

GENDER DYNAMICS

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www.euromedgenderquality.org

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EDITORIAL

Commitment confirmed: towards Greater Effectiveness



The Euro-Mediterranean Ministers responsible for equality between men and women met in Marrakesh on 11 and 12 November to take part in the second conference on promoting the role of women in society. Gender Dynamics attended the conference as well as the preparatory meeting organised by the NGOs in Istanbul on 24 and 25 October.

This fourth issue of your quarterly newsletter is entirely devoted to these two events and is primarily aimed at the nine partners participating in the Euromed Gender Equality Programme (EGEP): Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco,

Syria, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Tunisia. At the Marrakesh Conference, the Ministers gave a boost to the Istanbul Process which promotes equality between men and women, and which had been set in train three years earlier. They have made the Framework of Action more effective; priorities have been set and the follow-up arrangements for the planned improvements will be more efficient. Thanks to a questionnaire that had been drawn up by the European Commission and to which the governments had replied before the Marrakesh Conference, it had been possible to assess the Istanbul Process and identify ways to improve it. Euromed Gender Equality Programme experts drew up a report for the application of the Istanbul Conclusions covering the period from December 2006 to May 2007 based on answers from the countries involved.

Particular emphasis was placed in Marrakesh on women's economic rights, against the backdrop of the current economic and financial crisis. It may seem paradoxical, but this clear priority given by the Euro-Mediterranean Ministers enhances the importance of the actions undertaken by the Euromed Gender Equality Programme. EGEP was designed as a supporting measure for governmental actors for the implementation of the Conclusions of the 2006 Istanbul Conference.

Judith Neisse
Team leader EGEP

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THE FLOOR IS TO ...

Véronique Arnault, European Commission: "The first step will be to establish a legal basis"

Véronique Arnault represented the European Commission at the Marrakesh Conference. In this interview, the Director at the European Commission for Multilateral Relations and Human Rights (DG RELEX) outlined the current situation and future needs.

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Its activities focus primarily on civil and political rights and on the fight against gender-based violence. Equality before the law is the necessary prerequisite for de facto equality and on which women's economic independence is predicated. Women will be able to achieve economic independence and equal rights to employment and entrepreneurship when they can rely on egalitarian systems of legislation supported by measures giving real effect to their application and which punish their transgression.

By facilitating the exchange of experience and good practices among our partners, by creating synergy among all the actors involved in change, by processing the information that is needed to make progress, the Euromed Gender Equality Programme is working for the full application of the international conventions and for effect to be given to the intentions formulated by the Ministers, as expressed in Istanbul in 2006, and then in Marrakesh in 2009. The clear priorities for action, outlined at the second conference on promoting the role of women in society, will enable our programme to bring our initiatives into clearer focus.

Judith Neisse
Team leader EGEP

MARRAKESH CONFERENCE

New dynamism for equality

Three years after their first conference held in Istanbul, the Euro-Mediterranean countries met again in Marrakesh with the aim of promoting the role of women in their region. The meeting took place in a new context, following the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean (UFM), which brings together 43 partner countries. The participants came to give fresh impetus to the Istanbul Process and to take stock of what had been achieved. The adoption of the Istanbul Framework of Action, which was the outcome of the conclusions of the first conference, has paved the way towards improving the situation of women around the Mediterranean basin. However, progress seems too slow and, despite the work undertaken, the proposed rights have not been put into practice to the extent that had been hoped for. This is one key observation from a shadow report produced by the non-governmental organisations. The representatives of the 120 NGOs active in women's rights met in Istanbul on 24 and 25 October 2009 and criticised the "modest" implementation of the Framework of Action, as its potential is considerably "hampered by the lack of practical arrangements and compulsory measures." We shall return to this matter later in the present issue. For Nyamko Sabuni, Swedish Minister for Integration and Gender Equality and Co-President of the Marrakesh Conference, the lack of follow-up mechanisms accounts for a lot, "We have gained experience and we now have an idea of our failures and successes since 2006. One of the weaknesses identified is the lack of follow-up mechanisms. We have tried to remedy this to boost efforts to improve women's lives", she explained. One of the measures agreed on by the participants has, in fact, been the introduction of a follow-up mechanism. "A group of experts will be tasked every year with drawing up a report to track the progress made and its effects in each of the partner countries. I hope that these arrangements will contribute to enabling us to achieve more than we have so far. We have undoubtedly made progress on the ground, but not as quickly as we had hoped," declared Nyamko Sabuni at the end of the conference. In order to speed up the process, Ministers encouraged the partners to present practical projects. Three of them are appended to the Marrakesh Conclusions. The first concerns the creation of the Foundation of Women for the Mediterranean,



the second focuses on the use of information and communication technologies to combat poverty among women and the third is the establishment of a Centre for the political emancipation of women.

