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Message from the External Relations Commissioner, Mrs. Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

First I would like to thank Ms Fahoum al Kaylani and the AIWF, on behalf of the Commissioner in charge of External Relations, Ms Benita Ferrero-Waldner, for giving the European Commission the opportunity to participate to the official launch of AIWF's report on Women as Engines of Economic Growth in the Arab World.

Ms Ferrero-Waldner could unfortunately not attend this event, but has asked me to deliver a few words in her name.

The Commissioner wishes to convey to the Arab International Women's Forum her warm appreciation for the results achieved this year by the organisation in the promotion of increased participation of women in economic life, as well as the recognition of their indispensable role in this domain. The report and recommendations that are presented today are comprehensive and constitute, in our eyes, a very useful basis for further action. As a few recommendations presented today are specifically addressing the role of the European Commission, I would now like to give you a few highlights on the follow-up that could be given by the Commission as regards in particular, our current and future support to women empowerment and our more global commitments in the context of the Barcelona Process and the New Neighbourhood Policy.

As underlined during the Brussels and Cairo conferences organised by AIWF, the EC is already very active in integrating into its cooperation programmes the issues linked to women's education, entrepreneurial capacity building, women's participation into rural development and women's rights. This is done through mainstreaming of these issues into all our cooperation programmes and, in some cases, through specific programmes aiming at promoting and empowering women in the sector targeted. **In terms of funding**, the amount devoted to women in our Mediterranean partner countries under these two approaches and in all our budget lines, during these last years, **can be considered as very significant**. The EU Member States are currently discussing new financial perspectives for the period 2007 to 2013 and the programming exercise with partner countries is still in its infancy. However, as example and to illustrate its commitments on women issues, the Commission has clearly indicated **in its proposal to the Budgetary Authority for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership its objective to**

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increase by at least 50% its funding for Education and Vocational Training. Priority will be given to Equal Opportunities for girls and boys which means that specific support will be mobilised to ensure better access for girls and women to all levels of education.

As regards procedures, we have taken due note of AIWF recommendations on the acceleration of the delivery process. I am pleased to inform you that the Commission services are currently looking at ways and **means to adapt and simplify its current procedures relating to calls for proposals** in order to improve access to EU funding : in doing so, priority will be given to quality of proposals while maintaining transparency. This should smooth the whole process and contribute to a quicker and improved delivery.

On the policy side, the AIWF report and recommendations are presented at a very appropriate time. The EU is about to celebrate the **10th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration** : a **Euro-Mediterranean Summit** will take place in November in Barcelona and will further consolidate the partnership between the Mediterranean countries and the EU to build an area of peace, stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean Basin. At the same time, the Commission is launching the **New Neighbourhood Instrument** which will integrate support to all Mediterranean countries. In all these processes, the ambitions of the Commission to ensure a greater contribution of Arab women, not only in the economic, but also in the social and political life of their countries, remain very high. Commitments taken in this respect have been clearly stated. The European Commission is proposing and advocating that in the conclusions of the November Euro-Mediterranean Summit, **a strong emphasis is placed on women's empowerment and women's rights.** In parallel, the Action Plans on which the development of the New Neighbourhood Policy is based and that have already been agreed with Jordan, Palestine and Morocco and are well underway for Egypt and Lebanon, contain all important commitments regarding the enhancement of women's rights. In addition, these commitments will be closely **monitored by specialised committees** and discussed between the partner country and the EU on a regular basis as it was the case recently in Jordan for instance.

Finally and to conclude , I am pleased **to announce that our Commissioner for External Relations Ms Ferrero-Waldner has proposed to organise in 2006 a Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conference on equal opportunities between women and men.** This conference would gather representatives of both governments and civil society to increase awareness on gender issues and identify concrete measures to promote women empowerment. The objective of this conference could possibly entail the establishment of an action plan governing future EC activities in this area, in terms of political dialogue as well as in concrete cooperation with the Mediterranean partner countries. It goes without saying that the recommendations of AIWF constitute a very useful contribution towards this objective and that the participation of AIWF in the preparation of this Conference will be actively sought.

I thank you for your attention.

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