



GENDER REGIONAL PLATFORM
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

STRENGTHENING THE STATUS
OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS
IN THE EURO-MED REGION

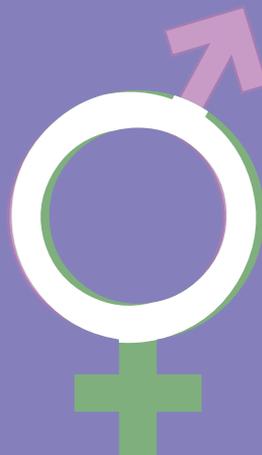


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This document reflects the discussions during the one-year long dialogue process. The content can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

ACRONYMS

BpA	Beijing Platform for Action
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Eradication of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
Euro-Med	Euro Mediterranean
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
GRP	Gender Regional Platform
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
IFE-EFI	Euromed Feminist Initiative
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NAP	National Action Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
VAW	Violence Against Women
WG	Working Group
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WR	Women's Rights

1. BACKGROUND

The UfM Ministerial Conclusions on strengthening the role of women in society are a major regional tool for promoting gender equality across the Euro-Med Region. Following up on their implementation, Euromed Feminist Initiative promotes dialogue among civil society, legislators and political decision makers. As part of this dialogue, a civil society-led process was launched in 2015 with the support of the European Union, to build a common platform enhancing gender equality policy making in the Euro-Med Region. The aim is to contextualize the implementation of the Ministerial Conclusions (Paris, 2013) and address on-going challenges in the region, enhance regional cross sector co-operation through policy dialogue, as well as exchange best practices with existing networks and stakeholders in the Southern Neighborhood.

The process brought together over 600 representatives from women's rights CSOs, CBOs, gender experts, academics and researchers with decision makers and legislators. It provided a space to analyze the changing context since the Paris conference, to discuss gender equality policy making as well as national and regional priorities in the current context, in order to prepare a Gender Regional Platform with concrete policy recommendations to the upcoming 4th UfM Ministerial Meeting in 2017.

Two regional dialogues held in 2016 (in February in Amman and in September in Cairo), and seven national dialogues that took place in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia were remarkable in terms of participation and quality of debate. They developed rich analyses and established the foundation of the Gender Regional Platform with common priorities and propositions for policy actions grounded in national realities.

The Euro-Med Women's Rights Conference that took place on 28-29 November in Beirut gathered over 100 participants from 19 countries in the Euro-Med Region and discussed the areas for interventions identified through the process. It enriched and finalized the Gender Regional Platform with the policy recommendations for improving the status of women's rights and gender equality in the whole region.

The discussions favored synergy between the efforts of civil society and the commitment of State actors. The process highlighted that a dialogue with decision makers and legislators, initiated by the civil society and in particular by women's rights organizations, is crucial for creating policies that address gender gaps and the root causes of discrimination.

The accumulated recommendations are responsive to local realities, while addressing common regional challenges. The interconnected nature of fundamental rights means that the whole society benefits from advancement in the area of gender equality.

The Gender Regional Platform therefore is envisioned as a means to promote progressive social policies in the area of gender equality, through the UfM Ministerial Process on strengthening the role of women in society, with concrete proposals for policy actions, which go beyond political rhetoric.

The dialogues highlighted the significance of the political and security changes since 2013 and affirmed the following:

- The Ministerial Conclusions on strengthening the role of women in society are based on **binding international women's rights instruments** such as CEDAW, BPA, and UNSCRs on women, peace and security. Therefore, their implementation is a duty of the States and contributes to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular goals 5 and 16.
- Gender equality policy actions and measures must enhance women's agency, address **root-causes of inequality**, and ultimately **lead to a democratic transformation in the social gender power structures**, in order to safeguard women's human rights, eradicate all forms of gender based discrimination and achieve changes in the real lives of women.

