



North-South Centre of the Council of Europe



« Women as agents of change in the South Mediterranean Region » (Rome, 24-25 October 2011)

Conclusions of the Chair of the Executive Committee of the North-South Centre

The theme of our conference, "Women as agents of change in the South Mediterranean region" was doubly topical. First of all, the conference took place in an historical context faced by the Mediterranean region since the beginning of 2011, which give a new relevance to the issue of promoting women's rights in the region. Furthermore, it enrolled in the continuity of initiatives, often for many years, on gender equality, of the Council of Europe and its North-South Centre, the United Nations, the euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Union, the parliamentary co-operation and the local and regional civil society.

Our discussions, which brought together nearly 250 participants from 31 countries, gave a broad overview of the place and role of women on both sides of the Mediterranean. We examined this issue in terms of political and public life, economic and social life, family, personal and private life. We also held two special sessions, one concerning the situation in Tunisia after the general elections of 23 October and the other about the role that the media can play in promoting women in the North and South of the Mediterranean.

Among the latest initiatives, the following were specifically emphasized:

- the fact that during the 60th anniversary of the Council of Europe the 47 member states - through the Committee of Ministers - solemnly reaffirmed their commitment to achieving real equality between women and men¹;
- the creation of UN Women by the United Nations in 2010 and the joint declaration adopted on 19 September in New York by a group of women holding high political responsibilities² ;
- the fact that the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is the third among the eight Millennium Development Goals defined in September 2000 at the Millennium Summit in New York;
- the adoption in November 2010, by the Alliance of Civilizations, of a Regional Strategy for cultural dialogue and co-operation in the Mediterranean, one of its priorities being the promotion of women as agents of change in the region;
- the importance, in the context of Euro-Mediterranean partnership, of the two ministerial conferences on "Strengthening the role of women in society"³, and the need to introduce this issue in any project to revive the Union for the Mediterranean;
- the commitment of the European Union, expressed in the communication issued by the European Commission to the European Parliament, to the Council, to the Economic and Social Committee, and to the Committee of the Regions on 21 September 2010, which proposed a "Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015".

¹ Declaration "Making gender equality a reality", (Madrid, May 12, 2009), 119th ministerial session of the Committee of Ministers.

² Joint Declaration: On Advancing Women's Political Participation (New York, September 19, 2009), published on the occasion of the 66th session of the UN General Assembly.

³ Istanbul (November 14-15, 2006) and Marrakech (November 11-12, 2009).

The civil society embodied by associations committed in the cause of women in the Mediterranean⁴ region, as well as local authorities close to the population, play an indispensable role in developing (and implementing) projects responding to local identified needs. The media as intermediaries and spreaders of the information, can also be powerful instruments for the promotion of women⁵. The modern communication technologies like the Internet or social networks, which enabled the mass gatherings of protesters that were part of the lead to the success of the Arab spring, offer new opportunities to achieve that goal.

We found, without surprise, that despite all these initiatives, the road is still long – in the North as in the South of the Mediterranean and in the whole world – to make the rights of women and equality between men and women fully respected. Several commitments have been made in that direction, especially in Marrakech, in November 2009, in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean⁶: these are entirely relevant, but we must now move from words to deeds.

In the south of the Mediterranean, women – already agents of changes as drivers of the economy and pillars of the family and social life – demonstrated by their strong involvement in the events of the Arab Spring that they want to control their own destiny and they want to provide themselves all possible means to build their future in better conditions.

The presence of women was a key factor in the successful overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes, and in the revolutionary movements that have transformed – and continue to affect – the entire Arab world. The image of the Arab woman as submissive, cloistered at home, locked in her role as wife and mother, must be changed. These women are more than ever willing to assert their rights and freedoms and to see their condition improve in the political, economical, social, familial and personal domains.

The issue is particularly important in countries that are engaged in processes of democratic transition: women who took an active part in the events should not be sidelined. They now have the historic opportunity that European women did not have in the past, to be directly involved in the construction of democratic states, respectful of human rights of all citizens and willing to promote those. It is important that they can seize that opportunity, and they can not miss our support.

We welcomed recent progress in Tunisia, with the adoption of a parity law⁷ for the elections, and we were delighted to see the massive participation of the Tunisian people, both men and women, at the elections of October 23. We also welcomed the progress made in Morocco, with the entrenchment of the principle of equality between women and men in the Constitution⁸. In Egypt, even if the constitutional reform of March 2011 has not lead to the expected progress, Bothaina Kamel was the first woman, in August, who could be candidate for the presidential election, something which would have been impossible under the regime of Hosni Mubarak. In Libya, where Gadhafi's death has turned the page after 42 years of dictatorship, it is important to support the efforts of those who want the country on the path of democracy and respect for human rights, including the equality between women and men.

⁴ Such as the Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Morocco, the Women's Foundation for the Mediterranean, the Association of Moroccan Women in Italy, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, the Robert Schuman Foundation. This one, in partnership with the General Direction of Education and Culture of the European Commission and Karamanlis Institute for Democracy, held on the 21st September 2011 at the European Parliament, a conference on "Women in Europe and Citizens' Initiative".

⁵ Such as the Permanent Conference of Mediterranean Audiovisual Operators (COPEAM), or with the TV5 program "Terriennes", bloggers and journalists, committed to the cause of women.

