belhassen, as head of the International Federation of Human Rights Associations (FIDH).

Apart from quantitative under-representation, qualitative discrimination is a significant factor in official posts where, as soon as women are appointed ministers, for instance, they are restricted to portfolios considered “in accordance with their nature.”

Finally, it is in the field of literary and artistic creation that real breakthroughs have been made in feminist expression. Although the media remains a vehicle for a stereotyped and traditional conception of women, if not a reactionary one, literature and cinema have given rise to certain productions that depart from this perspective, often causing ‘scandal’ in the Arab world. This is the case with the film by the Egyptian director, Inès el Degheidi, “Al Bahethat an al Horeya” (Women in Search of Freedom) as well as the novel *L’Amande* (The Almond), published in France under the pseudonym of Nedjma. If such precautions are taken, this means that at the same time, the artistic and intellectual scene is extremely

restrained by religious revival and subject to the Islamist system of beliefs and social practice. Women on Arab television, whether they are hosts or actresses on TV series, do not hesitate to appear in a head scarf, just as the "repentant" older stars. More generally and outside of cultural circles per se, the mentality of the population at large is strongly impregnated by religious culture and women play an important role in reproducing this state of affairs and disseminating it by wearing the headscarf, which has become prevalent in certain societies such as that of Egypt.

### **By Way of Conclusion: Internal or External Mechanisms for Women's Liberation?**

Thus, one could deduce that women not only hardly feel concerned by feminist liberation strategies but that, in addition, they act en masse in opposition to these strategies, causing members of the pre-Islamist generation to declare that their societies are experiencing an alarming regression. Women's success in the educational field has hardly been followed by incontestable victories in the ensemble of the public domain nor in the society's mentality, with the exception of a few personal success stories in the economic, political or cultural spheres. The expansion of education to include women could thus be understood more as the product of 'objective' socio-economic changes than as the result of deliberate action by women themselves. Indeed, although in many Arab countries, women's movements have a historical presence and female and/or feminist associations are active, despite the numerous political and cultural obstacles they face, their influence on women and society at large remain limited if not marginal. For this reason, Western partners on all levels (States, regional and international organisations, foundations, etc.)

increasingly commit and invest more generously to provide support to these associations and foster women's empowerment in societies of the developing world.

### **The Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference worked to define a joint action framework for the next five years, placing particular emphasis on three areas: civil and political rights, economic and social rights and rights in the cultural sphere**

This is reflected in the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, which worked to define a joint action framework for the next five years, placing particular emphasis on three areas considered essential: civil and political rights, economic and social rights and rights in the cultural sphere and the role of communication and the media. Independently of the evaluation that could be made of this approach, mainly focussing on rights rather than on women's real situations, the areas emphasised, on the one hand, indicate that these domains are those with obvious shortcomings hampering women from becoming stakeholders in social change, but on the other hand, they also inform us of the priorities officially designated for women.

This latter remark is not entirely innocuous, as it refers us to the terms of new polemics attacking women's associations and reiterating in a different light, i.e. that of sources of funding, the label they have always been tagged with, which associates women's emancipation with Westernisation.