STRENGTHENING OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN “COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRATIC STATES”¹

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Introduction

Women’s rights take place within the larger category of human rights in general. They do not fall behind men’s rights; they may even surpass men’s rights. If we want to ensure the protection of women’s rights, we should first make sure that there is respect for human rights in general.² Moreover in recent decades, women’s rights have come to play a key role not only in the development of states and advancement of societies but also a measurement in a country’s relative capacity of cooperation on the global level. There are still governments, such as those in Islamic countries, that do not pay enough attention to human rights in general and thus let discrimination persist against women in politics as well as in all life-worlds. Women have problems in access to education, to work and to an income. Women do not participate in decision-making bodies that are meant to bring change and make a difference in the way society works. Women are subjected to violence and this is true in all societies, whether north or south of the Mediterranean.

In the southern partner states of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), while the participation and representation of women is increasing, there is still pervasive gender inequality before the law. It is still questionable how the mechanisms of the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) will be used to support the pro-feminist elements in these countries. There has been some government sponsorship of increased women’s rights, but

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gender inequality in existing legislation and practice is still widespread. The impunity of “honour crimes” is still guaranteed in the laws of nearly all the partner states (Articles 98 and 380 of the Jordan Penal Code, for example, excuses men who kill “their wife or a close female relative” if they act out of “fury” or in the case of adultery). Moreover, women are also discriminated against in terms of freedom of movement, inheritance rights, child custody and social benefits, while illegitimate children suffer from discrimination. The fact that restrictions are placed on the right of peaceful assembly means that pro-reformists cannot carry on demonstrations effectively.

The social, political and economic rights of women are lagging behind those of men everywhere in the world, but especially in the Arab world. Religious affiliations, patriarchy and the level of development of countries are factors that determine the depth of gender inequality. Reform in the institutional framework and cultural practices is needed to overcome the persisting discrimination against women. And governments should become aware that cultural or legal barriers to gender equality limit their development and growth prospects. The EMP is now much aware of this necessity in the region. Istanbul, Turkey, is soon going to be the venue of the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Meeting on Gender Equality, entitled “Equality of Opportunities,” on 13-14 November 2006.

The decision to organise a Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on gender equality is a very significant step showing that the rights of women eventually finds its due place on the agenda of the Barcelona Process that was started in 1995. Women’s rights movements have played a considerable role in the Euro-Mediterranean region over the last few years, parallel to the profound changes that have taken place in political, social and economic life of the EMP partner states. However, the rights of women had been nearly absent from both the EMP and the ENP policies over the past decade.

Three major reports have been prepared, at the request of the European Commission, as background work to the Ministerial Conference: a report by EuroMeSCo, entitled “Women as Full Participants in the Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States;” a report by Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, entitled “Culture and Communication: Key Factors for Changing Mentalities and Societies,” which studies gender equality in educational, media and cultural policies; and a report by FEMISE, on women and economics. References are made to the first report in this paper. 3

I. Islam and Women’s Rights

The EuroMeSCo Report, which was presented at one of the two “Rights of Women” preparatory meetings in May and June respectively, generated intense debate and polarisation in Rabat on 14-16 June 2006. The Director of IEEI published an on-line letter in defense of the Report and invited everyone to contribute to the process of reflection. 4

The report discusses with accuracy many central issues concerning women’s rights in the

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Euro-Mediterranean region. There is obviously disagreement over most of the terms used, since there is no consensus among specialists as to how to label or categorise various Islamist currents. A similar controversy is currently raging over the term “Islamofascism.”

Two terms, “women’s rights” and “gender equality,” which have recently come to represent two opponent terms positioned at the contradictory poles of a running debate, are used interchangeably in this paper. Gender is a social construct to characterise roles, attitudes and behaviour of men and women in society. Gender equality is about men and women being equally visible and active in all fields of public, political, social, economic and cultural life. In the “women’s rights” argument, there is also the subject of special rights for women, surpassing those of men, which is also referred to in this paper. The effort to improve the protection and enforcement of women’s rights, taking into consideration the special difficulties faced by women, is important but it works simultaneously with a general democratisation process; and it is impossible to have a true democracy without gender equality first.

