

**Feasibility study for the creation of a Mediterranean women's  
fund**

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(Extract)

The Mediterranean region includes around 20 countries<sup>1</sup> in which a dozen languages are spoken and where three religions are practiced; Muslim, Christian and Jewish. Despite this apparent diversity, a very rich history and a joint future under construction make the Mediterranean basin into a regional entity.

Since November 1995 with the beginning of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the region is imposing itself in terms of a geopolitical existence. The inter-ministerial conference, bringing together twenty-seven partners from the southern banks of the Mediterranean and the European Union, led to the unanimous adoption of the Barcelona Declaration and to the process of associative agreement with three aspects: politics and security; economy and finances; Social, cultural and human conditions.

This engagement between states has helped the dynamic already existing in the civil society and, at present, there are a multitude of Mediterranean networks that have been set up and work together around various themes from human rights to artistic events or strategic studies.

**An identity claimed by women**

Belonging to the same cultural area, under the influence of three monotheistic religions, the women of the Mediterranean region have to exist within a form of patriarchy which is common to them all and which underlines the importance of promoting their Mediterranean identity in order to reinforce their connections.

Since more than fifteen years, those organizations and members engaged in the defence of women's rights have created networks and consolidated relationships between women's movements from both banks, by regional or Mediterranean groups.

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<sup>1</sup> These are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Cyprus, Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Italy, France, Spain. Portugal and Jordan are often included as well, whilst not bordering the Mediterranean.

# **I. The condition of women in the Mediterranean area**

## **1.1 Situations which appear to be varied**

It is commonly acknowledged that women living on the northern shores of the Mediterranean benefit these days from having full citizenship status. Since the 1970's, supported by the pressure of the women's movement on an international level, they have seen their conditions improve in a spectacular manner, with the adoption of laws concerning divorce, contraception, parental rights and the ending of men's superiority in family matters.

The efforts of the European Union to put into effect the resolutions of the Convention for the Ending of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), has, since several years, maintained a pressure on member states and even on candidate states in order to put into practice equality between women and men in their programmes and politics. The fact that there are numerous women in the European Parliament (47%) has tended to reinforce this dynamic.

On the southern shores of the Mediterranean, legislation concerning the family, inspired by traditional family laws which, in their turn, are derived from the interpretation of various religious texts, constitutes serious obstacles to women's emancipation. They control, in effect, that which is considered as belonging to the private sphere – marriage, divorce, guardianship, child custody and inheritance – but equally have an effect on economic, cultural, civil, social and political life.

## **1.2 Similarities, including violence against women**

Although European women benefit from more rights in their daily lives, and are therefore more prepared to conquer the public arena, they must, like women on the southern banks, cope with hostile attitudes concerning women's presence in public life. When it comes not to legal rights, but to women's place in society, the barrier erected between the south and the north is less clear.

By way of an example, the proportion of women members in Mediterranean parliaments oscillates on average between 8% and 13% on the northern shore (with the remarkable exception of Spain at 33%) and between 1% and 13% on the southern shore.

All around the Mediterranean, rights that women have been able to obtain are nevertheless fragile acquisitions; the Mediterranean patriarchy<sup>2</sup>, under the cover of religion or nationalism – or even that of liberalism -, continues to exercise an efficient control over women by coercive means. On both banks, violence against women has been expressed in an extreme way through the use of rape as a weapon of war (in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993, in Algeria between 1994 and 2000).

It remains very frequent, on a daily basis, in all of the region's countries: economic violence which particularly affects women responsible for families, domestic violence, sexual

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<sup>2</sup> There is a brilliant illustration by Germaine Tillon in her book "The harem and the cousins" published in 1966 and still relevant today.

aggressions, “crimes of honour”, kidnapping, women’s slavery, the symbolic violence in sexist school books, the personal status codes in the south and the publicity and pornography in the north.

Violence against women is particularly visible on the southern shores of the Mediterranean: firstly because legal and institutional violence exerted by the codes of personal status by allowing for the domination of women by their husbands without any possibility of legal action (covered by the obligation of obedience), and moreover because of the pressure of fundamentalist religious movements, who resort to violence in the face of those who are recalcitrant, such groups being gradually implanted, even into the spheres of government decision-making.

On the northern side, some countries are beginning to vote laws to protect women, such as the legislation in Spain, witness of a real political will to reduce violence against women. But others are going through a real regression, such as in Albania which has seen the resurgence of *kanun*, an ancient legal custom which authorises men to beat and publicly humiliate their wives<sup>3</sup>.

The majority of the countries on the southern banks have no legislation concerning violence against women and in general the attitudes on this matter are very conservative: women are considered to be responsible for the honour of their men-folk and their family.

