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Equality First Women's Rights and Democracy Building

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European Feminist Initiative IFE-EFI and the partners in the MENA region: AWO and SIGI in Jordan, Association Najdeh and RDFL in Lebanon, EACPE in Egypt, ATFD in Tunisia, WSC in Palestine have launched a regional campaign *Equality First* within the project "Promoting a common agenda for equality between women and men through Istanbul Process", with the overall objective of achieving "A more friendly gender equality environment that contributes to strengthening of the democratic development in the Euro-Med region and the promotion of women's rights as a constitutive part of sustainable development".

In November 2006 in Istanbul, the ministers of Euro-Med region, in the frame of the Barcelona process adopted conclusions which include a set of principles and a 5-year framework for action to strengthen women's role in political, civil, social, economic and cultural spheres, as well as to fight against discrimination. This framework was strengthened at the second Ministerial meeting November 2009 in Marrakech.

European Feminist Initiative IFE-EFI and the partners together have committed ourselves to the Istanbul Framework for Action (IFA) as we see the Euro-Med space as a valuable feminist space for common action towards more democracy and social justice through working for equality between women and men. We strive together to build democratic societies based on the respect of women's rights as universal human rights, and their

implementation in connection to democracy building.



Leila Al Ali, Association Najdeh is discussing contextualizing of IFA during the regional meeting on Oct 1-3 2011 in Cairo.

For the purpose of achieving closer and stable steps towards the objectives of the project, five workshops on *Equality First: Women's Rights and Democracy Building* were held between December 2011-March 2012 in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia and Egypt. Advocacy and grassroots women's NGOs gathered in each country, joined in several places by State actors and female politicians on national and local level together to discuss the relevance of IFA, its interconnection with CEDAW, the UNSCRs and other regional and national documents promoting gender equality and women's rights as universal human rights and the needs of the local communities.

From within the present contexts, the workshops focused on the connection between women’s rights, gender equality and democracy building in the current transitional political processes as new-old challenges connected with raising of religious fundamentalism and conservative trends were identified. Strengthening of the discourse on utilizing the international, regional and national tools to promote and protect these rights and to achieve their availability in future Constitutions was raised as one of the priorities for the feminist movement. The workshops have jointly raised four main ideas:

- ✓ The need to lobby for the universality of women’s rights using the international resolutions and conventions and other regional and national documents in a common frame;
- ✓ The need of inclusiveness in the process of writing of new Constitutions and the need that they be based on the values of civil state, full citizenship, gender equality and non-discrimination;
- ✓ The need of quotas as an assertive measure to ensure women’s participation in the political and public life, and to address lack of democracy;
- ✓ The need of international feminist solidarity and cooperation and common space for analyses.

The topic raised huge interest among the participants and many joined the workshops even without formal invitations. Originally designed for about 150 participants, the workshops gathered over 700 in the five countries. The participants were much more diverse than grassroots NGOs for which activities were mostly designed; therefore, the debate has been enriched, facilitated and

broadened. Young activists joined the debates in all the countries.



Young participants before the start of the Conference “Simulation of a Constituency Assembly for a Constitution of Equality and Citizenship”, on 4-5 March in Tunis

The discussions were overwhelming and proved that democracy and democratization can only function if built on the full respect of women’s rights as universal human rights and equality between women and men.

“The methodological approach based on providing space for interaction and debate contributed to high participation in the discussions”, noted Lilian Halls French, co-president of IFE-EFI. “The regional approach to each national activity contributed to strong debates in all the countries”, she added. The many voices constantly linked women’s rights and gender equality to democracy building in the particular contexts, thus contributing to sustaining and strengthening of the discourse and advocacy work on women’s rights, reminding the governments of their commitments towards international conventions and regional agreements. The workshops were covered by local TV channels, daily newspapers and radio programs,

bringing the issues to the attention of broader audience of beneficiaries.

Jordan



Jordanian partners AWO and SIGI held their workshop on 4th -5th of December 2011 under the title of: **"Equality First: Women's Rights and Democracy Building"**. It gathered over 60 participants from 16 major national grassroots and advocacy NGOs from 10 out of all the 12 governorates, including Amman. They were joined by regional and international NGOs, representatives from 13 institutions and some politicians, all taking part in a lively debate. Among the institutions there were representatives from the judiciary, Ministry of Justice, High Supreme Court, Appeal Court and Legal Network for Women Judges and Lawyers. There were also parliamentarians from Upper House and representatives from Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Department of Statistics. National Council for Family Affairs has also sent representative.

The national debate was encouraged by presentations from our regional partners in addition to IFE-EFT and Solidarity International from Spain. It was noted that it was the first time that representatives from the Euro-Med meet to discuss in-depth the conditions of

women in the Arab world in relation to utilizing IFA and CEDAW to positively affect the daily lives of women on both sides of the Mediterranean. The participants were brainstorming on how best to get advantage of the changes sweeping the Arab countries for gender equality in spite of the new challenges resulting from the rise of the conservative forces. The three working groups provided insights into the future work in Jordan.

Lebanon

RDFL and Association Najdeh held the workshop on Dec, 7th - 8th, 2011 under the title of: **"Equality First: Women's Rights and Democracy Building"**. It was co-funded by Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Liberty.



