



Speech by EU Ambassador Christina Lassen

Lebanese Council of Women Regional Conference

"The impact of political, economic and social changes on the reality
of Arab women"

21 February 2019

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

During my time as Ambassador of the European Union here in Lebanon, women's rights has probably been one of the topics I have discussed the most, and for all the obvious reasons: That the role of women in Lebanon is surprisingly unbalanced when it comes to political participation, economic empowerment or rights. It is one of those topics that I personally feel strongly about, and of course also a topic that is at the very heart of the European Union's engagement. The presence of all you here today shows that you are equally engaged in this work which is why I am particularly happy to be here today.

Although it is only February, this year has in many ways started with some good news for women's economic empowerment in the region. In January, several Arab governments announced their commitment to

National Action Plans on Women's Economic Empowerment at a conference here in Beirut, the Middle East got its first female Minister of Interior –MABROUK! - and Lebanon appointed 4 female ministers in the new government, four times more than last year — MABROUK again! - one specifically in charge of women's economic empowerment.

But it is clear that in terms of progress, we are only getting started! Although girls' access to primary education and women's economic empowerment have improved globally in recent years, girls and women continue to be systematically left behind and discriminated against all over the world.

Here in the Middle East and North Africa region the participation and employment of women is particularly low with 80 percent of women out of the labour force. According to the 2018 Global Gender Gap report, if current rates were to be maintained in the future, the overall gender gap would only close 153 years from now in the Middle East and North Africa.

As the European Union, one of our main priorities in our work on gender equality is to ensure that girls and women are empowered, that their economic and social rights are fulfilled, and that there is an enabling environment for their fair and active participation in the economy.

We do it for two reasons. Firstly, I am sure we can all agree that there are clear moral and ethical reasons to promote gender equality in all areas of life and to give women and girls the opportunity to develop their full potential. Secondly, we know that it also contributes to a stronger and more inclusive economic growth that benefits society as a whole. It is

frankly speaking "smart economics", as the Vice President of the World Bank told us back in January!

So how do we as the European Union work on women's economic empowerment in practice? First, we think it is important to **identify needs and increase capacity**. This is why we, for example, have supported the establishment of a Gender Observatory here in Lebanon which will collect data on the needs for women on a political, economic and social level in the country.

What is equally important is to tackle women's economic empowerment from all possible sides. We know that traditional gender roles contribute to low levels of women participation both in the economic and in the political spheres. Therefore, a second important part of our work to increase women's economic empowerment is to support efforts that **challenge social norms**. This is why the EU also funds initiatives to raise the awareness of journalists on women's representation in media.

Third, we work together with civil society and governments to **address discriminatory laws** and practices and other legal barriers that limit girls' and women's social, economic and political participation. Here in Lebanon, **we look forward to supporting and working together with the newly appointed government** to continue the important progress already started under the former government with the abolishment of the law allowing rapists to marry their victim, the establishment of a hotline for reporting domestic violence and the drafting of a National Strategy on Gender Based Violence.

I was glad to hear PM Hariri a few weeks back specifically mentioning some of those crucial laws that are currently under preparation and that we know have a proven impact on women's empowerment: laws on

punishing sexual harassment, granting paternity leave to fathers, amending the social security law to guarantee equality in pay and in maternity leave, and the adoption of quotas in municipal councils. And I hope for the MPs here today to push for this.

But there is still a lot of unfinished business. The right for Lebanese women to pass on nationality as well as draft laws on early marriage are among the most serious legal obstacles that still need to be urgently addressed.

To conclude, as with all important challenges of our time, fighting for gender equality is a constant battle that concerns all of us, whether in Europe or the Arab world. We need to work together: coordinate between ministries, consult with civil society, sharing knowledge and expertise. This is why regional conferences like this one are needed. We look forward to learning from each other. When it comes to the fight for a gender equal, sustainable and prosperous society, we are in this together. I wish you very interesting and fruitful discussions.