In recent years, and only in some of these countries, evaluation and awareness programs have been put into practice, which little by little allow for this violence to become visible.

Women from the region know that they must not only win the battles to promote equality in all of these areas but also must consolidate their gains, most often obtained thanks to their tenacity and to the political courage of those in a decision-making position and very rarely through the effort of the general will.

They must above all take action in a climate of generalized regression, which is the effect of the flowering of radical conservative movements in those societies which are losing their guidelines. Moreover, the more women invest in public life, the more they are themselves confronted by a violent reaction against them.

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<sup>3</sup> “Armes et machisme en Albanie” by James Dyson. Le Monde Diplomatique, June 2006.

## **II. The support for women's rights**

### **2.1. Funding bodies for women's projects**

In most of the Mediterranean countries, the actions of funding bodies has been restrained by states of which the majority, in the south but also in the north, watch jealously over any foreign intrusion. It is only within several years, first of all with the large international conferences on women's rights at Vienna and at Beijing, but above all very recently with the upheavals caused by globalization, that the funding bodies have multiplied their actions around the Mediterranean borders.

The region is clearly divided into three parts for funding bodies:

- The Middle East region – Northern Africa, which in terms of being a southern country and hence a development area, receives the greater majority of foreign funding;
- The region of the Balkans, which in terms of being a region under reconstruction receives a special attention from the European Union and other private funders ;
- Southern Europe, part of the European community, which only receives funds from particular community programs.
- The countries who are candidates for EU adhesion, such as Turkey, see their status changing with their candidature since they can no longer receive aid on the basis of development cooperation.

Many funding bodies are government institutions who contribute to cooperation development or are non-governmental organizations under contract to their government to assure development issues in southern countries (OXFAM, HIVOS are examples). Women's organizations situated to the north of the Mediterranean do not have access to these funds, except if they develop projects in countries on the southern banks of the Mediterranean with local partnerships or, alternatively, when they have as their objective those questions concerning women from immigrant communities coming from the south.

Currently, the financial sources quoted by women's organizations consist of:

- For the southern banks: the European Union, international non-governmental organizations, international cooperation, United Nations agencies, private foundations, feminist funds and very rarely governments.
- For southern Europe, funding is more likely to be locally based, with multiple sources, but of a limited nature. It is provided by government institutions or regional administrations, local foundations and in certain cases, special European Union programs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Financial resources for organizations in the region as found in the study. See also the statistics published in February 2006 by AWID and Redfern Research [http://www.awid.org/go.php?pg=where\\_is\\_money](http://www.awid.org/go.php?pg=where_is_money).

Funding bodies tend only to finance those projects which concern women from the south, which has a perverse effect on the women's movement in general : not only because it insists that European women should be contented with their situation and does not give them the means to consolidate their gains, but also because it nourishes the rivalry between organizations from the north and the south, the latter feeling used and ridiculed since non-governmental organizations from the north receive and manage the money for projects which primarily concern them.

Finally, and not the least worryingly, is the position in which are placed the women's organizations to comply with priorities decided by the funding bodies themselves, rather than to define their own priorities in an area that they themselves know well.

## **2.2. The Barcelona process**

The European Union is the largest funding provider for women in this region. This tendency should develop further with the evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership which, under the pressure of women parliamentarians and women's associations have made a priority of the role of women in the region's societies since November 2006. The governments have therefore become engaged in "mobilizing financial resources in order to contribute to putting in place the present plan of action".<sup>5</sup>

Those obstacles that remain are the weight of administrative processes of the European Union and, for organizations of women living in European member states or candidate states to European membership, the fact of being excluded, to a large part, from new programs.

Finally, the necessity for states to take charge of the support given to organizations could lead to the situation where they choose in return who to support in terms of future alliances. In such circumstances, small organizations or "sensitive" projects run the risk of not being supported.

To make up for this contradiction, the eventual use of a covering organization which could receive funds for other smaller organizations is now being studied by the EU.

## **III. Funding and the viewpoint of women's groups**

### **3.1. The work of women's organizations**

The projects set up by Mediterranean women concern economic, artistic and cultural areas, and are most frequently political, with the organization of campaigns concerning issues of equal rights between women and men, or the liberty in the use of their own bodies and the social order, through the support of women who are victims of violence.

Organizations work alone on their projects but are linked from time to time on a collective project as with national campaigns. They are also part of networks at both regional and

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<sup>5</sup> Ministerial conclusions of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Istanbul, November 2006.

international levels, which offer them the possibility to exchange their experiences and to feel that they are an active part of an international women's movement. For many organizations who work in hostile contexts, and there are many in the region, their participation in these networks provides a great support.

