

**Report
on women's empowerment
in the Mediterranean region**

This report was drawn up by the rapporteur Mary Freehill (Municipality of Dublin, Ireland) and adopted at the 9th ARLEM plenary session which took place on 21 February 2018 in Giza, Egypt.

COR-2017-03964-00-03-TCD-TRA (EN) 1/9

Context

Women's empowerment and gender equality are fundamental to democracy and the realisation of human rights for all. Building stable, prosperous inclusive societies requires women's full enjoyment of their fundamental rights and their balanced participation in leadership and decision-making positions.

The countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and the Member States of the European Union share strong commitments to gender equality within their legislative, constitutional and international frameworks and most have enshrined women's rights in law. Yet women on both shores of the Mediterranean still experience many social, economic, political and cultural obstacles to their equal participation.

While substantial progress has been documented in respect of gender equality in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries in terms of education, health, labour force participation and income, that progress is uneven and gender inequalities across a wide range of issues persist in all countries. Women in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (SEMC) are still too absent in decision-making, are too few in formal employment and are too often the victims of violence.

Policy Frameworks

All EU Member States and SEMC have signed up to the various international frameworks on women's rights, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its optional protocol, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Women's and girls' rights are at the heart of all the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in New York in 2015. Goal No 5 of the SDGs commits governments to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere and to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres.

All 28 EU Member States have signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). However, to date just 14 Member States have ratified the Convention. While Albania and Bosnia signed and ratified the Convention, from the Southern Mediterranean countries only Turkey has done so.

Equality between women and men is at the heart of the EU's founding values. Gender equality is a core principle integrated into all EU policies and funding programmes. Both European Neighbourhood Policy and EU overseas development aid programmes have strong gender equality dimensions. The new European Consensus on Development adopted in May 2017 emphasises the role of the EU as a global leader in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through its external relations. The EU Gender Action Programme II 2016-20 (GAP II)¹ provides a comprehensive framework for the European External Action Service to promote, measure and monitor gender equality in third countries.

Gender equality and women's empowerment has been a political priority of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership/Union for the Mediterranean since the Barcelona Summit in 2005. At the Fourth

¹ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/26-fac-conclusions-gender-development/>

Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, in Cairo in November 2017 the UfM 2016 Progress Report² acknowledged that while significant progress has been made in some areas particularly in relation to access to education there is still considerable variance between legislation and policy on the one hand and implementation on the other. The Fourth Ministerial Declaration³ adopted at that conference contained focussed on four priority areas: raising women's participation in public life and decision-making; improving women's economic participation; combating all forms of violence against women and girls; and eliminating gender stereotypes. Conference. The UfM will continue to monitor progress.

In June 2013, ARLEM adopted a position paper on the role of women in Euro-Med cooperation, underlining the importance of women's leadership in political decision making at local and national level⁴.

Scope of this Report

This report examines the condition of women in the region in respect of education, economic participation/employment, leadership, gender based violence, and social norms and stereotyping. ARLEM acknowledges that it is not possible within a short report to address all of the challenges facing women in the Euro-Mediterranean Region. Hence, the focus is specifically on how regional and local governments can play a role in empowering women and challenging social norms that impede women's progress in society and how the EU/UfM can support and facilitate that process.

Education

Access to education and training is absolutely essential for the empowerment of girls and women as well as for the full enjoyment of all other social, economic, cultural and political rights and the prevention of violence against women and girls. Lifelong learning measures are key to providing women with skills that can enable them to take up or return to employment or improve their employment, income and working conditions. The education gap between men and women is closing in SEMC. However, there is still unequal access to and participation of women in education programmes, particularly in rural areas.

Regional and local governments have a central role to play in both formal and informal education at local level. Regional and local governments are well placed to identify and deal with barriers to school attendance and in many instances local education authorities fall within their remit. There should be concerted local campaigns aimed at parents to ensure their daughters complete second level education and move into third level education. Schools should ensure that girls have a broad choice of subject areas once they enter the junior cycle in secondary school and should be encouraged to take up STEM subjects⁵. Properly resourced guidance counselling for services for girls should be available and should work towards steering girls towards STEM subjects and non-traditional university courses and career choices.