Minister Nyamko Sabuni, Co-President of the Marrakesh Conference: "a group of experts will be tasked every year with drawing up a report to track the progress made and its effects in each of the partner countries."

MARRAKESH DECLARATION

A strong consensus,



Nouzha Skalli, Moroccan Minister of Social Development, Family and Solidarity: "the follow-up mechanisms that we have just adopted are further proof of the credibility of the Istanbul Process."

The delegations of the countries participating in the Marrakesh Conference held marathon discussions over two days in order to arrive at a consensus on the final declaration. At her press conference Nouzha Skalli, Moroccan Minister of Social Development, Family and Solidarity summed up the main achievements included in the Marrakesh Declaration. "First of all the Euromed partners have renewed their commitment to strengthen the role of women in society, in particular, as part of the Istanbul Process. There is also the continuation of the Istanbul Process itself, as the first five year work programme will come to an end in 2011. We attach great importance to the continuity of this process. Similarly, we have also focused on the effective involvement of civil society, especially the Euromed platform, in the Istanbul Process. We believe that this is a strategic accomplishment of the greatest importance. And finally, the follow-up mechanisms that we have just adopted are further proof of the credibility of the Istanbul Process", indicated the Minister. Other aspects will also be of interest to the readership of Gender Dynamics and bear witness to the Conference's spirit of constructive practicality.

The Second Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society reaffirms the fundamental importance of equality – de facto and de jure – in all walks of life. Its objective is to achieve political, civil, social, economic and cultural equality and to combat all forms of gender-based discrimination in the region. The Euro-Mediterranean Ministers consider equality between men

concrete measures

and women as a determining factor for democracy, peace, stability and mutual prosperity. Women's involvement in society is a prerequisite for socio-economic development and good governance.

The Marrakesh Conference provided an opportunity to assess the progress made with respect to the joint 2006-2011 Framework of Action, which had been drawn up in Istanbul in 2006. The Ministers noted that progress had been made, yet stressed that there was still a long way to go. They therefore committed to stepping up their efforts to make use of the Framework of Action to produce practical results. Among the challenges to be taken up was the ongoing inequality between men and women in the labour market. This was preventing women from achieving economic independence and increased the risk of impoverishment and social exclusion. The Ministers also pointed out the under-representation of women in decision-making in public, economic and political life and the difficulty in managing the balance between work and family life. The persistence of all forms of violence against women – domestic violence, violence in the work place, in armed conflicts or in situations of occupation – were strongly condemned. The negative impact of the current financial and economic crisis on women's lives and equality was also noted.

The importance of the partnership with civil society, including the Euromed non-governmental platform, was highlighted as an irreversible achievement of the Istanbul Process. Dialogue was encouraged with all public and private institutions that were concerned by gender equality, including the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly. All these organisations should have greater involvement in carrying out the Framework of Action.

At the Marrakesh Conference the Ministers also set out the priorities for the years to come. Included among these are the complete and effective adoption of the international conventions on women's human rights – in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – and their transposition into national legislation and political reform. A number of areas for action

were singled out. With respect to civil and political rights, the Declaration called for the revision of discriminatory laws, the participation of women in the political decision-making process, the elimination of gender-based violence, support for institutions devoted to equality, the promotion of education and awareness-raising, the protection of the rights of immigrant and refugee women. Against the backdrop of the current economic and financial crisis, clear priority is given to building women's economic capacity, in particular with respect to equality in employment, to social protection and the fight against poverty, to equal opportunities and across the board support for women entrepreneurs (training, credit, etc.), and to empowering women to manage their own resources. With respect to social and cultural rights, the Ministers flagged up the fight against stereotypes, equal access to education and vocational training, the recognition of women's specific health needs and equal access to care, the promotion of dialogue and cultural exchanges.

Particular attention is to be given to migrant women, for whom specific plans to facilitate integration need to be drawn up. Their positive role in their host societies was brought to the fore and effective measures will be taken to protect them from discrimination. Ministers also registered their interest in the situation of women refugees and women living in rural areas.

In order to give fresh impetus to the Istanbul Process, its communication will be stepped up and concrete projects, visible to citizens, will be promoted. The Ministers suggest that the promotion of gender equality should be a priority for the Union for the Mediterranean. Several projects, appended to the Marrakesh Declaration, demonstrate the determination to take practical action.

