

# Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference “Strengthening the Role of Women in Society”. Interview with Benita Ferrero-Waldner

Commissioner for External Relations and Neighbourhood Policy, European Commission

**Quaderns de la Mediterrània:** Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner, the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference “Strengthening the Role of Women in Society” takes place in Istanbul in November 2006 and it will focus specifically on women’s rights and gender equality. What is the prime motivation behind the conference?

**Benita Ferrero-Waldner:** Human rights are universal. They are the rights of every man, woman and child anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, being able to exercise these rights is only an ideal for the majority of the world’s population, particularly in the case of women. We therefore have a duty to emphasise this point, time and time again, until the day when women’s rights are respected and protected throughout the world. It is clear to all of us that the goals of the Euro-Med Partnership – the creation of a region of peace, security, prosperity and opportunity based on democracy and respect for human rights – will not be realized unless and until existing serious inequalities between women and men,

both in Europe and in the Mediterranean countries, have been resolved. Inequalities are persistent in our societies and efforts to promote women’s rights often face resistance. The Euro-Med Partnership has been active in supporting Mediterranean women, especially regarding their access to economic life. But we need to do more and to do it in a more coherent and systematic way.

One of my personal priorities as European Commissioner is to give new and reinforced impetus to the fight against discrimination and to the promotion of gender equality in all our external actions. The momentum is favourable for the Mediterranean region. Several economic, political and societal reforms are ongoing in the region. I am very glad that the Commission’s proposal to hold a conference on gender equality at the Ministerial level has been taken on board. In Istanbul, for the *first time* since the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, we will discuss ways to ensure women’s full participation in the political, social, educational, economic and cultural spheres. It is my expectation that in Is-

tanbul we shall achieve political commitment to fight for the issue and plans for future action.

**Q.M.:** Is there a danger that this conference might be perceived as the EU exporting its values to its partners in the South through “peer pressure”?

**B.F.-W.:** I don’t think that gender equality is an EU-owned value. It is globally shared and countries from both sides of the Mediterranean have engagements in this sense that they must respect. It is evident that there is a gap between policy and results and this is what we are aiming to tackle.

**Q.M.:** What has been the role of the European Commission in preparing the Ministerial Conference on “Strengthening the Role of Women in Society”?

**B.F.-W.:** We have been at the forefront. We consulted governments, parliaments and civil society representatives during a preparatory conference which took place in Rabat from 14th-16th June 2006, where some 130 participants from the Euro-Mediterranean partner countries debated key aspects of women’s rights and gender issues in the region. We have also mobilised existing Euro-Mediterranean research networks. The results of commissioned reports prepared by the Network of Euro-Mediterranean Economic Institutes (FEMISE), the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo) and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures were presented and openly debated at the Rabat Conference.<sup>1</sup>



Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

The Action Plan, which we expect the Conference in Istanbul to endorse, will build upon the interesting recommendations arising from both the preparatory conference and the reports. Three priority themes have been identified:

- The promotion of women’s equal rights and political participation.
- The enhancement of women’s socio-economic participation as a prerequisite for sustainable development.
- The modification of traditional gender stereotypes purveyed through the education

1. The reports are available on the Europa website at the following address: [http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external\\_relations/euromed/women/docs/index.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/euromed/women/docs/index.htm).

system by new and old media and other channels of socialisation which do not reflect the realities of modern life for women or men.

In Istanbul we shall be seeking to attain the necessary political commitment and backing for this work.

**Q.M.:** Which concerns need to be tackled at the Istanbul Conference? What initiatives must be envisaged in order to combat the social and economic exclusion of women?

**B.F.-W.:** Over the last few years much progress has been made in improving the civil and political rights of women in the region, but this has not been sufficient. We need to move forward if the region is not to lag behind. There is no room for complacency. Although in most countries constitutional and legislative amendments have been introduced to guarantee women's civil and political rights, their private and social rights remain limited as a result of discriminatory family laws and personal status codes. It is clear that discriminatory legislation affecting the private sphere undermines women's political and economic participation, even when their right to equal participation in public life exists on paper. The reform of Personal Status Codes and the enhancement of women's awareness of their rights, as well as training and awareness creation for judges, juries and magistrates, are priority areas for action.

