

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Before considering the subject here proposed, one has to observe that there are actually many factors which facilitate the creation of links among the populations of the Mediterranean area and among the countries where such populations live. These factors have a political and economic basis and now they are extending to the defense systems. It is not new that somebody speaks about a "new Helsinki" in the Mediterranean which could reproduce, in a certain way, the complex system elaborated in twenty years by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. One has to add to these observations the fact that there is a trend within the European Union to expand itself towards the Mediterranean area in order to enable associated member states to acquire full membership of the Union. On the other hand, the tendency towards international regionalism which characterises this era, represents a phenomenon in expansion which can yield good results in this part of the world from all the aspects here mentioned.

In considering the role of women in economic development in the Mediterranean area one has to start from the observation that while the populations of this region manifest some differences, at the same time, they are very similar in some aspects which will be here described. Both the differences and the similarities are reflected directly on the situation of women.

The first consideration refers to the different stages of development of countries where women are, as elsewhere, "actors of the development". In fact there are countries in which the "status" of women is absolutely equal from an abstract and juridical point of view to that of men. Where there is any difference, the juridical systems have introduced, in conformity with article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the concept of "positive action", which implies the adoption of a temporary special measure to grant women equal

rights and equal opportunities in society. It is clear that in these circumstances the economic contribution of women to the development of their country is not very different from the one given to men. This happens in particular in countries which are full title members of the European Union where both national legislations and communitary law provide equal rights for women who are citizens of one of such countries. Nevertheless it is known that the present crisis, which concerns some countries, has as its first victims women who are obliged to leave their jobs first, especially in the case of qualified jobs. One also has to recognise that the protection granted to women by such legislations and by some directives of the European Union, in case of abstention from work for maternity reasons, determines sometimes an attitude against women and gives rise to forms of indirect discrimination which put women in a situation where they do not earn an income. To this one has to add some illegal situations by which the employer does not employ a woman in accordance with procedures laid down by law, to avoid being obliged to pay any benefit during an eventual period of maternity. In other Mediterranean countries there is legislation which does not formally recognise equal rights and equal opportunities for women, and where women are still employed in jobs for which they are underpaid, or where, due to insufficient qualifications they cannot aspire to important positions in society. In such countries one would still find a few women in a position of leadership or at the highest level of some careers, but these are absolutely exceptional cases.

If one considers closely the economic systems of Mediterranean countries, one can state that all of them have the primary role of agriculture in common: this can be said both for the countries associated to the European Union as well as to its full members.

In all countries women are employed in agriculture; but while in the States members of the EU, article 119 of the Rome Treaty (equal treatment for equal work) is applied – even if there is an illegal tendency to pay women less than men, in other Mediterranean countries women are regularly underpaid in comparison to men. Sometimes in countries where legislation is very advanced, as in Italy, some women are not covered by insurance for work carried out and this situation is absolutely illegal while in other countries it is the norm. In all cases, women employed in agriculture represent everywhere a factor of very substantive development both when they work independently as well as when they depend on an employer. In the first case they sometimes meet

difficulties in order to finance their activities because not all countries are ready to lend money to women to help them start an activity. In fact access to credit is not available everywhere to women. In some countries banks do not allow women to open accounts and to enter into transactions. Moreover there are countries where land ownership pertains only to the men of the family (e.g. the husband, the brother, the father) and not to women. If women succeed, despite such conditions, to start an activity which generates an income, it is known that not all societies allow women to invest or to utilise their income in an autonomous way, being obliged to implement the decisions of the family, i.e. of men. In this way the contribution of women to economy is reduced, and their own development is suppressed. But when the woman does not have support of her family – which in certain cases is also a limiting factor for her – and she is alone and poor, sometimes she becomes author of her own destiny and of the destiny of her children if she has any: she tries to produce something, to sell the products and to help the children – sometimes if there is a husband, he also depends on the modest income of his wife. In many States, like Latin America or some states of the Mediterranean region, many poor women are contributing to the economy in this way. Sometimes they succeed in unifying their efforts creating small associations of women in the form of rural communities. This experience normally makes women stronger and secure and gives them the possibility to improve their systems of production, to utilise the products and to ameliorate the socio-economic situation of each of them and of the whole small community. In this way the economic situation of the local community too enjoys the positive consequences of female initiative.