The next Ministerial Conference will take place in 2012; the implementation of the priorities defined will be extended until that date.

Consult the Marrakesh Conclusions in French, English online at http://www.euromedgenderequality.org/evnement_detail.php?evnement=7/

EUROMED GENDER EQUALITY PROGRAMME

In the footsteps of Marrakesh

The Euromed Gender Equality Programme (EGEP) is holding a round table in Brussels on 15, 16 and 17 March 2010. Its aim is twofold: on the one hand to examine and approve a report on the situation of women in the region, drafted on the basis of studies carried out at national level in the nine Mediterranean partner countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian territories, Syria and Tunisia) and, on the other, to define priorities in the programme's areas of action for the coming year.

In order to achieve these two objectives efficiently, several representatives of countries from both sides of the Mediterranean will take part in the meeting. Representatives of ministries and institutions responsible for the situation of women and equality issues will work together with other key actors who have expertise in the region. Local experts who produced the national studies, regional and international experts from organisations with experience and similar competencies will also participate.

EGEP will produce a comprehensive picture of gender equality in the Euro-Mediterranean region using communications based on the Ministerial Conclusions of Istanbul (2006) and Marrakesh (2009) on "Strengthening the Role of Women in Society" and their processes of implementation and follow-up and the national situation reports. The participants will also discuss good practice, what each has learned and still needs to learn with a view to sharing experience at regional level.



INTERVIEW

Véronique Arnault, European Commission: “The first step will be to establish a legal basis”

Véronique Arnault represented the European Commission at the Marrakesh Conference. In this interview, the Director at the European Commission for Multilateral Relations and Human Rights (DG RELEX) outlined the current situation and future needs.

The situation of women in several Mediterranean countries still does not live up to our expectations. In your view, how can this be put right?

First of all, international legislation needs to be incorporated into national legislations. For instance, several countries still have reservations about CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the additional protocols. It is still also important to penalise sexual violence against women, even in Europe where some countries do not have strong legislation in this area. The first step will therefore consist in establishing a legal basis. It will then have to be implemented with clear political leadership. And there will also have to be a change in mindsets. The report presented by the NGOs

brought to light fundamentalist trends in all the religions.

Irina Bokova, who has just been elected Director of Unesco, has set two priorities for women: access to education and access to power. Progress for women in the economic field should also be achieved.

Up until now, is it not true to say that efforts have been focussed on improving civil rights to the detriment of other areas?

I think it is very important to look at rights overall. There has often been criticism of the European Union for concentrating solely on civil and political rights and not enough on economic and social rights. We are indeed trying to do better, especially with the economic assistance available to us, but it has to be said that we are determined by the authorities' political agenda. The large-scale programmes depend on governmental institutions, although in the European Union, we do also have programmes which are directly implemented with civil society.



Is the gender approach mainstreamed in actions undertaken by the EU?

At European level, we are undertaking civil and military operations to help pacify and rebuild various regions around the world. Nowadays the soldiers, humanitarian workers and the officials involved in conflict areas are systematically given training in gender issues so that they can take into consideration the situations of women victims. First of all, there are the cases of women who have been raped, but there are also post-conflict situations in which we encourage greater participation of women to work for reconciliation and mediation.

Quite apart from the crisis situations, we are incorporating a gender dimension into all our programmes of external assistance to partner countries, and we also have specific actions, for example in terms of support to civil society organisations which are working to combat all forms of violence against women and giving help to victims. Similarly, we are introducing a gender dimension into all election observation activities. Next year, the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, should take the initiative to hold a ministerial conference to revise United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.



The European Commission accords particular attention to civil society

In the photo: Véronique Arnault, Director for Multilateral Relations and Human Rights at the European Commission, Frédéric Varenne, Programme manager, Centralised Operations for Europe, the Mediterranean and Middle East and Immaculada Roca I Cortes, Director General of External Relations.



PUBLICATION

The Shadow Report on the implementation of the Istanbul Plan of Action

The conclusions of the Shadow Report drafted by NGOs ahead of the Marrakesh Ministerial conference are based on several premises. The Shadow Report flags up the obstacles to achieving gender equality in the region, which are mainly due to the power of patriarchal structures. The male-dominated concepts of tribe and clan take precedence over promoting citizenship. The predominance of conservative power, whether religious, social or political, also plays a role in this process, as does a political and security situation ill-adapted to the flourishing and consolidation of women's rights.

