



ARAB INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM

2005 PROGRAMME

WOMEN AS ENGINES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

المرأة كمحرك أساسي للنمو الاقتصادي في العالم العربي

TEN YEARS AFTER THE BARCELONA PROCESS: EMPOWERING WOMEN AS CATALYSTS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

7-8 April 2005

at the European Parliament
Brussels

With the valued support of
The League of Arab States, The European Parliament, The Foreign & Commonwealth Office
UK, The World Bank and the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

With the support of the AIWF 2005 Programme Corporate Partners
Shell and IBM

With the kind support of
No Peace Without Justice and Instituto de Empresa

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

The Arab International Women's Forum developed its 2005 Programme around two-linked conferences to look at the current status of women in the economy, accomplishments in the past decade and areas where further action is required. *Ten Years After Barcelona: Empowering Women as Catalysts for Economic Development* focussed on women in business, in corporate life, and as entrepreneurs. *Women and Integrated Rural Development* to be held at the League of Arab States in Cairo, 12-13 June 2005, will look more closely at education and training, micro-financing, integration into the business world, rural-urban migration and equality.

There were many "firsts" for the Brussels conference, *Ten Years After the Barcelona Process: Empowering Women as Catalysts for Economic Development*, held at the European Parliament 7-8 April 2005 making it truly a landmark event! This was the Arab International Women's Forum's first conference to be held at the European Parliament for Arab and European women. It was the first of its kind opportunity to work in close co-operation with the valued support of the League of Arab States, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in the UK,

and the World Bank. We were also ably supported by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, No Peace Without Justice and the Instituto de Empresa Business School.

The Arab International Women's Forum developed its programme involving leading European and Arab organisations putting the women's agenda at the centre of public policy for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The conference featured five plenary sessions which explored challenges, identified best practices and provided ample opportunity to share experiences around important themes about women and economic development, women's contributions to the economy and women in business. The actionable recommendations that came forward at this conference will represent a significant body of opinion.

We are indebted to the very many excellent Guest Speakers who participated in the programme taking time from exceptionally busy schedules and at their own expense. The calibre of presentations and remarks was a testament to their experience and dedication to gender-related issues, building bridges and creating partnerships.

Over 200 participants – senior policy makers and business leaders, academics, media and members of civil society -- from as many as 44 countries, including 17 Arab countries, 20 countries in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Iran gathered at this landmark event to discuss women in the corporate sector, as entrepreneurs and their important impact on economic and social development. Added to the participants list were many special guests – Ambassadors and heads of Special Agencies, government officials and members of the European Parliament who were invited to the Opening Session, many of whom stayed for the remainder of the conference.

The Arab International Women's Forum is greatly indebted for the support and participation of our Conference Partners, Shell and IBM. AIWF welcomed our sponsors and their delegations as active partners. We are grateful, as always, for their continued support.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership / The 'Barcelona Process'

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was launched in November 1995 during the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs held in Barcelona. It marked the starting point of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership -- the Barcelona Process -- a wide framework of political, economic and social relations between the Member States of the European Union and Partners of the Southern Mediterranean. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership comprises 35 members (25 EU Member States and 10 Mediterranean Partners).

The Barcelona Process is a unique and ambitious initiative, laying the foundations of a new regional partnership and representing a turning point in Euro-Mediterranean relations. In the Barcelona Declaration, the Euro-Mediterranean partners established the three main objectives of the Partnership:

- to define a common area of peace and stability through the reinforcement of political and security dialogue;
- to share prosperity through an economic and financial partnership and the gradual establishment of a free-trade area;
- and to strengthen the social, cultural and human partnership aimed at encouraging greater understanding between cultures and exchanges between civil societies.

This year marks the 10th Anniversary of the Partnership under the 'Barcelona Process'. In a series of European and Euro-Med meetings of Foreign Ministers in 2004-2005, the partnership examines its future direction, economic reforms and investment and social-cultural aspects. Their discussions and recommendations will culminate in a meeting at the highest level in Barcelona in November 2005.

Women in the Arab world

The inclusion of women in the economic process is a fundamental catalyst for dynamic social and economic development. Women's contributions to the local, national and global economy is substantial and, at a micro level, helps to ensure that companies are more competitive. Still, too many

women remain excluded from the economic mainstream, to the detriment of their societies and their own individual lives.