Certainly agriculture is one of the sectors in which the employment of women is more frequent but it is also the one which distances women from school more than others. In this regard one has to bear in mind that all over the world the highest coefficient of illiteracy pertains to women: the care of the family, work during childhood and the rhythm of the seasons keep women away from education. The illiteracy of women has consequences on whole societies and it deprives the same women of many opportunities of improvement, of incomes, of new initiatives, confining them to the same activities, to repetitive work and keeping them in a corner of the group and of the community. Close to rural activities there is another sector which is common to many women in the Mediterranean area, i.e. that of handicraft. Handicrafts are

sometimes an inheritance for women, especially embroideries, ceramics, weaving of carpets and of special cloths, leathers etc. It is not rare that girls are trained in this kind of handicraft at a very young age.

In certain cases handicrafts are made by women employed in agriculture, meaning that they take a rest by making embroideries or something else. Also the handicraft represents an economic resource for the countries in the said area and therefore contributes to the economic development of the region. But also in this activity women are not protected enough: their risk at work is not sufficiently covered, which is similar to the situation of rural activity, and with regard to their income one can reiterate the observations already made with reference to agriculture.

In the case of women devoted to handicrafts there are also forms of associations which sometimes are very basic, in other times more sophisticated. Programmes of the United Nations, UNESCO's projects, as well as FAO's interventions in agriculture enhance such forms of collaboration among women, giving training and advice in order to have better administration of work and time, of the production system and of the investment of the money earned. Of particular importance is the action taken by UNESCO which has focused for years on disseminating among women literacy and education to prepare them for work.

In this field as in others which will be analysed there is a special problem determined by the fact that women are always employed for the same work and their preparation is limited to the same activities which traditionally pertain to women. In fact there is great difficulty to convince not only men but women themselves of the fact that in some sectors there are no more working opportunities because society has changed due to different exigencies determined, for instance, by the use of new technologies.

This very observation allows one to focus on another category of women which makes an important contribution to the economic sector of states, which is that of women employed in the services. This is a big category in the European Union where, in conformity with law and with national juridical systems, women can advance to the highest levels of the different careers. Also in this case one has to point out that the situation is not always in reality as positive as it is from a formal point of view. As an example I would like to refer to some remarks made some years ago by the first Italian woman-manager, Mrs. Marisa Bellisario in my presence. She told her colleagues of the commission, prior to the Council of Ministers,

that for a long period her colleagues used to gather late in the evening in order to take the most important decisions regarding enterprise, excluding her from such meetings. They replied to her protests that there is a world convention (of the International Labour Organisation) ratified by Italy which forbids work during the night for women.

But apart from these considerations, the opportunities for women to reach a good position in their career have started to open up and as a consequence, to obtain a good salary or good treatment depends on qualifications and on the choice of non-traditional activities. Clearly, in the area considered, there are still difficulties, even in EU countries, because the development of society can depend on the economic contribution of women. These difficulties are still linked with traditions, with the mentality and customs which are not present in other countries. In this case one has to mention the action of the European Union in favour of women to create special programmes in order to give new opportunities to girls. A similar action, on a global scale, has been taken by UNESCO with a methodology of easier application in relation to the large number of States for which it is provided. The observations here formulated would not conform to reality if one does not take into consideration two important factors which limit a woman from improving her position at work. The first regards responsibilities of the family in a wider sense, which include the care of the children, of older people and of disabled persons traditionally entrusted to women.

While maternity leave has already been considered, one should stress the fact that familiar responsibilities are not actually shared on the basis of equality between men and women – running the house one would still find the wife, the daughter or the sister. The double weight is still a reality in the Mediterranean societies and this determines a great division in Europe between the Nordic countries and the Mediterranean countries, even if something is changing among the new generations. The second factor concerns the age of retirement which is different for men and women.

This difference could be evaluated in a favourable way for women who normally leave work even before retirement age. But when a woman retires, she is out of the work market and will rarely be recalled, in this case low qualifications do not help. Leaving the work market, women miss the opportunity to earn an income: it is possible in fact that their income has less acquisition power. This situation indicates that women are actors of development for a shorter time than men, as they earn an income for less time.

One cannot reach a conclusion without observing that in all parts of the world – therefore also in the Mediterranean area – the possibility that women represent an active part of the development process depends on whether they are integrated in the same process, having the possibility to decide the best actions and choices for themselves. In fact only women are in a position to know their needs to be active within society as authors and users of the development process. But in all cases the protection of women shall include equal remuneration and shall be based on the respect of the social clause and of other international standards elaborated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to which also the World Trade Organisation (WTO) must devote all its attention to be able to implement as widely as possible.

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