The report's main recommendations call for the respect of commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) made by all the countries, which should include the withdrawal of reservations made by some members and the harmonisation of national legislation and international conventions. This aim depends on the recognition of gender equality in the Constitutions of countries which do not yet recognise it and the repeal of any laws enshrining discrimination between men and women. Reforms need also to be introduced into national legislations

to guarantee the representation of women in all areas and at all levels in elected and non-elected bodies.

The recommendations also include combating violence against women, particularly migrant women and recognising that violence against women is a violation of their fundamental rights, that no tradition or culture can condone. There must also be no impunity for persons guilty of perpetrating violence against women.

The report recommends promoting the Istanbul Plan of Action as a tool to support gender equality and to consolidate women's rights. Discussions should be opened on the main obstacle facing women in achieving equality. Establishing effective and credible mechanisms, supported by procedures and indicators at regional and national level in order to monitor continuously the situation of women would be a valuable contribution.

Finally, civil society organisations should be recognised as active partners, on the basis of total respect for their independence and freedom.

Undoubtedly, the practical measures need to given effect at regional and national levels, with clear actions in the short, medium and long term. The ONGs

recommend the establishment of a follow-up committee to monitor the implementation of these actions and to provide evaluations with civil society organisations. Mechanisms which guarantee consistency among the Istanbul Plan of Action, the Euromed Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy should be adopted to ensure gender mainstreaming.

The NGOs will be associated with the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference and both the European Parliament and the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly will be encouraged to participate more actively in the process to monitor the implementation of the Istanbul Plan of Action. Making women's rights a priority of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean, and ensuring that they are systematically on the agenda, is a major objective.

The Shadow Report advocates increasing and improving employment for women, furthering their social integration, reducing the differences between women living in rural and urban areas and better understanding of women's contributions to the economy overall.

The NGOs call on the Euro-Mediterranean partners to take a whole series of measures that can enhance gender equality in all areas and at all levels and which can reach out to everybody across the board.

Several of these recommendations have been included in the Marrakesh Conclusion, which makes it clear that the NGOs are particularly important in the process to achieve gender equality in practice.

PREPARATORY MEETING

Looking ahead to Marrakesh

Ahead of the Marrakesh Conference, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) and the Euromed non-governmental platform organised a series of preparatory meetings. They culminated in a conference entitled "Gender equality in the Euro-Mediterranean region: from Plan of Action to action?" which took place in Istanbul on 24 and 25 October 2009. More than 120 members of civil society groups, human rights and women's rights organisations, from both Mediterranean and European countries,

met to prepare recommendations for the ministerial conference. Also present were representatives of the European Commission and the French, Moroccan and Swedish governments.

The participants discussed the conclusions of the Shadow Report on the implementation of the Istanbul Plan of Action, published by the EMHRN. According to the organisers the report aimed to "examine the implementation of the Plan of Action, to identify the main obstacles to its implementation and to make recommendations on how this plan can advance gender equality and women's rights in the Euro-Mediterranean region". It also analyses the main developments that took place between 2006 and 2008 (see our article).

Almost from the start the discussion



"Euromed civil society: A key player to strengthen equality"

on the Istanbul Conclusions and the Plan of Action stirred controversy. Participants were particularly divided over the importance of the Istanbul Conclusions and the depth of commitment from governments to implement the Plan of Action:

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“Up until now, these conclusions are little known, if at all, even in governments, outside a small circle of people in the know” said Lilian Halls, of the European Feminist Initiative, one of the experts who contributed to drafting the report in European countries. On the other side of the Mediterranean the situation seemed little different: “Nobody knows about the Istanbul Conference, at any level, governmental, non-governmental, not even in the offices of the European Commission”, confirmed Amal Abdel Hadi, an Egyptian expert who also contributed to drawing up the report.

A consensus was finally arrived at to redouble efforts and to pursue the Istanbul Process by adopting a participative approach among the various actors working for greater equality in the region. Several speakers also warned against a regression of women’s rights as an outcome not only of the economic crisis, but also of the rise of conservative trends and religious fundamentalism.

Participants considered that greater efforts need to be made so that the Istanbul Plan of Action has real impact on policy and is transformed into a mechanism to discuss the obstacles confronting women. The participants believed that it was essential to publicise the Istanbul Plan of Action. This means “moving on from the Plan of Action to effective interaction among the governmental institutions responsible for women’s issues and civil society actors”, recommended Brigitta Aseskog, from the gender division of the Swedish Ministry for Integration and Gender Equality. “Each actor should be clear about her/his role and add grist to the mill”, she insisted.