Women in the Arab world have achieved significant economic advancement in recent years. Although the overall figure is low for women in the labour market, there are promising indicators that participation rates for women between 25 and 44 years of age in the labour force is increasing. Furthermore, the empowerment of women can serve as an economic growth strategy for regions like the Arab countries where a high percentage of entrepreneurial activity has been recorded in recent years.

Women in the region are, however, still facing difficulties in reaching leadership positions in corporations and/or running lasting and efficient entrepreneurial ventures. One of the reasons often identified in specific studies in the region is the lack of awareness of the opportunities available to women. Research also identifies a definite need for specific management skills and competencies as well as for more solid links with partners in Europe and other regions.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of the 'Barcelona Process' and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, now is the right moment to analyse what has been achieved in empowering women in the region, and to discuss what mechanisms should be put in place to further enhance the economic conditions of women, as well as the development of new bridges of civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean.

General Summary

The region has witnessed significant improvements over past years with regard to women, in particular where literacy and education among women is concerned. The legal framework is also being reformed throughout the Arab region to allow women to engage more actively and take up their position in society.

Nevertheless, women have not yet reached that position, and their talents remain an un-utilised resource. As in other regions of the world, women are increasingly seen as the engines for economic development of the region, and, as such, crucial for the future of the Euro-Arab partnership. The EU is therefore willing to set up the necessary resources to develop women's talent.

Arab women's needs were identified and captured in four broad themes:

- Institutional support
- Financial resources
- Skills and management competencies
- Links with the international community

Specific tools were also identified:

- Scholarship schemes for women's training
- Mentoring, coaching programs
- Networks
- Management training and IT knowledge

OPENING CEREMONY

In setting the tone for the conference and its individual sessions, all the special addresses in the Opening Session acknowledged that the conditions for Arab women have improved and that there have been a great many achievements. In her welcoming address, Mrs Haifa Al Kaylani, Founder and Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum, noted that most women remain an untapped resource. Although there are challenges facing women in the Arab world, there are also many opportunities. Women now account for a large proportion of the total work force in both the public and private sectors and also in various industrial sectors including trade.

From a European point of view, the 'Barcelona Process' did not come up to expectations because not enough attention was paid to the human factor, and more specifically to women. While the European community has shown a firm commitment, there is a recognised need for a better understanding of the realities and needs of the Arab region. There was every indication that financial resources from Europe are available but that there was a necessity to develop the right public policy to strengthen and extend the European-Mediterranean relationship.

Empowering women is not easy, and women must therefore fight for their rights. There is a firm belief in the freedom of choice for each woman, including the right to choose between staying at home or pursuing a career. The world is changing and the future uncertain; nevertheless various opportunities lie ahead where women should take the initiative to spearhead their ideas and lead more North and South organizations to get involved in the Euro-Med process.

Plenary Session 1:

The Role of Institutions in Promoting Women in the European and Arab Economies

Several main themes emerged from the first session. The participation of women in the public policy process, education, understanding cross cultural issues and the pace of change were themes repeated throughout the session.

Given that institutions are fundamental in policymaking and policy implementation, it is essential that voices of women be heard in these institutions, so that their needs, challenges, and interests are reflected in public policy.

Education was seen in two ways. Learning, knowledge and skills are the formal components to education, but as important are the stereotypes and images viewed in popular media. In the first instance, further funding and additional programming in vocational training and basic literacy was viewed as important. In terms of larger issues around knowledge, promoting networks and outreach programming, breaking stereotypes and changing the image of women in the media were regarded as crucial.

European involvement in the region is important. For this role to be played out correctly, however, Europe must understand the Arab world more comprehensively. There is a limit to the capabilities of government to undertake government exchanges although regarded as a valuable way in which to create greater understanding across cultures. Thus, there is a need to develop more exchange among civil society.

The pace of change is critical. The public policy debate and the decision-making process should keep pace with the rate of change.

Plenary Session 2:

Success Stories of Women Entrepreneurs

One of the axes in the Barcelona conference was cooperation in the area of economic development. Particular emphasis was placed in fostering the business environment of the region, and on promoting the SMEs environment.