² http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UfM_progress_report2016.pdf

³ <http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/womenfinaldeclaration.pdf>

⁴ <http://cor.europa.eu/en/activities/arlem/Documents/women-euromed-en.pdf>

⁵ UfM Regional Dialogue on Women's Empowerment, Progress Report, February 2017

Local governments should also integrate vocational training programmes for women into local economic development strategies so that training is related to labour market opportunities. Compensatory/second chance education programmes should be available to young women who missed out on formal schooling in both urban and rural areas. EU funded projects could provide valuable assistance in this regard.

Local governments can make significant interventions in informal education through the work of their libraries, science and arts museums, by supporting youth clubs and homework clubs and by the provision of community education facilities. The potential of the digital world should be further explore in this field in order to give access to content to the maximum number of women and girls.

Economic participation and employment

ARLEM is cognisant of the many barriers to women's full participation in the workforce, particularly, the lack of affordable and accessible childcare/elder care. Women's unpaid labour limits their capacity to participate in income generating activities as they spend twice as much time on domestic unpaid work as men⁶. Gender stereotyping of roles has resulted in less value being placed on jobs which are predominantly female. Women also have a greater tendency to work on a part-time basis and in the informal economy. Consequently, women are at greater risk of precarious work and poverty.

Discrimination based on gender is prohibited by law in most SEM countries. Women in Jordan need their husband's permission to take a job and in Tunisia women are prohibited from working at night, although this provision is thought to be on safety grounds. In fact, the lack of a reliable, safe and affordable transport system presents a significant obstacle to women's participation in the labour force across the SEM countries.

The ILO reports that globally women represent around 24% of all employers in all regions except the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where they are around 6%. Furthermore, globally women represent 31 to 38% of self-employed except in MENA countries, where they make up just 13%⁷. Women entrepreneurs in the Southern Mediterranean face significantly more challenges than their European counterparts. Gender is a central factor affecting women's access to credit and other financial resources such as assets, capital, productive resources and credit in all Southern Mediterranean countries with the exception of Israel. In addition, a mixture of legal/social/cultural barriers to women owning land can severely limit women's economic participation.

Local governments are well placed to identify and tackle barriers to women's equal access to land control and ownership and access to finance. Barriers to drawing down national or EU funding grants for local cooperatives can be overcome where the funding is held in trust and can only be drawn down for business purposes. The importance of micro-credits as tool for empowerment women in business should further be exploited.

⁶ UFM Regional Dialogue on Women's Empowerment, Progress Report, February 2017

⁷ ILO Women in Business and Management: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_334882.pdf

Local governments can make significant practical interventions to increase women's participation in local employment such as: the provision of local and affordable childcare; the provision of training and enterprise support for women including mentoring programmes; facilitating women's enterprise networks; and ensuring safe transport to and from work with the support of employers. Collaboration with local businesses and companies for example sponsoring mentoring programmes, hosting networking events, providing education and training opportunities etc. should be explored.

The cultural economy, for example literature, art, music, architecture, audiovisual media/cinema and fashion, focuses on cultural and intellectual heritage. The role of women in the cultural sphere can be very positive especially at local level. New technologies and innovative practices such as digitization and social media continue to open up new opportunities for creatives within this sphere.

Women and particularly women refugees from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries can play a leading role in the development of the cultural economy with assistance and coordination from regional and local Authorities.

Women in leadership roles

The balanced participation of men and women in decision-making structures is a sine qua non of a democratic society. The under-representation of women in elected and nominated political positions is a democratic deficit that undermines the legitimacy of decision-making.

In many SEM countries, there are encouraging signs that women's participation in national and local democratic structures is increasing. A number of Southern Mediterranean countries are now operating quota systems for women, particularly in local government.

Despite the increase of women in national parliaments, there are still significant barriers to women's participation in public leadership as social and cultural norms in traditionally patriarchal societies combine to prevent women from exercising their rights to engage in political activities.