The ways in which the Plan of Action could be calibrated with existing mechanisms at national, regional and international levels was a cross-cutting theme in the discussions. “This is precisely where the value added of this Plan of Action will be found” thought Abla Abu El Beh of the Jordanian Women’s Union. “It’s at this level that we should envisage an

important role for civil society which will involve integrating the Plan of Action into other structures and frameworks, starting with those of the European Union and the Union for the Mediterranean”, she added.

The Marrakesh Conference therefore represents for the participants a new opportunity to give impetus to the Istanbul Plan of Action and not an excuse to “curb efforts or to pander to particular interests. It will boost closer cooperation among all the actors, because there is so much at stake,” said Azza Kamel, Director of the Egyptian Centre of Appropriate Communication Techniques for Development. In her view it is governments’ role to establish the balance and real cooperation with civil society based on the principles of democracy and respect for human rights.

The conference ended with a declaration addressed to those attending the Marrakesh ministerial conference and recommendations were made to translate the intentions of the Istanbul Plan of Action into concrete action.



INTERVIEW

Lina Al Qurah, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network: “Realities on the ground are not in line with national legislations”

Lina Al Qurah, Director of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network’s Gender project works out of Amman. Included in her network’s objectives are the defence and protection of women’s rights and the consolidation of gender equality in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. She tells us about her network’s activities.

Could you give us an overview of gender equality in the Euro-Mediterranean region?

In the Shadow Report our aim has been to outline strategic lines which will make it possible to measure and assess gender equality both scientifically and practically. Women’s involvement in decision-making is still very limited in most European countries, with the exception of Sweden. Our goal, however, is to achieve parity and the active participation of women in political life.

And what is the situation in the Arab countries?

The thorny issue we encounter in the Arab countries is the large volume of texts which legally establish segregation and inequality, for instance, legislation on personal legal status, criminal law, labour law and legislation on nationality. It also has to be said that religious factors hold our work back considerably.

Is parity in political representation still little more than a slogan?

I think that national legislations and realities are not in line with each other. We still have a long way to go so we need to redouble our efforts together with civil society groups in order to start intercontinental action to lobby elected representatives and thereby initiate common action for the abolition of “segregationist” laws and the ratification by all states of the international conventions which enshrine gender equality.

What are the consequences of the inequalities contained in national legislations?

I think that the existence of such legislation, which remains in force in several southern Mediterranean countries, constitutes a major handicap for the implementation of a common Mediterranean policy on equality. In my view, these laws are incompatible with the resolutions and recommendations taken since 1995.

Some governments refuse to challenge the forces of religious orthodoxy. Is this not harmful to equality?

It’s sad to say, but in fact some governments are keen not to upset traditional religious groups and this creates an unbearable climate of competitiveness as far as the situation of women is concerned. Some progress has been made, but there is still more than enough to do.



EUROMED NON-GOVERNMENTAL PLATFORM

**Abdelmaksoud Rachdi:
“Civil society is looking for real change”**

“Governments have carried out some of their national plans in order to comply with the expectations of the European Union, but practically speaking, those in feminist movements consider that the official line does not match the reality as experienced in their respective countries. [...] Governments have their own departments and their own specific programmes. However, civil society is looking for real change to move from the expression of wish lists to programming, implementing

mechanisms and planning at regional national and continental level [...].

The different sections of civil society and feminist movements should take into account the changes that have been experienced in the Mediterranean basin. I would mainly point to the different approaches that have been taken by the Barcelona Process, which was launched in 1995 and which considers civil society as an essential partner in the Euro-Mediterranean

Partnership, and the Union for the Mediterranean, which seeks contributions from civil society. The latter was present at UFM’s launch on 13 July in Paris during the meeting of heads of state and government. However, civil society has not really seen, politically or financially, any reaction to its aspirations. This is why we are currently re-examining our approach to the role of civil society in the Mediterranean partnership process.”

