

## CONCLUSIONS

### MENA-OECD CONFERENCE ON GENDER EQUALITY IN GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS

**4 MAY 2010, PARIS, OECD HEADQUARTERS**

The MENA-OECD Conference on Gender Equality in Government and Business brought together participants from 19 OECD countries, 14 MENA countries, and several regional and international organisations including the Arab Administrative Development Organisation, the World Bank, UNIFEM, and the Union of Arab Banks. Several NGOs and universities were also present, including AFEM (the Moroccan businesswomen's association), the Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), Lund University, the European Academy for Law and Legislation, Secours Islamique, and the Women's Forum for the Economy and Society. The conference provided an excellent opportunity to present the findings of recent international research on gender issues. Drawing on concrete examples of successful gender strategies, participants identified best practices and collectively determined future avenues for action. The discussions resulted in proposals for regional activities to support MENA countries in their ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in public management and business.

#### OPENING SESSION

The chairs of the MENA-OECD Initiative, H.E. Mr. Mohammed Saâd El Alami, the Moroccan Minister of Public Sector Modernisation, and H.E. Mr. Nizar Baraka, the Moroccan Minister of Economic and General Affairs, opened the conference by recognising the importance of women's contribution to economic development and highlighting policy actions taken by their government over the last decade. They underlined that despite significant efforts to improve women's situation in the MENA region, public and private sector actors will have to work together to reduce persistent discrimination and gender inequalities. Improving the educational system and increasing women's labour force participation were presented as two key conditions for enhanced gender equality and the development of the middle class in the MENA region.

H.E. Ms. Karen Kornbluh, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the United States to the OECD, reported about the support of her government to the MENA region to enforce women's rights and increase their participation in the economy. Ambassador Kornbluh underlined her personal support to the MENA-OECD Initiative by announcing her acceptance to co-chair the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum. She encouraged the Initiative to contribute to the OECD's planned horizontal project on gender equality in employment, education and entrepreneurship.

#### SESSION 1: ATTRACTING TALENT TO THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

Because women represent half of the world's human capital, facilitating their participation in the labour force is a means of capitalising on the available talent pool, thereby increasing countries' competitiveness. Participants explored strategies for increasing gender diversity in the workplace – in both the public and private sectors – and discussed their impact on innovation, competitiveness, efficiency, and quality of service delivery. They reported on enabling factors, challenges and possible impacts of their strategies.

#### *Participants:*

- Identified three main reasons for attracting and retaining talented women in decision-making positions: the rights argument, the resource argument and the performance argument;
- Highlighted studies which show evidence of barriers to women's economic involvement including social obstacles and religious interpretations, and stressed the importance of ensuring gender equality in the law;

- Stressed the importance of addressing gender imbalances in the public sector, in particular in MENA countries, where the public administration remains the main, and sometimes exclusive employer of women;
- Identified tools for attracting talent, such as: legal and regulatory review, blind tests in recruitment processes, gender labels and other incentives, monitoring and reporting on women's representation by public and private sector employers, and sanction mechanisms;
- Suggested putting in place means to allow for a better work/life balance;
- Underlined the value of building women's leadership capacities through training, mentoring, and networking;
- Stressed the importance of raising awareness and combating stereotypes through high-level political support and the promotion of positive role models by the media.

***Actions of the Initiative:***

- Link up with other initiatives involved in promoting women's empowerment, education, employment, and entrepreneurship in the MENA region to build on synergies, and to create a "network of networks";
- Engage in studies and peer reviews to identify good practices for both attracting and retaining women to top level positions in public administrations and business;
- Provide concrete means to support women's empowerment (e.g. coaching and training).

**SESSION 2: PROS AND CONS OF QUOTAS**

Women's representation in decision-making positions – managerial positions, corporate boards, and political positions – is low in both MENA and OECD countries. Affirmative action measures, such as quotas, have been taken to remediate existing gender imbalances. Governments and businesses have experimented with different types of voluntary or legally binding quotas, such as: reserved seats in parliament, minimum thresholds for electoral slates, quotas for political parties, and quotas or targets in public and private sector employment. Their use has generated intense controversy in MENA and OECD countries related to justice, democracy and equality considerations. Participants discussed the use of quotas as a measure to achieve greater gender diversity in the workplace, in particular in decision-making bodies in the public and private sectors. They discussed the theoretical expectations of different programmes, showcased experiences in implementing and enforcing different types of quotas and discussed their impacts on gender equality. They also reflected on the applicability of such a policy tool in countries with low female labour force participation rates.