- The complex nature of violence against women and discrimination requires a **multi-sectorial approach and coordinated action** among all stakeholders towards the same goal. Recognition of all actors in the field of gender equality – government and institutions, political decision makers, legislators, civil society, academia, and media – is an important step towards institutionalizing a meaningful cooperation for efficient gender equality policy making.
- Women’s rights CSOs must be **structurally involved in all stages** of gender equality policy making: from preparation to follow up and monitoring of the implementation, in order to make sure that sound policies are designed, that reforms do not remain “on the books”, and political will is existent. The cooperation with independent women’s rights CSOs is a necessity for the development of a democratic process.

2. CHALLENGES

The status of women’s rights and gender equality cannot be dissociated from the wider political, social, cultural, and economic trends. There is now substantial evidence that points to a deterioration in the position of women due to range of internal and external factors, e.g. armed conflicts in the region, increasing violence of extremist groups, rising levels of political extremism and conservatism, refugee crises, and the ongoing occupation of Palestine.

In this context, the process has identified and highlighted the following common challenges:

- A global regression of women’s rights and gender equality.
- Shifting priorities towards national security and stability and sidelining women’s rights.
- Lack of sufficient political will to prioritize progressive social policies in the field of gender equality.
- Persistent legal and social discrimination of women; a gap between texts and implementation.
- Underrepresentation of women in political and economic decision making.
- Persistent and even reinforced gender stereotypes in the media and education systems.
- Violence against women as a burning issue and a main area of concern across the region, with a rising level of misogyny that contributes to perpetual social tolerance.
- Increased militarisation in the region as well as globally hinders political solutions of the conflicts in the region and ending of the occupation of Palestine. Military solutions always marginalize women’s rights and gender equality.
- Shrinking of the space for independent action of civil society.

3. PRIORITIES AND POLICY ACTIONS

During the process four major priority areas for policy intervention have been identified:

- Ending discrimination against women and strengthening women’s role and participation in public life
- Reforming education and challenging gender stereotypes
- Ending violence against women, wars and occupation and initiating a regional peace process
- Ensuring freedom and independence of civil society and support for women’s rights organizations

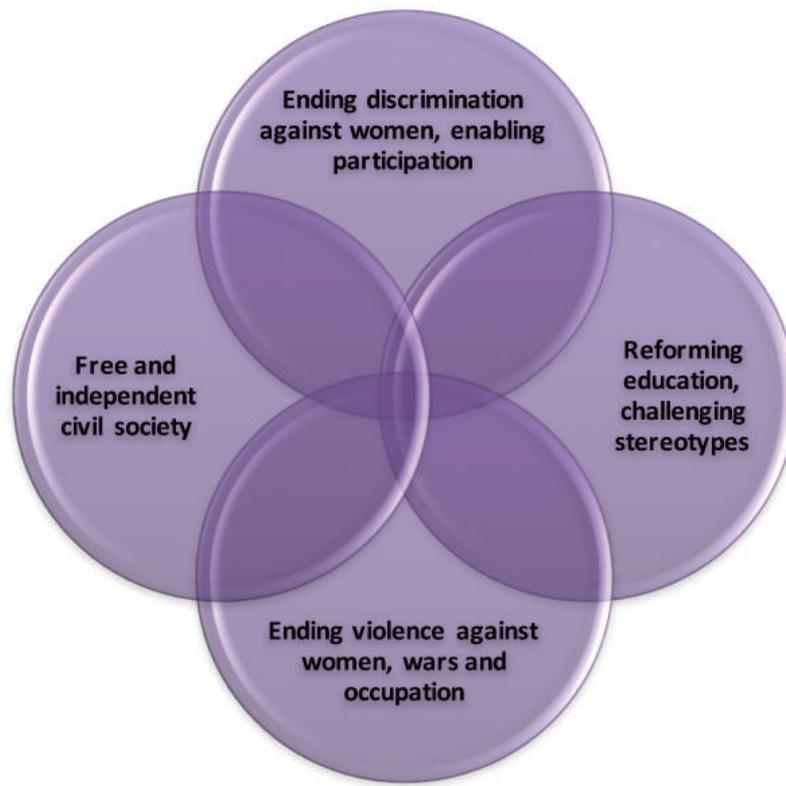


Figure 1 - Policy Objectives for Transformative Change

Prioritizing policy making and a comprehensive empowerment approach in these areas, has been seen as a major step to strengthen the status of gender equality in the Euro-Med region in the context of the increased wave of social conservatism, religious extremism, nationalism and populism that urge the decision makers more than ever to examine political solutions to conflicts and occupation and address the refugee crises through gender lenses.