There are also differences among Islamist women’s organisations. There are women who are members of male-dominated Islamist movements and parties; others who are “Islamist women” but do not take part in broader Islamist political groupings; there are still other women who are members of both the “Islamic feminist” movement and broader Islamist political groupings. The most heated debate over the Report centered around the contested definition of “Islamism,” the nature of Islamist feminism and its relationship with secular feminism and the rights of women according to the Western norms. The question raised about the compatibility between Islamism and democracy is also pertinent but this has become a target of criticism as well. All the above-mentioned points of controversy take place over the Chapter on “Women and Political Islam” (pages 27-31), where the basic argument is that the majority of Islamist movements take a paradoxical position between defending the political rights of women, but holding a very conservative view of personal rights which are specific to women and the position of the women in the family.

The Report further suggests that Islamist feminists who stress on the politically motivated or informed interpretation of Islamic religious text and teaching, strengthen and legitimate the chains that tie them and maintain the status quo. All such daring revelations of the truth concerning the rights of women are obviously disturbing to those elements in all societies that hold a conservative vision about life-worlds of both men and women. The EuroMeSCo Report actually has a tolerant and conciliatory point of view, favoring the idea that peaceful Islamist currents should be allowed to participate freely in the political arena, since this keeps channels open for dialogue between democratic and reform-minded actors and any obscurantist ideologies expressed by Islamists.

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) model should be adopted in the gender equality subject among the EMP partner states. The main recommendation of the EuroMeSCo

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Report is that a Women’s Rights Council should be established by the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial meeting on women. This is to ensure the mainstreaming of rights-promotion policies for gender equality, which are to be adopted in the legal, political and socio-economic realms as well as in the media by 2008. The Council should further be expected to make periodic assessments of non-governmental thematic cooperation. The Report advises that Euro-Mediterranean ministers establish relevant benchmarks and time-frames for the achievement of women’s rights-specific and defined goals, and monitor progress in accordance with the recently adopted governance facility and the Action Plans that need to be amended accordingly. The Report also advises the creation of Euro-Med Gender-Disaggregated Knowledge Base, for the collection of gender-specific data. The partner states should be committed to scheduled membership to the CEDAW and UN Human Rights Conventions. Strong monitoring mechanisms should be established. A “Woman of the Year” prize is suggested as an annual award to an organisation or individual deemed to have made the greatest contribution to promoting the rights of women. The Report also advises empowerment of civil society, particularly women’s rights groups, including Islamist women’s movements. A dialogue should be encouraged between different currents of the women’s rights movement.

II. Women’s Rights: the EMP and the ENP

It is outlined in the Barcelona Declaration of 1995 and reaffirmed in 2005 that the rights of women is a fundamental aspect of the project to create an integrated Euro-Mediterranean Region based on democracy, the rule of law and the protection of fundamental human rights. There are cross-cutting issues of concern for women both in the north and south of the EMP. Patriarchy and discrimination are a reality everywhere in the EMP; the problems of cultural relativism, violence exists also in the north, especially in immigrant communities. Thus, the promotion of the rights of women should be treated as a Euro-Mediterranean challenge.

The rights of women should not be treated as an isolated issue but be mainstreamed into all EMP official policies. This would be in compliance with, March 2006 Commission Roadmap for equality between Men and Women: 2006-2010; 2006 Communication on a European Vision on Gender Equality in Development Cooperation; 2001 Programme of Action for the Mainstreaming of Gender Equality in Development Cooperation; 2001 European Consensus; the Millenium Development Goals (MDG) adopted in 2000 and set for the year 2015, and Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. Under the title, “Gendering the EMP,” the EuroMeSCo Report states its criticisms and recommendations as follows. Firstly, the EMP has failed so far to recognise that women are not merely subsidiary actors but rather central actors in processes of political transformation to democracy. Secondly, Islamism is an immensely varied belief system; so it cannot be seen as a single, undifferentiated phenomenon. Thirdly, Islamism cannot be repressed or sidelined from processes of political change.

What should be the major priorities for the EMP as regards the rights of women and the participation of women in the political reform processes? These are stated in the EuroMeSCo “Barcelona Plus” 2005 report which had adopted the task of transforming the EMP into Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States (CDS). There are also
clauses on women in the Five-Year Work Programme, “New Scope for Action on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership,” adopted in November 2005. It states that the partners will adopt measures to “achieve gender equality, preventing all forms of discrimination and ensuring the protection of the rights of women;” calls for a significant increase in the percentage of women in employment in all partner countries; asks for an expansion and improvement in education opportunities for girls and women; advises political pluralism and participation, particularly for women and youth; supports all actions through the active promotion of a fair and competitive political environment, including fair and free elections, and for an increase in the participation of women in decision-making, in political, social, cultural and economic positions. This set of suggestions constitutes an important symbolic step and moreover, the objectives are clear, relatively well-defined and prone to evaluation.