***Participants:***

- Highlighted different country experiences with the implementation of quotas – only few OECD countries have introduced mandatory quotas, and some have introduced legislation on voluntary quotas;
- Noted that they may not necessarily be in support of quotas, but that evidence has proven that the introduction of quotas is the most efficient means to enhance women's participation in both the public and the private sector;
- Pointed out when there are no quotas, men generally hold the leading positions;
- Supported the establishment of progressive quotas that increase with time, to be lifted when the concept of equality is a reality;
- Underlined that quotas have so far mainly been introduced in government but that they can also be applied to companies which are encouraged to reflect their codes of conduct (this can be accompanied by "gender labels" which reward companies with higher representation of women in decision-making positions)
- Underlined that clear and transparent standards would be necessary to avoid the concern that the use of quotas contradicts the principles of merit and competence;
- Stressed the need to complement quotas with other measures including financial support to engage in politics.

***Actions of the Initiative:***

- Consider commissioning studies on human resource management in the public and private sector and best ways to introduce quotas and identify criteria to ensure the effectiveness of quotas as a means of supporting the promotion of women's talents;
- Collect examples and data on how women contribute to economic growth.

### **SESSION 3: WOMEN'S ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS SERVICES**

Equal access to government and business services is a precondition for women's empowerment. In practice, however, institutional, cultural, or practical obstacles may constrain women's access to services. In this session, participants examined structures, institutions, policies and processes, which either advance or impede women's access to services. Participants explored gender-specific biases in service delivery and provided examples of good practices for adapting service design and delivery mechanisms to women's specific needs and constraints. Discussions covered several themes such as women's access to public services, to justice, to finance, and to business support services.

#### ***Participants:***

- Stressed the importance of access to information in both the public and private sectors, and that institutional and business climate reforms are essential to accompany women and to ensure their access to public services, justice, finance, and business support services;
- Acknowledged that ICT tools can facilitate women's access to public services, but can also widen the gender gap;
- Reported on the difficulties women may encounter to access finance and land in the MENA region when establishing and expanding their businesses;
- Highlighted women's unequal access to justice services in the MENA region, which are often too expensive, distant, do not respond to women's needs or do not allow the prosecution of discrimination, injustice and violations of women rights. The high prevalence rates of violence against women are an important indicator for insufficient accountability in terms of law application and enforcement;
- Noted that several tools can help promote women's equal access to justice, including gender budget analysis (to take stock of public spending devoted to the national justice system with performance indicators), reviews of policy priorities, regulatory impact analysis, analysis of women's access to justice, and the development of indicators for monitoring purposes;
- Reported on women's unequal access to public services at local and national level and noted that a range of diversified tools should be put in place to enhance women's access to public services, including the use of ICT tools, comprehensive impact evaluations, gender budgeting, networks of locally elected decision-makers, mediation services, public service satisfaction surveys, gender databases, and job databases for gender experts;
- Received a presentation on the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum, a regional body which supports the expansion of women-led businesses and women's employment through policy assessments and recommendations, as well as training and mentoring for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region.

#### ***Actions of the Initiative:***

- Lend support to the work of the MENA-OECD Gender Focus Group and the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum, in particular by organising capacity-building training workshops, and by facilitating mentoring and networking between women decision-makers and entrepreneurs in OECD and MENA countries;
- Enhance policy dialogue through the WBF's interactive web platform;

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

**In the concluding remarks, the co-chairs of the MENA-OECD Initiative, H.E. Cristina Narbona-Ruiz, Ambassador and Permanent Representative from Spain to the OECD and H.E. Mr. Chris Hoornaert, Ambassador and Permanent Representative from Belgium to the OECD:**

- Welcomed the opportunity to engage in an active debate over gender equality with an audience composed of men and women;
- Underlined the need to carry the discussions forward in a gender-balanced platform;
- Provided support to the MENA-OECD Gender Focus Group and to the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum which should provide, in collaboration with other international and regional government and non-governmental organisations, analytical and practical support to women in the MENA region;

- Suggested that the MENA-OECD Gender Focus Group and the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum take into account the discussions and recommendations put forth during the conference, and incorporate them into their respective Programmes of Work;
- Welcomed the input of these groups to the horizontal OECD-wide project on gender.

***Actions of the Initiative:***

- The OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum (Investment Programme) will reconvene in autumn 2010 and in order to mainstream women's entrepreneurship it will forward its work and conclusions to the MENA-OECD Business Council to complement and support its recommendations;
- The Gender Focus Group (Governance Programme) will come together on 4 June 2010 in Tunis to address the question of gender analysis in regulatory quality frameworks and in autumn 2010 in Cairo;