3.1. PRIORITY AREA ONE

ENDING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Promotion of equality between women and men, and enabling women's equal participation and role in political, economic and social spheres curb discrimination against women in all realms of life. Legal framework should set gender equality as a norm and affirm women's rights as universal human rights instead of them being subject to interpretation by religion, tradition or culture. First priority is to end legal discrimination, which exists predominantly in Personal Status Laws and Penal Codes in the South Mediterranean countries. In this regard, measures should also be taken by EU governments to address the legal framework keeping women immigrants to Europe subjects of the personal status laws in their countries of origin. Equality and justice cannot be achieved if women are not equal in the family under the law. Equal status of women calls in priority for criminalization of rape in marriage, abandoning the concept of guardianship in law, annulment of legislation that exempts rapists from sanctions if he marries his victim, and reform of inheritance law. Additionally, achieving equality requires recognition of the value of the social function of care and unpaid work in general.

It is necessary to further strengthen the connection between the Ministerial Process and the implementation of all international agreements ratified by the governments, including CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 and approach them and the SDGs in one complementary frame.

However, legislation alone does not challenge and change public attitudes and gender stereotypes. Its implementation must be ensured through political will, a zero tolerance approach towards violence, political and financial resources, training of all institutional stakeholders, accompanied by large-scales awareness raising campaigns addressing the root causes of discrimination and violence against women.

Specialized gender equality policy agencies such as a Ministry of Women's Rights, and Governmental/Parliamentarian Commissions of Gender Equality and/or Women's Rights, must be created in recognition that although women are traditionally marginalized, they are not a minority with more "specific" needs, but half of society, half of Humanity.

Separation of religion from State political matters and legislation is one of the basic prerequisites for achieving equality and ensuring the freedom of all religions and beliefs. Women from religious and ethnic minorities as well as disabled women suffer double discrimination that should be addressed with particular measures.

Furthermore, detailed analysis of statistical trends and monitoring of identified key indicators are necessary in order to evaluate progress in the advancement of women's rights as well as tackling social and economic exclusion.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Harmonize national legislation with international human rights legal framework.
2. Lift all the reservations on CEDAW.
3. Annul all discriminative articles in national legislations existing mainly in the Personal Status Laws and Penal Codes with an additional focus on women who are facing double discrimination due to belonging to a religious or ethnic minority, or having a disability. In order to allow equal status of women, in priority criminalize rape in marriage, abandon the concept of guardianship in law, withdraw legislation that exempts the rapists from sanctions if he marries his victim, and reform inheritance law.
4. Research and change the legal framework in EU countries that keeps women immigrants to Europe subjected to the personal status laws in their countries of origin.
5. Provide training programs on building gender sensitive budgets, taking in account the unequal opportunities of women.
6. In parallel, develop comprehensive gender equality frame laws including:
 - Adoption of gender quotas of not less than 40 % as a temporary measure until achieving parity, to enhance women's representation and access to decision making in political, economic and social life, at the executive, national, local/municipal level, and legislative level.
 - Provision of public services and measures that enhance women's access and participation in labor market and politics (childcare, public transport, equal pay, parental leave, men's involvement in caring tasks, etc.)
 - Establishment of specialized gender equality policy agencies with sufficient financial resources on the national level as Ministry of Women's Rights, Governmental/Parliamentarian Commissions of Gender Equality and/or Women's Rights.
 - Allocation of financial resources to the gender or equal opportunities units in the different ministries to ensure appointment of gender experts in these units, proper gender mainstreaming and monitoring of the implementation of gender equality laws and policies.