There is also a significant gender gap in other realms of public life as the number of women occupying senior and influential positions within the civil service, diplomatic corps, the judiciary and local government remains low. Consequently, the influence of women as a driving force of social change has not been fully developed and the impact of an increased number of women in politics is still difficult to gauge.

Local governance structures, from school board to town council through to regional council and elected mayor provide a fertile training ground for women leaders⁸. Regional and local governments are well placed to roll out awareness-raising campaigns to promote the value and importance of the equal participation of men and women in the policy decision-making structures for democracy. Moreover, Religious Authorities in many countries have significant influence and can play a seminal role in promoting and developing women's leadership in society. Open dialogue with religious authorities at regional and local level could help greatly to increase women's participation in leadership roles within national, regional and local democratic structures.

⁸ Arlem Position Paper, The Role of Women in Euro-Med Cooperation June 2013.

Leadership networks and training programmes at local level will enhance the participation of women in decision-making structures. Funding streams aimed specifically at increasing women's participation in local decision-making should be put in place. Education packs for schools/youth clubs highlighting women's role in politics, should be developed. Such programmes should be aimed equally at informing and educating men on the importance of gender balance in policy and decision-making.

Local government's own employment policies should ensure equal access for promotion for women and ensure that women occupy senior management and decision-making roles.

International Women's Day (IWD) held annually on 8 March is a global day of celebration of women and their achievements – current and past. The creation of IWD networks could provide a unique opportunity to develop a range of awareness-raising activities on women in leadership roles for both women and men.

Gender based violence

Violence against women and girls is one of the most prevalent human rights violations globally and one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based inequality.

Despite the lack of reliable statistical information about the prevalence of violence against women, reports from reputable organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and UNFPA⁹ indicate that violence against women – including sexual and domestic violence – is endemic in SEM countries where husbands have rights over their wives and cannot be accused of marital rape and it can be acceptable for a husband to give his wife a "light beating" if she is "disobedient".

To date only Turkey of the southern Mediterranean countries has signed the Istanbul Convention, although there have been some initiatives by the EU and UfM to promote awareness of the Convention to encourage them to sign and ratify.

Political unrest, conflict and migration have resulted in an increase in the incidence of violence against women, much of which is completely undocumented.

There are reports of the increased use of rape as a weapon of war in conflict zones. Women who have been displaced and are living in large refugee camps or on the streets are particularly at risk of exploitation and abuse. HRW reports that in the majority of cases displaced women will not report violent incidents perpetrated against them due to the cultural mores, for fear of stigma or reprisal, or out of a huge mistrust of the authorities.

The practice of honour marriages, whereby the woman or girl is forced to marry her rapist, has been outlawed in many countries and that practice is declining. However, there are reports that child marriage is on the increase in rural areas of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon and remains prevalent in Mauritania, Morocco and Palestine.

⁹ United Nations Population Fund.

FGM¹⁰ is now prohibited in all countries and the practice is declining. However, FGM is still carried out in Egypt, Mauritania and to a lesser extent in Lebanon, Turkey and Gaza. A number of EU-funded programmes have made significant progress in the campaign to end FGM. Again, religious leaders have a significant role to play in highlighting that FGM is not a religious practice.

Regional and local governments are on the frontline of identifying and tackling violence and harmful practices against women. Poor infrastructure and resources result in poor services and totally inadequate protection for vulnerable women. Local governments have a role to play in providing support services to women affected by violence and must be sufficiently resourced. The creation and maintenance of safe public spaces and safe public transport systems should be at the heart of all urban planning, including in Refugee Camps. Frontline staff in local governments, education, police and healthcare should receive proper training in how to identify and deal with issues of domestic violence. Local governments must take responsibility for the provision of sheltered or safe houses to women and children who are victims of domestic violence. They can also provide help improve access back into the labour market through training programmes¹¹.

Local governments are also well placed to roll out public information campaigns in local languages to create awareness of the issues around domestic violence and other forms of gender based violence. Education programmes at local level are also key to challenging social constructions of masculinity/femininity, as certain concepts of masculinity put boys and men at risk of becoming perpetrators of violence against women.