The Work Programme however has no “Road Map” or time table about when and to what extent partner governments should implement these goals. The Work Programme is not politically binding and on the basis of past experience this is unlikely to induce much change. The Ministerial Meeting in Istanbul should address the issue of how to ensure that clear objectives are also accompanied by clear benchmarks and evaluation mechanisms.

The ENP claims to offer southern Mediterranean partners “everything-but-membership” in exchange for successful reforms in all the areas listed in bilateral Action Plans, but contributes little to the rights of women. Gender equality in the southern Mediterranean was relegated to the background. All the Plans refer to human rights, and only implicitly to women’s rights. Only the Action Plans concluded with Jordan, Palestinian Authority, Morocco and Tunisia refer to the issue, but only in very broad terms.

The Euro-Mediterranean Women’s Conference, Barcelona + 10, which took place on the sidelines of the Heads of State and Government Summit on 24-25 November 2005, called on the EU to support efforts for gender equality by including a gender perspective in its development policies and its criteria for selection of projects; make women’s rights explicit in the Association Agreements, even if a clause on fundamental rights is included, while an anti-discriminatory clause should be incorporated; and, the same principles should be applied to the ENP and all other negotiations carried out.6 Their conclusions were as follows: equal opportunities between men and women has a deep impact in the economic and human development of the people and countries living together in the Mediterranean space; the participants wanted legal guarantees that women’s rights will be respected and warned that failure to respect or limit them is a breach of human rights; patriarchy is blamed as one of the reasons why it is not easy for women in the Euro-Mediterranean region to achieve full and effective recognition of their rights; participation in public life, and especially in decision-making is of “fundamental importance.” A gender perspective is demanded in all public policies (“For this, political will is mandatory, as well as adequate financial resources.”) Finally, the conference group concluded that cooperation and a viable solution to the problem of migration was necessary; not to forget that women migrants who

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are half of the numbers are the ones who suffer intense marginalisation, much more than men.

III. Women and Development

When talking of women’s rights in the Euro-Mediterranean region, one must divide the rights of women into two: the public political rights of women, and the private rights, particularly within the context of the family. Even though there is the need to stress that civil and political, social and economic rights are indivisible and interdependent, all these four categories can be said to belong in the “public” sphere. Whereas women have an important existence in the context of the “extended family” that is a domain with its own system of laws and norms, especially with respect to Islamic religion. Freedom House released the first ever comparative assessment of women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Women are at a profound disadvantage in practically every institution of society: the criminal justice system, the economy, education, health care, and the media, plus the quite unknown territory, the family. Women have generally gotten used to being treated as “passive recipients of male-dominated state largesse and patronage” in the partner states of the EMP. They are hardly considered as “capable and autonomous beings who are active participants in the forging of their own destinies.”

Two years before the launch of the EMP, the 1993 United Nations (UN) Conference on Human Rights in Vienna had brought together all the countries, including the later partner states of the EMP, and stressed an integrated view of human rights. That is, the indivisibility and interdependence of civil, political, social and economic rights. Islamic states nevertheless tend to have a one-dimensional focus as far as gender equality is concerned: they appear to be ready first to accept the role of women only in economic development processes. This attitude also reflects their understanding of the EMP; that the first aim of the Partnership was development. The conditions for political stability, security, social progress or democracy would follow gradually. However, the EuroMeSCo “Barcelona Plus” Report revealed that this sequential and linear perspective towards general improvement was mistaken. Civil and political, social and economic rights are indivisible and interdependent. Economic development policies can not come to full fruition without parallel policies to ensure political participation and justice. Examples show that current economic development policies are not respectful of gender equality; the rights of women are not fully recognized. In civil rights laws there are discriminatory inheritance laws against women; this has a serious impact on the ability of women to participate in economic life. Women are registered as voters on the Family Code under the name of their husband or father. This limits their ability to enjoy their legal right to vote as autonomous individuals. Women are prohibited from moving around freely, on their own; this has serious impacts on their access to education, healthcare or other services.

