Situation of women in North Africa

2012/2102(INI) - 25/02/2013 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Silvia COSTA (S&D, IT) on the situation of women in North Africa.

Members recall that many women, in particular young women, were very much involved in the 'Arab Spring' in North Africa. North African countries are going through a process of political and democratic transition and of changing or adapting their constitutions, in which women are actively and consistently involved. They take an active part in civil society, and therefore were, and still are, key players in democratic change in their countries and in strengthening development and cohesion. The result of this process will shape the countries' democratic functioning and fundamental rights and freedoms, and will have an impact on the status of women. The report recalls that at present the EU's specific support for gender issues in the region stands at EUR 92 million.

Women's rights: Members call on the authorities of the countries concerned **irreversibly to enshrine in their constitutions the principle of equality between men and women.** They call on lawmakers in those countries to reform all existing laws and to incorporate the principle of equality into all projects or legislative proposals that could lead to discrimination against women, for example in the area of marriage, divorce, child custody, parental rights, nationality, inheritance and legal capacity, in line with international and regional instruments, and to entrench the existence of domestic mechanisms for the protection of women's rights. They stress that the ongoing transitions in North Africa will only lead to democratic political systems and societies once gender equality, including the freedom to choose one's way of life, is achieved.

Members also call on the North African countries to adopt laws and concrete measures prohibiting and laying down penalties for **all forms of violence against women**, including domestic and sexual violence, sexual harassment and harmful traditional practices. Such crimes shall be severely punished. They condemn the use of all forms of violence, particularly sexual violence, before, during and after the uprisings and stress that the International Criminal Court could intervene if no judicial action is possible at national level.

Other measures are called for such as: (i) the combat against female genital mutilation which is still in use in some areas of Egypt; (ii) the fight against early and forced marriages; (iii) creating new health policies to protect women and girls (maternal, sexual and reproductive health and rights).

Members stress that **discrimination or violence of any kind against women or girls cannot be justified on grounds of culture, tradition or religion** and that no monotheistic religion should advocate or be used to justify violence.

Women's participation in decision-making: Members point out that recent events in the Arab Spring have shown that women can play important roles in revolutionary events. However, necessary steps should be taken to ensure progress towards women's equal participation in decision-making at all levels of government (from local to national, from executive to legislative powers). The representation of women should be enhanced particularly in institutions, trade unions and the public sector in order to reduce the glass ceiling phenomenon.

More women should be involved in **peace negotiation**, mediation, internal reconciliation and peace building processes.

Women's empowerment: Members commend those countries, like Tunisia and Morocco, where efforts in favour of girls' education have been stepped up. Nevertheless, some efforts remain to be made to eradicate women's illiteracy, and that emphasis should be placed on vocational training including courses to promote women's digital literacy. They call for policies to take account of the specific situation of the most vulnerable categories of women, as well as members of ethnic or sexual minorities.

The report highlights the fact that **much more should be done to ensure women's economic independence**. It calls on the governments of the North African countries to encourage and support more female participation in the labour market and to take all the necessary measures to prevent gender discrimination in the work place.

In addition, Members recommend that steps be taken to monitor the process of women's empowerment, including with regard to respect for their rights as workers, in particular in industrial and service sectors, in rural and industrial urban areas. They highlight the importance of female entrepreneurship, in particular in the SMEs and micro-finance sector.

Overall, Members underline the importance of ensuring that programmes and actions for women's empowerment in the region are based on three levels of intervention:

- at institutional level, by pushing for gender equality through reforms in the legal framework and new pieces of legislation, including the provision of technical support;
- by supporting civil society organisations that can advocate in favour of women's rights and help increase their participation in the decision-making process; and,
- by working directly at local community level by opening up spaces for women in the social, economic and political life of their communities.

European Neighbourhood Policy/EU action: the report calls on the Commission to continue and to strengthen the mainstreaming of gender issues in the various EU interventions, whatever their core topic, and encourages the Commission to continue to cooperate with international organisations as implementers, such as UN Women. Members encourage the adoption of a **gender mainstreaming approach when drafting country roadmaps in North African countries**.

The Commission is also called upon to:

- reinforce the financial envelope providing support for women in the region;
- encourage the development of leadership programmes for female opinion leaders;
- develop clear criteria in order to guarantee and monitor progress, through a transparent and inclusive process, including in consultation with women's rights and civil society organisations;
- continue monitoring EU election observation missions;
- address discrimination against women workers' rights in labour law;
- promote programmes aimed at ensuring equal access to labour markets and training for all women;
- establish means of disseminating the relevant information to promote female entrepreneurship;
- reinforce the staff dedicated to gender issues in the EU delegations;
- encourage the creation of and to finance counselling centres and 'women's houses', where women can obtain advice on any issue;
- encourage national authorities to set up awareness raising programmes on domestic violence;
- support the efforts in Northern African countries towards building deep and sustainable democracy based on respect for human rights;
- support women's projects in particular by enhancing cultural relations between both shores of the Mediterranean;
- strengthen higher education exchange programmes, such as Erasmus Mundus, and to encourage the participation of young women.

The report highlights the importance of encouraging the participation of women in the electoral process.

As regards **human rights**, the Commission is called upon to support the efforts in Northern African countries towards building deep and sustainable democracy based on respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, women's rights through **technical and financial support to civil society**. Members believe that the newly established European Endowment for Democracy (EED) should devote special attention to women's involvement in the democratic reform processes in North Africa, by supporting women's organisations and projects in gender-sensitive areas.

Lastly, Members call on the Commission to ensure full transparency in **trade negotiations** with the countries concerned.