From an economic development perspective, studies show a high correlation between entrepreneurial activity and economic growth. Entrepreneurial development is a creative alternative, particularly in places where the labour market is saturated. It provides the background for people to develop their full potential and lead productive lives.

Moreover, entrepreneurial activity among women is more likely to increase the sustainability of a country's economic growth than men. The reason is women have a greater tendency to reinvest their earnings to the benefit of their family, in such things as nutrition, health and education. Therefore, the empowering of women entrepreneurs can also be seen as an economic growth strategy for regions such as the Arab world, where high percentages of entrepreneurial activity have been recorded in recent years.

Four themes emerged in this session: Barriers to entrepreneurial activity; the significance of women starting SMEs and their economic impact; taking an SME from business idea to reality; and the great need for more visibility, role modelling and mentoring.

Several barriers inhibiting women starting their own businesses were identified by panellists such as daunting legislation and start-up bureaucracy; social stereotypes; lack of childcare infrastructure; financial obstacles; and work/family balance.

Plenary Session 3: Education and Training – Providing Women with Management Skills and Competencies

Although women in the region are obtaining increasingly higher degrees of education, there is still a great need to equip women with the management skills most in demand in the corporate world: core as well as soft skills, and the adaptation of management curricula to different cultural settings. The delivery modes offered by new technologies will permit education of the highest possible quality being adapted to the different needs of women in the region.

There is recognition in the Arab world today that special emphasis should be placed on the role of women with particular regard to their education and employment. Considerable change is already evident with the increasing numbers of women in the student population and their greater participation in government civilian jobs. Dialogue on diversity and tolerance issues and women is included in the wider dialogue on reforms currently underway in all Arab countries. Women need to share in the economic growth of their country and have the potential and preparedness to establish or advance their own business to achieve this objective.

This session concentrated on specific aspects of education in which common themes surfaced around issues in management education; practical and executive training; and the cultural contexts of women in business including role models and risk-taking behaviour.

Plenary Session 4: The Corporate Environment

Women have achieved key positions in the corporate world in Europe as well as in the Arab Mediterranean Countries. However, women still face difficulties in finding appropriate jobs in business corporations and important barriers in reaching leadership positions.

Participants heard from four very senior managers at multinational corporations who reviewed company diversity programmes and the need to be proactive in the recruitment, training, retention, and career development of women throughout various stages of their corporate life.

Plenary session 5: Public Policy Strategies and Mechanisms Aimed at Empowering Women in the Arab Region and Europe.

The Euro-Mediterranean partnership initiated at the Barcelona conference provides a new framework for business development in the Arab Mediterranean region.

The EU was conscious of the difficulty that the partner countries faced in the short-term, and offered a contribution for the period 1995-1999 estimated at 4.685 million Euros alongside an equivalent amount in loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB). A new financial package was approved for the period 2000 to 2006 for a total amount of 5.350 million Euros and a 6.400 million for EIB loans.

In order to help business development in Arab Mediterranean Countries, substantial financial aid has been provided. The majority of the financial aid is channeled through the MED committee, the body in charge of approving the different projects presented. The financial aid targets three main areas:

- A- Support for Mediterranean countries in their economic liberalization process, assisting privatization programs, and helping the private sector to adapt to the new environment.
- B- Support for local governments with structural stabilization programs
- C- Social programs, to limit the effect that the economic transition could have on the poorer social stratum.

The last session analyzed the most successful policies as well as their effectiveness in fostering women-led businesses.

Countries in the MENA region have invested significantly in education and health, a prerequisite for women's empowerment, but this investment has not yet translated into greater economic participation of women. Progress in women's empowerment has been slow either because of legal and social constraints or because economic policies have not actively addressed the participation of women in the economy.

The Barcelona Process and its successor, the new European Neighbours Initiative (ENI) can play a critical role in providing incentives and resources for the economies of the region to integrate gender issues in a holistic matter.

Not only is there a need to build from the top down, but also from the ground up to raise the profile of women. Prominent roles of First Ladies in the region have helped to mainstream women's issues in economic, political and societal arenas. At the same time, the non-governmental organisation sector and community-based organisations have significantly increased in the Arab world engaging many more women in civil society issues.