The workshop provided the participants with the opportunity to elaborate and initiate a discourse and structural cooperation towards utilization of a common framework for action, including IFA, on national and regional level. A regional discourse on the connection between gender equality, universality of women's rights and democracy was promoted and strengthened by an impressive Euro-Med

gathering; a discourse to be spread and broadened later on to other NGOs and networks. Sixty representatives from thirty local and regional women, feminist, human rights, and development NGOs and three networks were present and participated in the exchange of analyses. The discussions focused on the opportunities and challenges for women's rights and gender equality provided by the Istanbul-Marrakesh Ministerial Conclusions in the present regional contexts. There was also a rich debate on IFA and Marrakesh conclusions and their role in connection with other international instruments promoting women's rights and gender equality (CEDAW, UNSCR1325, UNSCR1820, etc). The discrepancy between international norms for gender equality and the daily life of women was raised together with the necessity of having both discourse and lobby action on gender equality towards the governments, including Istanbul Marrakesh Process in a common frame.

The conclusions and the statement from the workshop were spread in the whole region and used as a reference and support in other activities.

Palestine

WSC held the workshop under the same title on 1st-2nd February 2012. The event gathered over 100 participants from around 60 women's rights and grassroots NGOs and some international NGOs. The workshop covered a comprehensive geographic representation of the Palestinian women. The participants highlighted the particular oppressions and suffering of the Palestinian women as being part of a people living under occupations (WB&GS) or Diaspora, exile (Palestinian camps

in Lebanon) and lacking mowatana (Israel), which affect their rights within all contexts.



IFA and the international conventions and resolutions were lifted as needed instruments promoting women rights in the Palestinian contexts.



The workshop stressed the necessity to develop a common Palestinian-Euro-Med perspective taking into consideration the lack of women's rights within a comprehensive framework of disposition of Palestinian rights.

The workshop drew eight major recommendations for future work and

underlined the necessity to raise awareness of Palestinian grassroots women on IFA and international conventions. A follow up committee of nine women's rights NGO's was composed to take the responsibility to spread and broaden the campaign and the ongoing contribution of the women NGOs to the national campaign, ensuring the national support to the dialogue with the governments and other relevant targets.

Media coverage introduced IFA and the other instruments related to women rights and stressed on the connection between women rights and the implementation of democracy. Five speakers from the presenters were interviewed and highlighted that the project will provide the Palestinians opportunities to work for their women rights.

Tunisia

The partner ATFD held the workshop on 4th - 5th February in the frame of the organized simulation of a Constitutional Assembly: **"Simulation of a Constituency Assembly for a Constitution of Equality and Citizenship"**, supported by UN Women and CIDA Canada.



About 400 women and some men from Tunisian human rights and women rights associations from 18 of the 23 regions of Tunisia, academics, experts, artists, trade unionists, female politicians, NGOs and networks from Mashrek, Maghreb and Europe and the IFE-EFI partners gathered in the event to discuss the integration of women's rights in the new constitution.

Mrs. Mehrzia Laabidi, Vice- President of Tunisian National Constituency Assembly and representative of Enahda party had an opening speech. The conference gave a space for a two days discussion, including the issue of strategy: should women negotiate their rights and demands according the political balance of power, and if so, to what extent. Heated debates took place on panels and in working groups' workshops, one of which was on the international conventions and regional tools for promotion and protection of women rights. It was noted that in order to reach out, a new discourse should be adopted, grounded in democracy, social justice, and human dignity.

This gathering enabled rich exchanges between historical feminists and new generation because of the considerable presence of young women and men in the workshop. As an added value, networking among human rights and women rights NGOs, trade unions, parties and media has been initiated.

A lot of media was present and the final adopted text has been presented on the 8th of March. It focused mainly on supporting the lobby campaign in promoting the importance of the international instruments for women rights.

Egypt



Egyptian partner EACPE held the workshop on 3rd-4th March in Cairo under the title: **“National, Regional and International Mechanisms: A Common Frame for Promoting Women’s Rights in Democratization”**.

Nearly 80 women and men from across the whole of Egypt gathered to discuss women’s rights and democratization in Egypt. Researchers, female candidates for the elections, a Shura candidate and a representative from the newly elected semi-governmental National Commission for Women were also present.

Contextualizing the mechanisms in the ongoing transition in Egypt, the workshop participants discussed a political agenda with the challenges but also the opportunities for women’s rights, seen in three major issues now:

1. The drafting of the Constitution grounded in the principles and values of gender equality, citizenship and civil state as promoted in the

international conventions and resolutions and with the participation of women and feminist organizations;

2. In regards to the coming presidential elections, to plan meetings with the candidates in order to put forward women’s demands for women’s rights and gender equality;

3. Laws and legislations that have to be harmonized later on with these values to be enshrine in the future Constitution (especially the Personal Status Law).

The workshop ended elaborating proposals for a program for the coming two years on what the role of the civil society would be. Recurring in the discussions on the strategies was: “exercise pressure”, “dialogue”, “organize for a collective action”, “strengthening of the women’s movement”, “coordination among them and with the other parts of the democratic movement, in Egypt but also in the whole Euro-Med region”.

Promoting a common agenda for equality between women and men utilizing Istanbul Framework of Action in a common frame with other international conventions and resolutions