Gender stereotyping and social norms

While recognising the need for a strong legislative equality framework, legislation is just one aspect of achieving gender equality. In many countries, prevailing cultural and religious norms, traditional gender roles and discriminatory practices persist and thus perpetuate structural and institutional gender inequality.

Traditional gender roles and stereotypes continue to have a strong influence on role distribution between women and men in the home, in the workplace and in society in general. As noted earlier, stereotyping of female roles impacts greatly on decisions in relation to education, training and employment and can influence women's choices throughout their lifetime.

Moreover, gender stereotypes are shaped and reinforced by the print and broadcast media. The media and the advertising industry should take measures to ensure respect for the dignity of women and ensure that their portrayal is free from stereotypes/discrimination.

Education is key to challenging traditional female and male stereotypes. A programme of public education and media campaigns, which would engage with both women and men to combat discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes at family and community level should be rolled out in each country.

¹⁰ Female genital mutilation, referred to in UN SDG 5.3.

¹¹ An example of one such project is Murcia Regional which won the EU RegioStar Award for Women's Empowerment and Active Participation based on its programme to reintegrate victims of GBV back into the Labour Market: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/spain/empowering-victims-of-gender-based-violence-in-murcia-spain

Recommendations

1. ARLEM acknowledges that legislative initiatives at national level, while central to realising gender equality, do not necessarily result in improvements in the condition of women at local level. ARLEM believes that regional and local governments have the potential to be catalysts for change in respect of gender equality and women's empowerment.
2. ARLEM calls for local governments throughout the region to be equipped with the required resources to roll out the necessary education/training/mentoring programmes and information campaigns for women.
3. ARLEM believes that local government housing, planning and transport policies should be gender-proofed¹² to deliver safe and secure neighbourhoods for women.
4. ARLEM recognises the importance of the decision-making positions of women in the local and regional governments.
5. ARLEM acknowledges the need to guarantee the access of women to the labour market and to basic resources.
6. ARLEM acknowledges that the lack of comprehensive, reliable and regularly updated equality data, segregated by gender in SEMC, means that it is still not possible to build up a comprehensive picture of women's condition across the Euro-Mediterranean Region. ARLEM calls on EU and UfM countries to improve collection of gender indicators and gender disaggregated data in order to monitor the gender impact of policy in each of the countries; ARLEM calls for supports for local governments in the collection and collation of data as appropriate.
7. ARLEM urges all its Member States to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combatting domestic violence and supports EU and UfM projects and awareness-raising activities on gender based violence.
8. ARLEM commends the critical role of civil society and non-governmental organisations (CSOs) as well as religious authorities in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. ARLEM emphasises the importance of open dialogue between national and local governments and CSOs and religious organisations on legislation and measures to promote gender equality/women's empowerment.
9. ARLEM acknowledges the important role of EU Funding Instruments, particularly the European Neighbourhood Instrument¹³, in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries. ARLEM notes that while many of the funding programmes have been gender mainstreamed, there is insufficient data to consider the gender equality impact.
10. ARLEM calls for gender proofing of all EU external actions to ensure that external policies contribute to combating all forms of discrimination. ARLEM stresses the importance of robust monitoring, evaluation, reporting and follow-up systems and welcomes the comprehensive list of indicators in the Gender Action Plan II 2016-20. Mechanisms for cooperation between the

¹² Gender Proofing is the means by which it is ensured that all policies and practices have equally beneficial effects on men and women.

¹³ European Neighbourhood Instrument (EUR 15.4 billion for the period 2014-2020) is the main financial instrument for implementing European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENI provides the bulk of EU funding to the 16 ENP partner countries (10 of which are members of ARLEM).

EEAS, the European Parliament, Committee of the Regions and ARLEM on monitoring the implementation of GAP II should be explored.

11. ARLEM encourages cooperation across regional, national and transnational boundaries and supports the establishment of transnational thematic networks of regional and local governments to formulate strategies for gender equality and women's empowerment in SEMC and to provide for the dissemination of the results.
 12. ARLEM calls for an annual review of progress in the implementation of the recommendations in this report. Such a review should be carried out jointly between ARLEM and the Committee of the Regions' Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC).
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