

Towards the Next UfM Ministerial Declaration on Women's Empowerment

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In 2017, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) adopted the Cairo Ministerial Declaration to strengthen the role of women in society. Since then, it has worked ceaselessly to achieve the objectives of the declaration, in a very complicated environment that has also been aggravated by crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change or the war in Ukraine. On 26 October 2022, the UfM hopes to adopt a new declaration based on three main thematic areas: women's economic empowerment in contexts of regional crises, gender equality and climate change, and violence against women and girls (VAWG). The governments of the member states of the UfM, as well as the civil society partners and associations, are all key players to continue working together along these lines and confront the challenges of the region.

Since the Regional Dialogue Process on Women's Empowerment launched by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2015, important progress in achieving gender equality has been made in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Legal frameworks in many countries were strengthened (work-life balance, pay transparency in order to end the gender pay gap, gender balance in decision-making bodies, and preventing and combating violence against women and girls [VAWG] and domestic violence), and new programmes and policies were developed with the primary intention of increasing effective and meaningful women's participation in political, economic and social spheres, and to protect women from all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence (UfM Progress Report on Gender Equality, 2022). The report is the

result of the solid commitment of the members of the UfM Regional Dialogue Platform, who in 2021 carried out a first reporting exercise on the set of indicators adopted from the 42 UfM member states in 2020.

Nevertheless, the persistence of gender stereotypes, negative social norms and discriminatory practices and laws, especially towards women in the most vulnerable situations, as well as different perceptions about issues related to gender inequality and empowerment of all women and girls, not to mention divergent priorities in this area, continue to stall women's advancement in all areas of civil, economic and political life.

Moreover, the present times bring with them greater challenges, chief among which are climate change, the war in Ukraine and the

post Covid-19 pandemic scenario. The impact of such crises on women is multi-dimensional, as are the challenges to confront it. Within the context just described, women and girls are more prone to suffer economic impoverishment and gender-based violence.

With this scenario in mind, five years after the UfM Ministerial Declaration adopted in November 2017 in Cairo, of which four pillars remain essential for strengthening the role of women in society, the Secretariat of the UfM has been tirelessly working with the UfM Co-presidency on the 5th UfM Ministerial Declaration.

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The members of the UfM Regional Dialogue Platform acknowledged the progress recorded since the last Ministerial Declaration in Cairo but they also agreed on the urgent need to tackle new challenges in a new context. Global challenges, be they climate change, natural or man-made disasters, digitalisation, and economic and human development, among others, have driven and, in some cases, exacerbated the situation. These challenges have an undeniable gender dimension, as witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic, when women disproportionately suffered negative consequences. In addition, there are other barriers that need to be targeted, including that of social norms acting as barriers to women's empowerment. The aim will be to find solutions guaranteeing that women are fully committed and engaged as economic actors. Such a role should be pro-

ted by norms that allow them to fully exploit their abilities.

The Ministerial Declaration, which is expected to be adopted on 26 October this year, rests on the following three main thematic areas: women's economic empowerment in contexts of regional crises, gender equality and climate change, and VAWG.

The overall reference frameworks will include the New Agenda for the Mediterranean and its Economic and Investment Plan as well as the commitments made by the European Commission in the framework of the EU Gender Action Plan in its external relations (GAP III)¹ launched in 2020.

The Three Thematic Areas of the New UfM Ministerial Declaration

Approaching the first of the three thematic areas, namely women's economic empowerment in contexts of regional crises, the members of the Regional Dialogue Platform recognised that in a sustainable and just economy everyone is entitled to enjoy an adequate standard of living; workers would share the profits of their labour invested in jobs that re-generate rather than degrade the natural environment, while dignified working conditions and living wages would provide women with a pathway to economic empowerment and autonomy. To translate this vision into reality, governments shall inevitably prioritise the fight against inequalities and embrace the high road to economic recovery and transformation. This is particularly important in a context in which, even prior to the pandemic, environmental degradation, technological change and automation, as well as demographic shifts, were transforming work and livelihoods, with a

1. The EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III is a Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

disproportionately negative impact on those who already faced significant socioeconomic disadvantages.

Promoting women's access to the labour market and closing gender gaps in the changing world of work are central to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Women's economic empowerment boosts productivity and increases economic diversification and income equality, in addition to other positive development outcomes. The commitments the countries should make for effective women's economic inclusion refer among others to promoting the transition to formal employment for informal workers, strengthening the provision of adequate and accessible care-giving services and infrastructures, and supporting and encouraging women's entrepreneurship.

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Women's greater dependence on, and unequal access to, natural resources, public services and infrastructure, signifies that they are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and climate change, which naturally leads us to the second thematic area of the Ministerial Declaration: gender equality and climate change. Context-specific analysis demonstrates how existing gender inequalities increase women's vulnerabilities towards environmental and climate change, while prioritising women's substantive participation in policy design and decision-making is urgently needed to combat barriers.

As previously indicated, the Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges posed to women and girls, but also civil society organizations (CSOs) delivering services to victims of gender-based violence. In this regard, it

is worth mentioning the need to transcend the victim-centred approach to crisis preparedness, response, management and leadership.

It remains of paramount importance to create a link between civil servants dealing with victims of VAWG and the CSOs active in this field, thereby ensuring that peer exchange and cooperation between civil society and the public sectors remains a priority. Civil servants working with victims of VAWG need to become fully aware of the support network created by CSOs designed to support women and girls. In addition, they should be trained to join forces with the CSOs in order to leave no victim behind and strengthen the transversal response against acts of violence targeting women and girls.

But regional organisations can also have a positive role in protecting and advancing the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It remains crucial that respective experiences and good practices at the national, regional and international levels are shared and exchanged, with a view to ensuring a better international response to the issue at hand.

While the barriers to gender equality remain multi-dimensional, so too are the tools and mechanisms needed to address them. On the one hand, some barriers, such as negative social norms, gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices and laws, which are entrenched in society, have hindered their advancement since the launch of the UfM Regional Dialogue Process on Women's Empowerment in 2015. On the other hand, other forms of barriers, such as unpredictable crises, like those mentioned earlier, have nothing but exacerbated the already existing challenges. For this reason, they require greater emphasis on the development of recovery, and transformative and resilient actions. Thus, it clearly transpires that an increase in women's participation in public life, mainly in those countries where women still experience restricted access to, and participation in, economic leadership, remains crucial.

Within the drafting process of the Ministerial Declaration, all the parties involved stressed the urgent need to produce and use available, accessible, reliable and comparable data and statistics disaggregated by sex. They are critical for evidence-based and context-specific informed policies and reforms aimed at structural and sustainable changes. In so doing, well-functioning gender responsive national monitoring processes and mechanisms need to be in place to assess such policy analysis. In this view, the UfM Regional Platform on Women Empowerment will develop and support the implementation of a Roadmap for Action 2023-2025 and will enhance the current monitoring exercise by paying attention to the identification of the target values of the selected indicators.

Whatever the case, the consistency of the UfM member states and regional and interna-

tional stakeholders (such as the IEMed, Anna Lindh Foundation, UN Women Arab States, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, EuroMed Feminist Initiative, United Nations Development Programme or League of Arab States, among others) in raising awareness about the existing barriers coupled with their commitment to overcome them remains the right course to be pursued in order to strengthen women's economic and political empowerment, while bringing an end to VAWG in the Euro-Mediterranean region. In addressing this task, regional and local governments possess the potential to be catalysts for change with respect to gender equality and women's empowerment in their respective capacities. Equally, CSOs will remain key actors in this process as the previously cited examples amply show.