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Turkey is one of the EMP partner countries which has largely overcome the barriers to the rights of women posed by legal measures. Turkey has recognized early in its history that the full realisation of socio-economic rights is not separable from the achievement of civil and political rights. Turkey, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, recognised in the 1920s and 1930s that women’s rights must be addressed as an integral part of political as well as socio-economic transformation. A number of failing points in civil law have been amended recently in the preparation for membership in the EU. However, de facto gender inequality persisting in practice is still far from being achieved fully in the rural area and urban periphery. Most notoriously, young women’s suffering under the Kurdish tribal exercise of “honour crimes” has caused much distress in Turkey as well as in Europe. As it is stated in the EuroMeSCo Report, “only a commitment to pluralism and participatory democracy can ultimately ensure full respect for the rights of women.”

Across the Middle East and North Africa region, women are using grass roots-based, bottom-up, culture-specific methods of reform policies and legislation to ensure greater equality and social justice. Women’s right to equal citizenship is guaranteed by the majority of constitutions also in Arab countries, as dictated by international law. However, in some countries in the region, women are denied even their right to nationality, which is a crucial component of citizenship. Some women in the region, who may marry men of other nationalities, cannot confer their nationality on their husbands or children. These laws undermine women’s status as equal citizens in their home countries, preventing them from participating fully in public life.

There are women’s organisations who fight for much wider causes beyond their own rights. Association of Women of the Mediterranean Region (AWMR), founded in Malta in 1992, unites women from 18 countries. They work towards a just and peaceful solution to conflicts and try to demilitarize and denuclearize the Mediterranean region as well as actively support all other movements for global disarmament. They aim to foster the health and well-being of the most vulnerable among women and to end all forms of violence against them. They try to abolish sexual discrimination, oppression and exploitation, and to achieve human rights, democracy and sustainable development. They work for the welfare and rights of children, irrespective of racial, social, cultural and family background. They promote education for justice, equality and peace at all levels with special attention to the family, school and media. They also carry on action in order to achieve a Mediterranean Region free of pollution; to halt wanton ecological destruction and to safeguard the sea, air, soil and water.

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There is a two-way causality between the advance of economic and social rights of people and their economic and human development.\textsuperscript{12} Due to the interdependence and indivisibility of rights, the lack of progress in female employment and labour conditions affect the capacity of women to attain gender equality in the civil and political spheres, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{13} The one hundred ninety one member states of the United Nations unanimously adopted the UN Development Declaration, Millenium Development Goals, adopted by the 2000 UN Millenium Assembly. In the light of the goals set for 2015, many countries are trying to enhance their growth prospects by making reforms in the institutional frameworks that limit women’s participation in the economy and in the labour force, in women’s education and training. As states shall score progress towards the establishment of pluralistic democratic statehood, they will also overcome “the mismatch between public political or labour rights on the one hand, and private or family related rights on the other.”\textsuperscript{14}

Furthermore, the EuroMeSCo Report stresses the need for a two-dimensional treatment of the rights of women in the EMP partner states. The rights of women should constitute an integral part of the general human rights and be evaluated on the basis of equality and non-discrimination; the rights of women should also be seen as rights recognised according to specific needs of women. In the second dimension, women’s differences are taken into account, such as maternity and reproductive health rights. Women have a right to equality with men; but women also have rights based on difference. Their first rights are as human beings; their second rights are as gender specific beings. In other words, they have a right to have all the fundamental human rights included in the provisions of the major human rights conventions; and women also have special rights due to their being women, safeguarding the specific needs of their physical existence. This has been recognised in international human rights law, and through the focus on gender mainstreaming by the UN as well as the EU. However, \textit{de facto} situation shows that women suffer very disproportionately from the disasters lived on earth, such as wars, terror, immigration, earthquakes, floods, chronic burdens of poverty, unemployment.\textsuperscript{15}

A different historical experience from that of men have also led women to get used to leading lives embedded in gender discrimination and loss of trust in their own power due to all forms of domination and violence. Now women need special encouragement in order to pick up the habit of leading a normal life of a human being in freedom. Some of the forms of violence that target women are not just confined to partner states of the EMP; trafficking in women is a gender violence that needs collaboration of both north and south partner states.

Laws, norms, traditions and codes of conduct that take place in the overall institutional setting of a country are often the main sources of persistent discrimination against women.

\textsuperscript{12} Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Commissioner, (7-8 April, 2005) Ten Years After the Barcelona Process; Empowering Women as a Catalyst for Economic Development, Arab International Women’s Forum (IAWF), European Parliament, Brussels.
\textsuperscript{13} EuroMeSCo Report 2006, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 11.
Examples include polygamy, Islamic marriage instead of official marriage, family-imposed marriages of teenagers, honour crimes, unequal inheritance rights and practices, obstacles to free movement, virginity tests, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, etc.