7. Create a Mediterranean inter-parliamentarian commission to monitor the protection of women's human rights.
8. Develop national gender based statistics, sharing and following best practices in Euro-Med. This will give a clear picture of exclusion/participation of women in society.

3.2. PRIORITY AREA TWO

REFORMING EDUCATION, CHANGING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

Women's rights advocates face significant challenges based on customs and tradition on the one hand and on religious indoctrination, privatization, commercialization and politicization of the learning environment and school textbooks on the other. This has a drastic negative impact on the processes of educational reform and modernization, resulting in alarming repercussions in the quality of knowledge provided and on people's skills, thinking habits and values. Educational reform therefore needs to be strategic, structural and holistic. It needs to acknowledge that gender hierarchies shape the syllabus and propagate unequal social and economic gender power structures.

Media also play a key role in challenging or spreading gender stereotypes. Women's representation in the media can act as the compass for wider perceptions about the position of women and gender equality in public and private spheres. These changes are necessary to address traditional gender hierarchies and deeply entrenched stereotypes in society.

Education and the media must therefore be used to shape social norms framed by the principles and values of universal human rights and gender equality.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ministries of education commit to reform the education system applying a holistic approach that combines:
 - Normative framework based on international human rights and gender equality standards
 - Outcomes from nation-based action research of the needs on the ground
 - Measures to enhance gender equality friendly learning environment at school
 - Binding outcomes and indicators
 - Allocated financial resources for implementation
2. Establish national mechanism as a commission with the participation of gender experts from the civil society and academia to design and develop education curricula based on:
 - Academic freedom and independence
 - Gender sensitive language and content
 - Gender sensitive civic education
 - Sex education
 - Gender equality and women's human rights
 - Contemporary learning tools and activities
 - Lifelong learning
3. Develop tools as a manual on best practices to disseminate the concepts and values of gender equality, citizenship and democracy in schools, a roadmap to sustain reform and engendering of the learning environment that enable ownership and agency of the schools' constituency and stakeholders.
4. Design and adopt gender equality training programs for teachers and educators.

5. Develop national awareness campaigns with local dialogue processes aimed at changing the stereotypical image of women that subjugates them and addressing behaviours that undermine and devalue women.
6. Develop monitoring mechanisms such as media observatories and obligatory codes for media professionals for enhancing gender equality and the image of women in media.
7. Enhance the role of trade unions and laws for journalists prohibiting sexist words and images.
8. Support the creation of journalist networks to create linkages between media and gender equality policy and create a platform of female voices in media.

3.3. PRIORITY AREA THREE

ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, WARS AND OCCUPATION

*** Violence against women in public and private**

Violence against women has been identified as “...one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position.” (Vienna Declaration (1993). It poses a global and structural obstacle to achieve gender equality. It affects the life of women both in peacetime and during armed conflict. Violence against women in the home prevents women from enjoying their human rights, from participating in the political and economic development of the society, and limits their ability to enjoy everyday life. Therefore, fighting violence against women, including the most vulnerable, must be a priority for all governments and societies, in order to ensure human security and safe lives for women.

Due to its pervasive nature, as a result of unequal gender power structures, discrimination and control, its many dimensions and types of abuse, the response to violence against women requires a multipronged approach and measures promoting gender equality in a wide variety of policy areas: culture, health, social services, laws, and education. Therefore, coordination is required to ensure that all agencies and actors are working towards the same goals.

