

**Conference on
“Women, agents of change in the South Mediterranean Region”,
Rome, 24 October 2011**

**Speech by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio,
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Opening Session

Embargo against delivery / check against delivery

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with you this morning.

All the more so, since gender issues have been at the top of my agenda since I took up office in 2002 as Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe. And although I believe the issue of women's rights and their situation in society should always be of primary concern to any government, I do recognise that there is today an exceptional window of opportunity to move things forward in the South Mediterranean region. Let's not lose this momentum.

Let us remember, at the outset, that ensuring equal rights for women is not only of benefit to half of the population. In 2002, the first Arab Human Development Report cited the lack of women's rights as one of the three factors most hampering progress in the region, along with lack of political freedoms and poor education. Equality of rights is a matter of justice and fairness, but it also makes hard economic and political sense.

Women have emerged as key and equal players in the Arab Spring: through protesting, organising, blogging and even through hunger-strikes, they have taken a central role in the movements for change in the region. Now it remains to be seen if their rights will be formally acknowledged and if their political engagement will lead to governmental and institutional reform and to real change in daily lives and experiences of women in society.

I realise that the realities on the ground are very different from country to country, even within countries and among social classes. It is a challenge to speak of “women” in general terms and of “the Southern Mediterranean” as if it was a homogenised region.

The events which took place in this region do, however, point to common trends. Women activists of the Arab Spring have come from all social groups, since it has been a mass movement, starting from the grassroots. This has meant that a wide range of concerns have been put on the agenda, from issues of political representation and legislation affecting women's equality, to escaping violence and the call for wages and better employment rights.

Across all groups, women's health, literacy and material well-being have emerged as shared concerns.

Another common trend is the role of the media, internet, social networks in bringing women to the streets and giving them a voice. Women have been inspired by articulate women anchors on satellite television networks like Al Jazeera. Women can assert leadership roles in cyberspace that men's dominance in the public sphere might have hampered in city squares.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are invited to debate over two days the role of women as agents of change in the political, economical and private spheres. Women can only bring about effective and long-lasting change in their countries if they can first participate actively in political and economic life at all levels - governmental, local, through associations political parties or trade unions – and in all sectors, and thus see their views incorporated into policy-making. This is the only way of genuinely influencing the future of their countries and their own future.

The issue of participation is linked to the fundamental principle of equality between men and women.

The instauration of truly democratic regimes in the Southern Mediterranean calls for full equality between men and women. This requires people to radically change their perceptions and to make (in some cases enormous) efforts to change their attitudes towards what are socially and culturally accepted roles. This does not come easy. But gender equality is the first step towards the equality of people, and thus the first step toward democracy.

The fact that a march of approximately 200 women on “international women’s day” (8 March) in Egypt was jeopardised by groups of men, and other examples of intimidation in various countries, illustrates that there is no wide acceptance of giving women a larger role in politics and society – or rather there is lack of awareness? But there are everyday signs of progress and this is what I invite you to focus on today.

The objective of this Conference is not to draw a catalogue of obstacles, but rather to highlight the progress and the giant leaps that have occurred recently and that inspire us - as citizens and as policy-makers.

To give only a few examples:

In Egypt, a prominent female newscaster called Bothaina Kamel is running for President, something inconceivable in the Mubarak era. Whatever the final result of the elections, her candidacy is nevertheless deeply symbolic and historic.

In Morocco, the new Constitution adopted by referendum on 1 July 2011 introduced explicitly the principle of equality between men and women in its article 19.

In Tunisia, the transitional government is determined to protect the public role of women by making sure they are well represented in the new legislature. A first in any Arab land, and in advance of most European Countries: the Tunisian elections taking place today (23 October) demanded strictly equal proportions of women and men on all lists presented to the polling booth. Whatever the outcome of the elections, I hope that this approach will be continued.

On 7 October, the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work". By selecting these African and Arab women leaders, the committee of the Nobel Prize hoped to contribute to putting an end to the repression suffered by women in many countries and to express the great potential that women can represent for peace and democracy.

The Arab Spring and its flavour for change is having an impact well beyond the geographical borders of the Southern Mediterranean. Even traditionally conservative countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have experienced positive changes with the inclusion of women in the public sphere. In May 2010, I had the privilege to attend the ceremony of the North-South Centre awarding the “North-South Prize” to Rola Dashti, a leading activist in Kuwait well

known throughout the Middle East region for her advocacy of democratic reform and gender equality. She was one of the first four women ever to win a seat in the Parliament of Kuwait.

I am convinced that the expertise and experience of the Council of Europe can be of added value to our debates. As early as 1979, the Council of Europe has established its first intergovernmental committee to promote equality between women and men. Since then we have been in the forefront in pushing forward the debate – and concrete action – on subjects such as violence against women, trafficking in human beings, gender mainstreaming, positive action, balanced participation in decision-making, and national machinery for equality.

Over the last 30 years, a lot has been achieved, but much more remains to be done. I believe that the starting point must be a solid legal framework – and in some countries this still needs to be achieved. But even when the legal basis exists, we cannot be complacent in believing that real equality of rights and of opportunities will follow.

We must close the gap between de jure equality and de facto equality. This is true everywhere, also in Europe. Progress is slow, and in my view we cannot afford to believe that change will happen alone.

Our work in the Council of Europe is based on legally-binding instruments which are a solid basis for progress in specific fields of action. Many of these conventions are open to non-European countries, the most recent example being the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which was opened for signature in May 2011. I hope that many countries of the Southern Mediterranean will join it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Council of Europe is currently developing a new Neighbourhood Policy, through which its unique expertise in the fields of human rights, democracy and the rule of law could be of support in the context of democratic changes in the Southern Mediterranean. This support can include legislative expertise, institutional capacity-building, as well as awareness-raising on specific issues such as violence against women, trafficking in human beings. In this connection, it is important to underline that the Partner for Democracy” status recently granted to the Parliament of Morocco and the Palestinian National Council includes commitments to encourage equal participation of women and men in public life and politics. This status allows the parliamentary delegations from these countries to take part in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly's activities.

In return, they must declare their commitment to the Council of Europe's values, which include balanced participation of women and men in political and public life.

Finally, the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, which I would like to thank for the initiative of this conference, has also made the promotion of equality between men and women one of the priorities of its Tran Mediterranean programme since its launch in 1994. The Centre can play an essential role as a platform for discussions and for monitoring the recommendations coming out of this conference, as well as in creating a network of the person and institutions present here today.

Let us be ambitious and bold. We all have seen the images of women in the streets asking for change. Seeing is not enough. We have to demonstrate in the next two days that we have also heard and understood their messages, and that we stand alongside them.

Let's make sure we make progress and do not slip back during this decisive moment.

Thank you for your attention.