There are preconceptions about the status of women. Women are perceived as producers; men as providers. Personal status codes confer upon women the status of dependent and minor with respect to marriage, divorce, child custody, the right of work, travel and inheritance; these rules subordinate women to male guardianship or authority. Male heads of family demand obedience within marriage. In exchange, the male provides for the family. The male has the right to dissolve marriages. The male acts as the primary intermediary between women and the state. The protection of the family takes precedence over the protection of individual rights of women.

Marriage is seen as a mechanism for reproduction, the survival and reinforcement of the family, the preservation of male property through inheritance, and the preservation of the interests of the community. There is no recognition of individual desires in marriage for women. Laws legalise and institutionalise gender violence in the context of marriage and family. Husbands retain a right over the bodies of their wives upon marriage; therefore a husband cannot be accused of legally raping or physically abusing his wife. “Light beating” when the wife is “disobedient” is accepted as normal by both men and women, which means breaking of the rules of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Women are not allowed to travel alone without the consent of the male guardian. Married women cannot travel abroad with minor children without their husband’s approval or accompaniment.

Where cultural traditions still largely determine people’s behaviour, standard policies to promote gender equality, such as amending the laws, building more schools or setting up rescue homes for women cannot be sufficient to alleviate the suffering of women. Giving micro-credit to women in rural villages where they are not allowed to leave the house without the dominant male’s permission will not make much difference.\(^\text{16}\) While there are some who argue that cultural and regional disparities call for cultural and normative relativism, cultural relativism is rejected by the EuroMeSCo Report, as a tool which is often used to justify laws and practices that violate fundamental rights, not only against women in the south partner states but also against migrant women in the European Union. Core universal values and norms are inscribed in the CEDAW and there is no need for cultural relativism that help policy-makers to turn a blind eye to brutal discrimination. “Culture is permeable, changeable and flexible entity, the present configuration of which cannot be ‘essentialised’ in the sense that it is immutable.”\(^\text{17}\)

It is true that there have been various legal reforms, and there has been a slow process of improvement in women’s rights. Even though some of the international, multilateral norms have been adopted, there has been very limited progress in the private and family status of

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\(^\text{17}\) EuroMeSCo Report, p. 7.
women. Even where reform has taken place, it has been selective; tending to benefit only urban and elite women. In their application, the judiciaries act unevenly, since there is the prevalent tendency towards a patriarchal jurisprudential approach in the southern partner countries. Local traditions or values keep fending off the pressures from the northern partners towards gender equality.

The predominance of patriarchal values imposes itself not only upon legal, political and religious spheres, but on wider socio-cultural structures of discrimination which is historically constructed. Such a construct is primarily embedded in educational policies of countries. There is the great need for policies that shall “contribute to change the attitudes of key actors, notably political parties, government institutions, judiciaries and police and military forces” with respect to patriarchy.\(^{18}\)

**IV. Women and Political Islam**

The EuroMeSCo Report equates the emergence of Islamism with the rise of a new political generation. This group is part of the post-colonial process of modernisation; and this state-building modernisation was not legitimated on the basis of culture and identity, but was driven by nationalism. They are the products of a process of socio-economic modernisation which produced uneven divisions of class and rural/urban divide. Rather than giving credit to efficiency, merit, productivity-related criteria, the new generations based connections on their common religious belief. Political Islam Militancy is the carrier of a new experience of religion; it conflicts with the traditional order. In Politicized Islam, social behaviour involves three interdependent modern social dynamics: 1) authonomy vis-à-vis the state and traditional religious authorities, 2) individualisation of social actors, as opposed to communitarianism and clientilism, 3) broadening of women’s access to the public sphere.

Women’s participation has become a common element in all political Islam groups. Women are developing a new relationship with Islam through Islamist movements, and opening cracks in the existing patriarchal order. In so doing, they are contributing to altering their traditional status. They adhere to such movements as “individuals” and not through paternal affiliations. This new woman is no more submissive; even the traditional wearers of the veil (haik) are different from those who wear the modern version of the veil (hiyyâb). Haik is now a symbol of ignorance, submission, seclusion and superstition. Traditionally, women’s sole identity was mediated by males, as “daughter of,” “wife of,” “mother of.” Women are now visible in electoral campaigns and as candidates. They are young, urban and educated. This is not the result of male “manipulation of women.” Urbanisation and education have been two important factors in their lives. Urbanisation fragmented traditional communities that once structured relations between men and women, and created an opportunity for a new generation to avoid the authority of their elders and of patriarchal groups. Education, learning and intellectual autonomy helped women to reinterpret their role according to an “authentic Islam” which may differ from that of religious establishment and “authorities” (Islam does not accept ranks of authorities).