In the Euro-Med region, increasing conservative and traditional trends together with religious fundamentalist movements are hindering women from fully exercising their citizenship rights and to live a life free of violence. In the MENA countries, many governments have reservations on CEDAW, which contributes to propagating violence against women in the public and private sphere - family, marriage, inheritance and property, while in the European countries legislation is not always implemented. A commitment to the full implementation of the international instruments, including the Istanbul Convention on Violence against Women and lifting the reservations on CEDAW is a basic prerequisite to improve women’s lives across the region.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Study the best examples of legislation on violence against women in the Euro-Med region, develop and adopt comprehensive laws in consultation with women’s rights CSOs that criminalize all forms of violence against women, provide protection and stimulate prevention.
2. Annul discriminatory laws that withhold women’s rights and bring about violence against women and reinforce implementation of existing laws in order to close the gap between formal rights and substantial rights.
3. Spread knowledge of the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women and develop national campaigns for zero social and political tolerance towards violence against women.

4. Develop national studies on all forms of violence against women and issue public information on a regular basis with data on violence against women, on participation at the political and economic levels, promoting gender statistics.
5. Develop campaigns to increase public awareness on the violations of women's right to live out of fear at all moments of their lives.
6. Engage boys and men for gender equality and in the fight against VAW.

**** Women, Peace and Security Agenda**

One of the biggest obstacles to women's security is violence against women. Understanding violence against women in its continuum is a key to understanding how and why it is used in armed conflict. When a conflict erupts, women become a "war zone" themselves. Sexual violence, assault, torture and slavery increase in the context of armed conflict. Advancement of women's rights is therefore a key to promoting and preserving rule of law in any society, in particular in times of crises. Military solutions to crises and conflicts expose mostly women and make them more vulnerable. Women's equal participation and role in social, economical and political decision making as well as in peace negotiations are crucial in finding political solutions to the conflicts in the region and a better environment to curb VAW.

Political solutions to these crises are the only pathway to a long-term solution, and include addressing the position of millions of refugees, with majority of them being women. Gender equality is one of the cornerstones of security, stability and development. Therefore, implementing women's rights, developing gender equality policy and addressing violence against women is a matter of human security and is central to all political solutions, including solutions related to the issue of refugees.

Increased wave of radicalism requires stronger involvement of women, not as object of policy but as key political actors. In order to put an end to radicalism, security approaches used by governments should be based on human rights, participation, research, and application of political solutions and banning trade and use of collective and individual weapons.

According to international agreements, signatory States should eliminate barriers to women's participation in politics, in political transitions and peace-making; to protect women's rights advocates, and work towards ending violence against women globally.

National action plans for implementation of UNSCR1325 on women, peace and security are essential tools to curb violence against women, in particular in crises, to improve women's rights and lives across the region and to contribute to women's participation in decision making.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate women's rights, gender equality and UN human security approaches in the development of national security strategies.
2. Emphasize VAW as a human security issue in national strategies on violence against women, and incorporate means to address it as a part of national security policies.
3. Protect the human rights of refugees in countries of asylum: family reunion, maintaining dignity and human rights, provision of social protection and access to education and healthcare.
4. Criminalize all types of violence against women during armed conflicts; develop legal mechanisms to put an end to the impunity of perpetrators.
5. Adopt measures to enable women and women's rights defenders to have meaningful participation and roles in all peace processes.

6. Establish a system to monitor, document and investigate acts of violence against women during armed conflicts
7. Review the perspective of the EU countries towards the refugees in Europe: Provide asylum to refugees and migrant women who escape gender based sexual violence, and provide social rehabilitation.
8. Develop and adopt national action plans for the implementation of UNSCR1325.

