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Union for Mediterranean strengthens cooperation in fight against gender inequality

Brussels, 06/11/2020 (Agence Europe) – With the European Commission due to publish its 2021-2025 Action Plan on Gender Equality in EU External Policy (GAP III) on Wednesday 11 November, cooperation on gender equality between the EU27 and their Mediterranean neighbours is taking a new step forward.

The *Women4Mediterranean* conference, organised by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), will be held online from 16 to 20 November, in the presence of the European Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli: an opportunity to take stock of the progress achieved in the field of gender equality, 25 years after the launch of the Barcelona Process (see *EUROPE B11440A3*) and the Beijing Platform for Action against violence against women.

It is also an opportunity for the UfM to launch a new intergovernmental monitoring mechanism aimed at measuring progress on gender equality in the organisation's member States. That is 27 European countries and 15 Mediterranean countries in North Africa, the Middle East and South-East Europe.

An initiative welcomed by Hannah Neumann MEP (Greens/EFA, Germany), member of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs in her report for opinion on gender equality in the Union's foreign and security policy (see *EUROPE B12530A20*, *EUROPE B12588A25*).

Follow-up mechanism

According to UfM Secretary General Nasser Kamel, interviewed by EUROPE, this mechanism should make it possible "*to accurately reflect*" the situation of women's rights in each country and thus "*create a common standard setting out what needs to be done to achieve gender equality*".

The tool aims to collect accurate national data - data that is often lacking in this area - for use by policy makers and NGOs alike. These data will be collected using indicators.

Twenty indicators have been approved by the States. They concern: - women's access to leadership and decision-making; - women's economic participation; - combatting violence against women and girls; - combatting gender-based stereotypes.

Initially, each State will prepare its progress report on the basis of only four indicators: one for each of the categories listed above.

This is due to the limited capacity of States to implement all the indicators at once and to provide in-depth information for each one", explains Mr Kamel, counting however on a gradual implementation of the 20 indicators over the coming years.

"We hope that countries will undertake this data collection and report on their situations. This will allow us all, collectively, to make recommendations and determine where and in what areas support is needed", he said with confidence.

"Although we are far from having achieved our goals in terms of gender equality, everyone is aware that this is a major problem", he said, noting that there has so far been a *"high degree of cooperation"* between the different UfM member states on this issue, which he considers to be particularly *"consensual"*.

What role for the EU?

"This is a collective Euro-Mediterranean effort and not a project of the North for the countries of the South", Mr Kamel insisted, claiming that *"there are as many problems in the EU as there are in the southern Mediterranean"*. This is proven by recent data from the European Institute for Gender Equality (see EUROPE B12592A28) as well as by concerns recently expressed in the European Parliament about the threatening *"restrictions on women's rights"* in Poland (see EUROPE B12594A15).

More broadly, as regards the EU's commitment to gender equality in its external policy - and in this case vis-à-vis the Mediterranean countries - Mr Kamel said that *"although there are expectations in terms of overall cooperation and support between North and South"* when it comes more specifically to the gender issue, *"it is first and foremost a question of political commitment: it is up to us, in our own countries, to give women their rightful place in the political, economic and decision-making processes"*.

A point on which MEPs as well have recently shown that the European institutions themselves will also have to make progress (see EUROPE B12587A7). Starting with the European External Action Service (EEAS), where 87% of senior management posts are occupied by men. (*Original version in French by Agathe Cherki*)

Subscriber: A Cherki

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