



Equality First
Regional Gender Platform



OUTCOMES

REGIONAL DIALOGUE

From the Ministerial Conclusions to Gender Equality Policy Making in the Euro-Med Region 3 February 2016, Amman

The high-level regional roundtable *“From Ministerial Conclusions on strengthening the role of women in society to gender equality policy making in the Euro-Med region”* took place on 3rd of February 2016 at the Ministry of Social Development, Amman, organized by the Euromed Feminist Initiative IFE-EFI in cooperation with the Jordanian Ministry of Social Development. This event is a part of a policy dialogue and exchange of best practices with existing networks of stakeholders in the Southern Neighborhood, funded by the European Union.

Ministers and their representatives, political leaders and gender experts from women’s rights organizations from Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, joined by EU diplomats and UfM secretariat, strengthened and furthered the ongoing dialogue between state actors, political sphere and civil society on the promotion of women’s rights in democracy building in the follow up of the Conclusions from the 3rd UfM Ministerial Meeting on *Strengthening the role of women in society* held in Paris in 2013 and in preparation of the upcoming Euro-Med Ministerial Conference.

The roundtable was a qualitative step in enhancing a cross sector dialogue on gender equality and fostering a sustainable regional process on discussing the Euro-Med Ministerial Conclusions as a major gender equality policy document on national and regional level. During the meeting, the important role of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in supporting this regional civil society initiative was acknowledged. The fruitful cooperation with Ministry of Social Development in Amman contributed to the success of this event.

The meeting deliberations paved the ground for building a gender regional platform in light of the changing context after the 3rd Ministerial Conference in Paris and in the perspective of supporting the planning for the upcoming one.

I. The Current Context

The Euro-Med Ministerial Conclusions focus on supporting women’s role in society by ending discrimination, violence against women and human rights violations as well as empowering women in all spheres of life. Since 2013 drastic changes of the geo-political context have been characterized by two major phenomena that should also be taken in account in the implementation of the Ministerial Conclusions.

- 1) **Increasing violence of extremist groups:** Religious extremism, intolerance and exclusion have impacted the area and threatened previous achievements. Such regression has weakened the concept of gender equality and the enjoyment of women’s rights.



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- 2) **Refugee crises:** The massive influx of Syrian refugees and displacement has generated human tragedy for millions of people and has dire results for hosting governments and societies. Women and girls refugees are disproportionately affected. Violence, child labor, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and early marriages are on the rise. The EU is currently closing its doors for refugees and develops anti-terrorist measures that often lead to undesired consequences.

Besides, the ongoing occupation of Palestine remains a central problem and source of violence in the region, preventing women from achieving their rights. Occupation is a barrier to democratic development, creating continuous conflicts that affect societies. Women pay the price on all levels, struggling not only for women's rights and equality but for independence, in the process losing their children and husbands.

II. The Challenges

Positive achievements in strengthening the women's role in society, reflecting certain level of political will have taken place in the region: laws and constitutions have enabled higher level of women participation, legal systems have been revised, some discriminatory actions have been criminalized, alimony funds have been established, and public campaign supporting women political participation have been organized. In some countries bodies of civil society and government have established joint actions. However, in the light of the rapidly deteriorating context there is an urgent need to exert much more effort in the economic, political, social and cultural sphere and strengthen cooperation among stakeholders. Moreover, the Ministerial Process remains largely unknown in all spheres: governmental, political, and civil society. Major challenges that need to be addressed with effective measures are:

- **Shifting priorities away from women's rights:** The massive increase of violence in the region even further prevents prioritizing women's rights on governments' agendas. The fight against terrorism has become a prominent issue in the discourse of political leaders, weakening the support for and the role of civil society. Furthermore jeopardizing the cooperation between the political sphere and women's rights CSOs.
- **Lack of political will to achieve gender equality:** This explains the absence of bodies following up on the development and implementation of gender equality policies and systems of social protection that realize aspirations for women's rights. There are shortcomings in existing strategies and their implementation in regards to the alleviation of poverty, particularly of rural women. In addition there is not enough work on community-level empowerment programs that encourage the adoption of gender equality.
- **Underrepresentation of women in decision-making:** Figures demonstrated that women are still subject of exclusion, exploitation, and discrimination that prevent their participation in political and public life. Even if they are the majority of educated graduates, they are still



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underrepresented in political decision making, in the labor market, and are still discriminated in law.

- **Existing gap between texts and implementation:** Even when good intentions lead to strategies and action plans, a gap exists in their implementation and bringing perpetrators to justice. In this regard, what is lacking is a democratic and participatory approach that can lead to the development of legislation for women's rights and change in attitudes and stereotypes.
- **Reinforcement of gender stereotypes:** The violent context leads to strengthening of the traditional roles of women and limit the progress in their rights. Cultural practices that reinforce a discriminatory image of women are portrayed as necessary in a context of violence.

III. Regional Gender Platform and the Ministerial Process

The participants laid the foundations of a regional gender platform reaffirming the need of a clear women's rights language promoting the values of gender equality and women's universal human rights as central to peace, human security and democracy building.

The regional gender platform is grounded in the need of States' de jure and de facto commitment to international women's rights instruments, which are international law and as such, binding. The following main points were raised as the basis of the platform that would promote and support the Ministerial Process and its Conclusions as major gender equality policy-making document.