***** Initiating a comprehensive regional peace process, reaching political solutions, ending occupation**

Creating a supportive environment for gender equality policy making also involves integrating a regional policy on peace making with the participation of the civil society, and particularly women's rights CSOs. The Israeli military occupation; the undermining of the asymmetry between the occupying forces and occupied people by the international community; the escalation of aggression and the denial of the right to return for Palestinians in application of the UN Resolution 194, are intensifying the level of insecurity for women in occupied West Bank, besieged Gaza and occupied Jerusalem. The aggressive settlers' policies of Israel and the lack of political will to hold Israel accountable in accordance to the IHRL and IHL remain central issues and a permanent source of violence in the whole region. UNSCR 1325 does not provide insights on women living under occupation. Therefore, its three pillars of prevention, protection and participation have been adapted to the condition of women under occupation in the NAP1325 adopted in Palestine.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Take a public and documented stand on the roots of women's discrimination under occupation, exposing the interplay of different factors in sustaining it, including arm-trade with Israel, its impact on the increased militarisation of the conflict and the occupation itself.
2. Plan an urgent intervention to lift the siege of Gaza and to stop colonial settlement activities.
3. Protect women's rights defenders and facilitate their movement and work.
4. Enforce ratified international agreements that are mandatory, especially the 1951 Refugee Convention.
5. Initiate a regional peace process towards ending Israeli occupation, through dismantling the settlements on occupied territories, and enabling the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and the return of the refugees to their homes according to the 194 Resolution.

3.4. PRIORITY AREA FOUR

ENSURING FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENT ACTION OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY AS WELL AS SUPPORT TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Space for civil society to feed into policy processes has been shrinking and women's rights organizations are increasingly being used as instruments by political actors and government agencies. Implementation of women's rights and gender equality policies requires political commitment and budgetary allocations to support core programs and women's rights CSOs. Gender sensitive budgeting must be seen as a core requirement for good governance.

Terrorism and political violence are increasingly being used by governments to justify the curtailing of civil liberties and freedom of association and speech. In addition, there is a trend that governments encourage charity and philanthropy, instead of rights and equality, which is an attempt to structurally change backwards. Restricting funding of civil society and increasing interference of government agencies limits the scope of CSOs and women's rights groups. There is a contradiction between on the one hand the restrictive emergency laws, and law restricting freedom of assembly and access to public spaces, which limit women's access to the public sphere, and the stated governmental commitment to increase women's political participation on the other. That makes it all the more important to further develop structural cooperation of CSOs with political decision makers and stakeholders.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Guarantee independence and freedom of expression, organization, speech, and movement to CSOs and women's rights defenders and abolish articles of laws and measures curtailing them, including measures prohibiting their international and national financial support.
2. Engage women's rights CSOs as partners in developing national gender equality policies.
3. Encourage structural dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders whilst recognizing, and safeguarding, the independent role and expertise of the women's rights CSOs.
4. Guarantee the participation of women's rights CSOs in all negotiations that include cooperation between the EU and southern-Mediterranean countries in the frame of partnership agreements.