Islamism has a variety of beliefs among its adherents and just as many different interpretations about the rights of women. In Political Islamism, there is no single understanding of what is an immensely varied socio-political phenomenon. Different groups with respect to their standing according to Islam have different positions with regard to the public political rights of women and their private rights, particularly within the context of the family. Most women’s movements play an important role in the defence of the political rights of women and their participation in the public space. Some of these movements favour conservative views with respect to women’s private and family life in accordance with the interpretation of the Shari’a. Public rights are often universally recognised. However, some aspects of social rights are limited since they may be in conflict with family laws and women’s perceived position in the extended family. The paradox lived in many of the southern partner states is that full participatory democracy requires that all women’s rights organisations and Islamist political parties should be included in the process of reform in order to guarantee gender equality, and include all women as full social and political actors. This means that, at the same time, this process involves fight against the conservative patriarchal views of some Islamist groups who are also working for women’s rights.

Islamist Women’s Organisations (IWO) constitute an important force in the southern partner states. However it is questionable whether any Islamist movement, including that of IWOs, is capable of evolving democratically and espousing cultural attitudes that would have validity in democracy. There is also the question, whether feminism is compatible with Islam. Is it possible to be a Koran-based feminist? One view says: By arguing for women’s rights on the basis of religious texts, Islamis Women’s organisations, or Islamist Feminists are only strengthening and legitimating the chains that tie them. Another view says: This is the only viable and locally-rooted way to challenge the status quo. A third view says: While Political Islamist Feminism is a legitimate form of struggle for the rights of women in a particularly difficult context, it has its limitations.

Islamist women’s groups are subject to the same duality and paradoxes as Islamism more generally. Although they advocate the rights of women (progressive), they are caught in the difficulties inherent in arguing their position through a theological debate about the true nature of Islam. They accept that religion may govern public life, even if on terms somewhat different to those currently espoused by traditional religious authorities. Then, the role of women in society cannot correspond to that in the West. Secular women’s organisations are a lot different (sexual emancipation has to be underlined), but as far as the public rights of women are concerned, the two groups may agree on a great number of issues. One positive point is: the more Islamist women enter the public life, they more they tend to redefine relations between men and women, thus keeping further progress as a possibility. Another curious point is that Islamic women use the Koran as their frame of reference, but their discourse is often not religious when they are talking about rights; they rather use the international language of human rights.

Conclusion

A population of politically aware women are emerging, with access to education, employment and mobility, encouraged by the global human rights movement. Islamist
Women’s Organisations (IWO) are included in this revolution. Whatever their limitations, IWOs are now an undeniable part of the growing movement for gender equality in the south. Moreover, IWOs are part of the wider transnational effort of women’s groups to combat the negative effects of patriarchy and of intolerant religious groups on gender equality, not just in the Muslim world but also in Europe and beyond. In the Middle East and North Africa, where populations are Islamic in the majority, human rights norms are well-known and prevalent in discourse. In order to empower women and help them enhance the protection of their rights, the countries of the north must make an effort not to exclude groups that have broad support from their own populations and keep up a dialogue with them.

It is however important to distinguish conservative Islamist groups from more progressive ones. And one should understand to what degree such groups or movements support women’s rights, and whether they appeal to international human rights standards. Women’s organisations in the south focus on four major issues: the reform of family law, the criminalisation of domestic violence and other gender-violences such as honour crimes, nationality rights for children through their mothers, greater access to employment and paid-jobs, participation in political decision-making, removal of current reservations to the CEDAW. Policy-makers should be forced to adopt measures in all these areas.

It is also crucial to understand the nature of the commitment of such groups to the rights of women. Some patriarchal and conservative forces make instrumental use of the rights of women as a way to gain popular support. But this can be turned into a substantive commitment by making use of the structure of incentives and overcome the sympathetic views based on cultural relativism. The official rhetoric in support of equality and equal opportunities in political life and decision-making often does not match the reality. Thus, positive discrimination mechanisms, quota systems, and recognition of special rights for women should be put in place in national institutions of the southern partner states of the EMP.