⁶ See excerpt from the Marrakesh Declaration attached.

⁷ The electoral law adopted for the elections of 23 October endorsed the proportional list that must be made with equal representation, with risk of cancellation for non compliance with this requirement, which is really new.

⁸ In Morocco, gender equality is now under the principles enshrined in the Constitution. Indeed, the new Moroccan Constitution, which was adopted by referendum on 1 July 2011, establishes in article 19 explicitly gender equality. In addition, Morocco has raised most of its reservations to CEDAW, which will force it to reform its legislation so that it meets the principle of gender equality. The new Constitution also states that the international conventions ratified by Morocco will have precedence over national laws.

We noted with satisfaction that the mobilisation of women has spread far beyond the Mediterranean. Thus, in Iran since the beginning of the Green Movement, hundreds of activists were detained in Iranian prisons, because they "constitute a threat to national security." In Syria and Yemen, women have challenged social norms to join the protests, and sometimes paid with their freedom or their lives. Even the most conservative countries are affected, as evidenced by the campaign in Saudi Arabia for women being allowed to drive, and the recent decision to give them the right to vote and stand in local elections, even if they will only be effective from 2015.

We stressed the importance of peace as a prerequisite for the development of human beings, and the decisive role played by women not only in conflict prevention, but also in their regulation or in post-conflict reconciliation. We welcomed, in this regard, the symbolic step that has represented the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gboweh and Tawakkul Karman, three women who helped to change their country and the world .

Together with peace, the other essential component of development and women's blooming is education. We welcomed the significant progress made in many countries where the proportion of women in higher education exceeds the equivalent percentage for men, while measuring the shortcomings that remain, including in the level of basic schooling. We encouraged all states in the North and South of the Mediterranean, to follow the principles of Recommendation CM / Rec (2007) 13 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which pleads for an integrated approach to the equality between men and women in education.

We also called on all countries that have not already done so to include in their constitution the principle of equality between men and women, with the principle of primacy of international law over national law, while leaving open the possibilities for positive action when necessary. The parity should also be included in the election laws at the national, regional and local levels, as well as the laws on political parties. Dissuasive sanctions should be applied for non-compliance, as experience shows that financial sanctions alone are not enough.

The key for change is the political will. Without it, the words remain words, and will not be followed by progress. The promotion of women is in the interest of all, and many studies show that inequalities between men and women, even more than the other inequalities, are a major obstacle to development. Men and women, North or South of the Mediterranean, we are all concerned and we can all give our contribution.

To show our commitment, we have adopted a series of concrete measures, that we are determinate to implement in the coming months and years⁹.

These conclusions and the outcome of the conference will be presented at the Lisbon Forum jointly organised by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe and the Alliance of Civilizations, November 3-4¹⁰, and at the Ministerial Meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean "5 +5"¹¹, which will be held on 28 November in Naples.

⁹ See the final document of the Conference, entitled "The North-South process for strengthening the role of women."

¹⁰ The theme of the 2011Lisbon Forum is "The Arab spring: a major step towards making universal rights real."

¹¹ Gathering traditionally Italy, France, Portugal, Spain and Malta, for the "North", as well as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania, for the "South", this process will be expanded to Greece on the one hand and Egypt on the other.

Annexes: excerpt from the final declaration of the Ministerial Conference in Marrakech (November 12, 2009)

Ministers renew their commitments towards the following areas, which shall be implemented by all partners, in accordance with their international obligations, as real opportunities for women in the region:

i. Civil and Political rights: Implementation of their obligations under the international conventions promoting women's full enjoyment of human rights (in particular CEDAW), Women and peace and security (contributing to the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009) towards the ministerial meeting on the occasion of the 10 years' celebration of UNSCR 1325); review of laws discriminatory against women and girls that may still be implemented in contravention with the international obligations accepted by States; promotion of women's capacity and leadership in political decision-making processes; eradication of all forms of violence against women and girls, including in situations of armed conflict and foreign occupation and fighting trafficking in women and girls; contribute to strengthening the capacity of and networking of national public institutions and among civil society organizations active in the protection and the promotion of full enjoyment of all human rights by women, enhancing human rights education and awareness-raising, and ensure the rights of migrant and refugee women;

ii. Economic rights: In the light of the current economic and financial crisis, a clear priority is women's economic empowerment, that is: gender equality in employment (including equal pay and decent work), social protection and the fight against poverty; guaranteeing equal access and promotion in employment and on the labor market, promote women's entrepreneurship by improving inter alia women's equal access to and ownership of land and enterprises, finance, markets, information, training and networking and encourage financial institutions to tailor products to women's needs, in particular by providing micro-credit; promote modules to improve economic and financial management skills for women entrepreneurs, investing in women's economic participation as "smart economics"; promote gender responsive budgeting, and ensure women's right to control their property, income and available resources;

iii. Cultural and Social rights: combat all forms of gender stereotyping; ensure equal access to education and vocational training, including new information technologies; recognize women's specific health needs and ensure equal access to health care (including sexual and reproductive health); promote a balanced and non stereotyped portrayal of women and men in the media; and acknowledge and promote as well women's participation in dialogue between cultures and cultural exchanges. Special attention should be given to the integration of the gender dimension in education and training as well as in health policies are of primary importance for the success of the Millennium Development Goals, of which one is about eliminating the gender inequalities at all levels between now and 2015.