Another area of concern relates to women's economic status. In the South their participation in the paid labour force exhibits some of the lowest rates in the world, despite the gains that have been made in most countries in closing the gender gap in education. Also, women in paid employment are often concentrated in lower level jobs while few women are to be found in decision-making

positions in either the public or private sectors, or as self-employed individuals. Traditional gender stereotypes underlie many of the obstacles to women's advancement that exist in legislation and its application as well as in the segregated labour market. Finding ways of modifying such stereotypes so as to bring them into line with today's changing reality is a major challenge that needs to be addressed by working with all channels of socialization – family, school, youth and community groups, religious groups, the media – and by ensuring that women are able to make their voices heard in all spheres and at all levels.

**Q.M.:** What are the most important issues for Euro-Mediterranean relationships with regard to women's rights and gender equality?

**B.F.-W.:** Let me be clear on one point before answering: gender inequalities persist on both sides of the Mediterranean, albeit to a different degree and extent. In Europe, the situation of women has made impressive progress over the last 20 years. But even here much still remains to be done, particularly as regards women's access to the decision-making process and the persisting wage gap. As a woman in a high position, I am very aware of this. Moreover, we also face our own challenges of domestic violence and trafficking in women. When speaking of issues which need to be tackled in the context of Euro-Mediterranean relationships, I think of areas where there can be mutual interest and cooperation, where partners can bring experiences and resources to provide solutions to common concerns. There are three areas in which the partnership can make a notable change: women's rights, migration, and violence against women (trafficking being one type of such gender-based violence). I consider women's networking to be a very important means of influencing decision-making. The Euro-Mediterranean

Partnership has a crucial role to play in strengthening contacts and exchanges between women leaders from the business, non-governmental and political worlds in the region.

**Q.M.:** The Ministerial Conference will endorse an Action Plan. What are your views on it?

**B.F.-W.:** I hope that the implementation of the Action Plan will mark a change. Within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership we shall move from compartmental and isolated activities in favour of gender equality to an integrated approach. It will provide an operational framework for common action to fight discrimination against women and strengthen their role in the political, social, economic, educational and cultural spheres, and will guide the mobilisation of funds for gender equality. We shall take every opportunity to raise the commitments made in the Action Plan during our political dialogue with our partners in the framework of the Association Agreements and in the preparation and monitoring of the Neighbourhood Policy Action Plans.

We shall continue to support the development of initiatives in favour of gender equality at both a bilateral and regional level. Within the Regional Programme to Facilitate Women's Access to Economic Life, seven projects have recently started which provide counselling and capacity building for women entrepreneurs and NGOs in the partner countries. Gender experts have been recruited to assist in the exchange of experiences, research and information among the key actors involved in the promotion of women's economic status:

civil society, business associations, governments, research institutions and the media. We are aware that, in the area of gender equality, it is a challenge to translate policy commitments into tangible progress. Therefore, I firmly believe that we need to put into place systems for clear accountability and monitoring of the results achieved. In this respect, the Commission has proposed the setting-up of an independent, high-level group. It will be charged with monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan and preparing periodical reports. Its conclusions and recommendations will then be addressed to the Euro-Mediterranean Foreign Ministers Conference. The Istanbul Ministerial Conference on women's rights should not remain an isolated initiative. We shall then table a proposal to organise a follow-up Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference in 2009.

**Q.M.:** What are your expectations regarding the next steps in the process?

**Q.M.:** The tasks ahead of us are challenging but, when faced together, they are by no means insurmountable. It is a common responsibility for all of us: governments and civil societies of the whole region. I regard our meeting in Istanbul as a step towards closing the gap between policy and practice. I hope the opportunity will be seized to ensure that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership makes a real and tangible contribution to the advancement of women's rights and gender equality in the region. Personally, I shall not falter in my commitment to promoting gender equality.