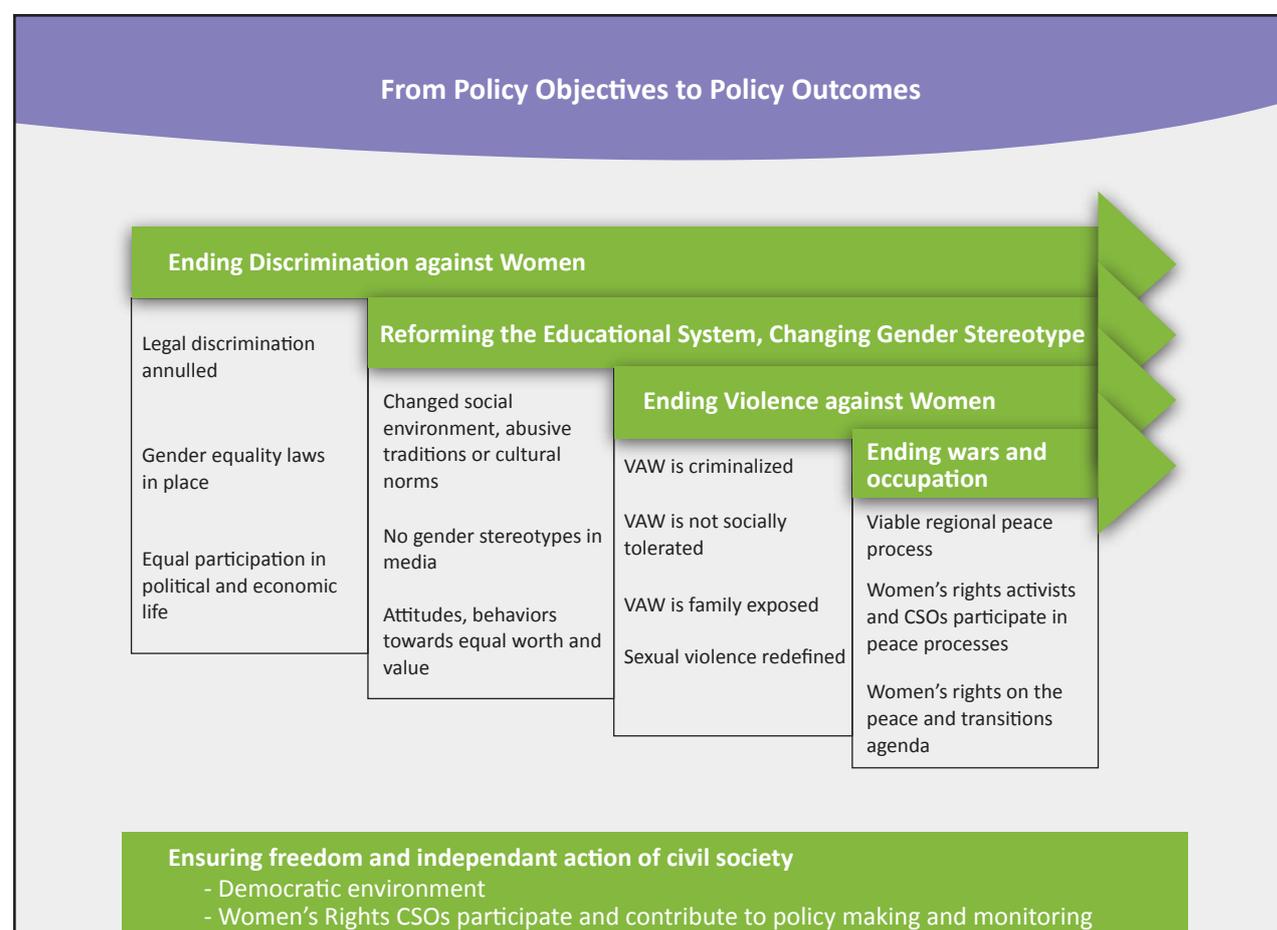


Figure 2 - From Policy Objectives to Policy Outcomes

4. MECHANISMS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH UFM MINISTERIAL PROCESS

- Build cross-sectors alliances on the national level based on the recognition of gender expertise, on democratic and egalitarian discourse and practices and the respect of the independence of the women's rights CSOs in order to address the present challenges and face reactionary trends.
- Adopt national action plans for the follow up, monitoring and evaluation of implementation of the Ministerial Conclusions, developed with the participation of the CSOs.
- Fully engage WR CSOs in national cross-sector dialogue by creating cross sector bodies with periodic meetings and conferences to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Ministerial Conclusions and the recommendations of the civil society (the action plans).
- Support the Gender Regional Platform as a mechanism that responds to the call to unify efforts and a space for genuine dialogue and structural cooperation between women's rights CSOs, decision makers and stakeholders on gender equality policy making.
- Establish gender equality committees in national parliaments and gender units in the ministries.
- In the absence of Ministries of Women's Rights, create inter-ministerial committees or coordination on women's rights.
- Strengthen reporting mechanisms with outcomes indicators and develop accountability measures from UfM to hold governments accountable for the implementation of the binding international women's rights conventions that the Ministerial conclusions are built on.
- Mainstream existing national strategies and plans as well as international women's rights conventions and SDGs in the upcoming ministerial decisions on women's rights.
- Collect gender disaggregated data and identify key equality indicators sharing best practice in Euro-Med.