**NETWORK AISHA
(ARAB’S WOMEN FORUM)**

**Joumana Merhy:
“Similarities
in the countries
of the North
and the South”**

“... The report has shown some similarities in the situations of women in the countries of the North and the South. This is enabling us to build strategic alliances with tools taken from the Istanbul Conclusions... Civil society should be included in this process as a main actor and not as a partner who simply follows the implementation of a plan of action”



ALGERIAN LEAGUE FOR THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS (LADDH)

**Kamel Daoud:
“The Euro-Mediterranean Network
acts as a protection for NGOs”**



“Governments draft texts which, at the end of the day, are not applied. In particular, I’m thinking of our experience of the Barcelona Process,

in which the Association Agreements’ conditionality on democracy and human rights was not respected. The same is true of the Treaty of Paris concerning the Union for the Mediterranean, in which there is no mention of women’s rights. In other words, above and beyond the texts per se, it is important for the Euro-Mediterranean Network in particular to define its own guidelines and recommendations, by taking the realities of the various countries, in particular those in the South, as a

starting point [...].

Civil society tends to neglect its true claims, as it becomes an instrument of the political relationships it has to establish. In my opinion, the time has come to assert that we are not an appendix of governmental organisations, but a truly autonomous system, which is independent of political forces and which must be much closer to society. [...] The Euro-Mediterranean environment is extremely important for local NGOs, who suffer from governmental ostracism. This deprives them of the ability to act independently, to express themselves and to articulate their true claims. The Euro-Mediterranean Network therefore represents for us a kind of international protection which we rely on enormously.”

EUROPEAN FEMINIST INITIATIVE

**Lilian Halls: “Joint strategies
to counter discrimination”**



“... we have to take up the Istanbul Conclusions and use them as an additional tool to discuss the main obstacles that are preventing women from enjoying their rights and to facilitate cooperation on common objectives, to demonstrate that there have to be joint strategies to counter discrimination and the oppression suffered by women everywhere...”



PREPARATORY MEETING

Mediterranean ministers favour women's rights

New projects aimed at facilitating leadership roles for women will contribute to strengthening democracy, say the Ministers of Mediterranean countries who met in Marrakesh.

By Siham Ali

for Magharebia in Rabat - 18/11/09

The countries of the Mediterranean region should finance and coordinate more projects aimed at stimulating the role of women in society, according to the ministers and the civil society delegations of forty-three countries who met in Marrakesh on Wednesday 11 November.

The delegates to the second Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on gender equality and women's rights, all from countries of the Union for the Mediterranean, discussed ways of improving the situation of women with respect to leadership and employment.

In addition to calls for more funding and better coordination of women's projects, the official declaration published at the end of the two-day meeting also praised progress made by women in the Mediterranean region, while noting that this progress had been made at "varying speeds, which is also the case in the countries on the northern shores of the Mediterranean."

The participants concluded that ensuring more even progress would require setting up projects such as the Foundation of Women for the Mediterranean, which will have an office in Marrakesh.

This Foundation will organise meetings, initiatives and exchanges of

local experience in order to strengthen and promote the role of women in society. It will also finance projects aimed at stimulating local development and encouraging better financing from organisations such as the World Bank. France, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco are supporting the establishment of this Foundation. According to the statement, "[it] will create a venue which both institutions and actors in the field will be able to identify with".

"The Foundation will be a mechanism to implement projects to enhance women's rights", explained Hala Bseisu Lattouf, Jordanian minister of Social Development, to her counterparts.

The participants also stressed the need to help young women and women living in poverty by giving them the means to look after themselves and, by doing so, promote democracy.

Other ministers also confirmed the need to work together to overcome the obstacles preventing women from fully enjoying their rights.

"Women in the Euro-Mediterranean area still encounter great difficulties when trying to assert their rights fully", said Moroccan Minister for Social Development Nouzha Skalli. "These obstacles", she said, "are evident in various fields, but particularly in employment and decision-making."

Ms Skalli also criticised the image of women in the media and the arts, which fuelled stereotypes and negative prejudice.

"Now more than ever before women need to have greater involvement in decision-making", said Farkhonda Hassan, Secretary General of Egypt's National



Ministers discussed the promotion of women's rights in the Mediterranean region at the meeting in Marrakesh.

(Abdelhak Senna/AFP/Getty Images)

Women's Council. "It is particularly important for women to promote their condition, especially given the current economic crisis."

The Italian Minister of Equal Opportunities, Mara Carfagna, was of a similar opinion and considered that the promotion of women would depend on "their access to decision-making, both politically and socially."

Ministers also called on charities and civil society in general to play a role in promoting women's rights.

"Civil society has an important role to play in devising a general strategy to find appropriate mechanisms to achieve gender equality, which must be considered as a fundamental development issue", said the President of the Euromed Non-Governmental platform, Abdelmaksoud Rachdi.

<http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/fr/features/awi/features/2009/11/18/feature-01features/2009/11/18/feature-01>

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