- 1) **Reaffirming women's rights are universal human rights:** As such they are not a subject to interpretation by any religion, tradition or culture. There is an urgent need for full implementation of the binding international women's rights conventions such as CEDAW and UNSCRs, without any reservation in addition to harmonizing national legislation with international human rights law. Furthermore, lifting the reservations of CEDAW is now a major priority as CEDAW is a major reference for accountability.
- 2) **Separation of religion and State:** Taking urgent measures towards ensuring separation between religion and State, political matters and legislation, as this is the only way to ensure the freedom of religion and beliefs of all.
- 3) **Emphasizing on women's rights in times of crises:** Fighting terrorism and radicalization cannot justify reactive policies, nor the exclusion and deprioritizing of women's rights. On the contrary, women's rights need to be focused on during crises. Women are impacted at all times by the patriarchal system and violence against them only exacerbates during war and military crises. Advancement of women's rights is a key to promoting rule of law in any society, and in particular in times of crises.
- 4) **Broadening the concept of national security to human security:** It is imperative that weapon suppliers are held accountable and that the concept of national security is incorporates the values of human security. Violence against women is a human security issue. It is urgent to



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find political solutions to the conflicts in the region as the only way to solve the dramatic situation of millions of refugees.

- 5) **Reaching a political solution, ending occupation and initiating a regional peace process:** Working proactively for political solutions to the conflicts and initiating a comprehensive regional peace process with the participation of the civil society for ending the military conflicts and occupation.
- 6) **Criminalizing incitement to discrimination:** Religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence should be prohibited by law. There is a need to focus on women groups, whose rights are violated, naming perpetrators of these abuses, and clearly condemning State actions sponsoring fundamentalism or failing to address it.
- 7) **Building cross-sectoral alliances on national and regional level:** Only such substantial cooperation based on the recognition of the gender expertise and the respect of the independence of the women's rights CSOs can bring the support to the political feminist discourse that addresses the present challenges and face the reactionary movements. Such a partnership should be based on democratic and egalitarian discourse and practices.

On the Ministerial Process:

- 1) **The Ministerial Conclusions are based on binding international law documents:** As they refer to international conventions such as CEDAW and UNSCRs, their implementation is a duty for governments. The support of and cooperation with independent women's rights CSOs will allow governments to widen the process and act for its concrete implementation.
- 2) **Harmonizing national legislation with international conventions:** Notably CEDAW, UNSCR1325, Beijing Platform for Action, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in order to introduce binding legal measures regarding all forms of violence against women and contribute to the bridging the gap between formal and substantial rights.
- 3) **Develop NAPs for the implementation of UNSCR1325:** Their approval by all governments in the Euro-Med region is a goal and a tool to curb violence against women, in particular in crises, and contribute to women's participation in decision making. UNSCR1325, CEDAW, SDG, in particular goals 5 and 16 are the references to implement the universal human rights of women and girls.
- 4) **Unifying scattered efforts in the Euro-Med region:** The efforts of civil society and all relevant institutional and State actors should be in synergy, aiming at involving all stakeholders in gender equality policy making. A coordinated work on regional level is recommended to make conclusions into policy and to transform the commitments into reality.
- 5) **Allocating public resources and developing gender-sensitive budgets:** Governments should allocate personnel and financial resources for training of staff as well as for providing support to the women's rights CSOs and cooperate with them in designing gender sensitive training program. Budget auditing and developing gender sensitive budgets is of utmost priority in order to strengthen the action towards positive change.





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- 6) **Reforming educational curricula:** The change of curricula is identified as a high regional priority. It should be accompanied with national campaigns for zero tolerance towards violence against women; denouncing any cultural pattern or tradition that is violating women's rights and aim for changing the stereotypical image of women in all textbooks. Enhancing the image of women in media should also be encouraged by the development of obligatory codes for media professionals.
- 7) **Protecting the human rights of refugees in countries of asylum:** The rights include family reunion, maintaining dignity and human rights and providing social protection and access to education and healthcare. Before the next Ministerial meeting it is imperative to review the perspective of the EU countries towards the refugees in Europe.

On mechanisms for implementation of the Ministerial Conclusions:

The high-level roundtable discussion emphasized the need to progress beyond recommendations into developing mechanisms for implementation on national and regional level. A system of monitoring, evaluation and accountability on policies and actions based on the Ministerial Conclusions needs to be developed. By mainstreaming gender, governments should develop a participatory approach framed by a clear speech on the values of equal citizenship rights.

- 1) Building functioning partnership between civil society and government based on the respect of the independent and gender expert role of the women's rights CSOs.
- 2) Creating cross-sector bodies of government, civil society and political sphere that develop, monitor and evaluate action plans to implement the Ministerial Conclusions.

IV. Next steps

1. **Organizing national workshops:** Organizing and inspiring broader cross sector discussions and awareness raising on how to promote and implement the Ministerial Conclusions and debating the recommendations from this roundtable.
2. **Syncing major national development strategies with the Ministerial Conclusions:** Relevant existing ministerial bodies or ministries together with the gender experts identify the gaps between these and propose relevant mechanisms for integration.
3. **Holding a second regional roundtable:** Euromed Feminist Initiative will organize a second regional discussion on the inputs of the national workshops and recommendations in preparation for the 4th Ministerial Conference.