To the south of the Mediterranean, those local resources that are available for women's organizations are in general very limited and of difficult access, which leads to a heavy demand for foreign funding. These are present, however, in abundance, sometimes in competition, and in very difficult economic conditions the funds can be taken away from the needs expressed in the initial project.

The opposite effect is produced in countries to the north of the Mediterranean : organizations find funding at a local level – limited and based only on specific projects – and are refused international aid because they “are not from the south”, unless they are specifically working with southern women.

But this general outline does not exactly reflect the reality: effectively, depending on the country, whether they are from the south or the north, women's organizations can either run into many difficulties or on the contrary find it easy to finance their projects.

### **3.2. Relations with funding providers: the difficulties in finding funding for certain projects**

Women's organizations describe their relations with funding providers as being complicated and difficult with institutions linked to governments and particularly with the European Union, whereas they are described as being easy and confident with the smaller foundations, above all with feminist funders.

In all countries, certain types of organizations will find it easier to obtain information and contact funders, and among these an even more limited number will be able to fill in the application forms and to complete the processes required by the funding bodies. These are those who have salaried personnel or members who are at ease with international institutions and, in general, relevant experience and a solid structure.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, on both banks, many of the smaller organizations have very limited means and have neither the organizational capacity, nor the time to take part in the complicated procedures that they experience as taking them far away from their goals. Also, it is commonly found that they do not have access to the most elementary facilities (means of transport, of communication and logistical services) necessary in order to work comfortably.

Most frequently, organizations have no knowledge of the existence of donors: the information concerning any possible support that they could receive is not available to them mostly because it is in English.

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<sup>6</sup> By way of illustration, the organizations which replied to the questionnaire concerning their funding were those organizations which consist, for 2/3 of them, of between 150 and 20 000 members and have between 4 and 100 salaried workers.

It must be noted that an important effort is currently being made by donors to become more available, by meeting the organizations where they are but also in more systematic translation of their documents in Arabic and in French.

Another obstacle is represented by the bilateral contracts by which the funding providers are often linked to governments, which prevents those organizations in opposition to the government, or who have a project which does not enter into a state program, from benefiting from their aid.

Finally an obstacle must be noted which is of a more psychological nature, which is the uneasiness of members of organizations in their relation to money. It was, and still is, considered to be shameful to be paid to work as an activist. This is often the reason why requests for funding are limited to grants for projects, at the price of an enormous sacrifice on the part of those who work on the projects on a voluntary basis.

Added to all of this, in those countries on the southern banks, the fact that money is coming from western foundations is often seen as a submission to neo-colonialism, which is unbearable for those generations born at the time of their countries' independence.

We can take note, however, that there is a change of attitude on the part of many organizational members. The exhaustion that is experienced by voluntary workers is nowadays widely recognized, in that such work occurs in addition to their paid work and, for a large number of women, their work as a mother as well. Finally, the opening up of the world through the use of the Internet and international meetings with, in parallel, the international alliance of fundamentalists, gradually eliminates the nationalist scruples of militant women on the southern banks.

Most of the women's organizations have met up with difficulties in financing specific projects.<sup>7</sup> This study was not able to establish whether the difficulties always concerned a lack of interest on the part of donors for the aims of the project or whether they were also due to a lack of information or of contact on the part of the organization itself.

In general terms, it is those projects which were not considered to be of priority in the programs of the funding bodies which, according to the members of the organizations questioned, find the most difficulties in obtaining financial support. It is also those projects which do not appear as expected, in general the projects which are concerned with women's rights and for which the funders want to impose a model of the "gender" concept.

The more political projects, such as those concerned with legal defense and lobbying, which are nevertheless very necessary in order to make advances in terms of ideas, also seem to have more problems in finding financial support. But also, the organizations said that they encounter little interest for long-term projects or those that are more original.

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<sup>7</sup> Examples of projects for which organizations have experienced difficulties in finding funding (other than those, noted by 80% of the organizations studied, of finding funding for administrative costs and personnel) : Surveys not agreed by authorities ; Documentary and information centres for cultural studies of gender equality and citizenship; Observatory and incubator of non agricultural employment; Project of evaluation and action in gender issues and development; travelling to other countries; setting up of shelters for abused women; the creation of a network of women's organizations in the Lebanon, in Spain; funding of micro-credit projects; legal defence and lobbying, social projects which look into early marriages; domestic violence and sexual violence involving children; training for organizational managers for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership; lay and artistic projects against fundamentalism.

Finally, aid to set up networks and for the financing for travel to foreign countries does not seem to be easy to obtain from funders. But what comes over the most frequently in the replies from women's organizations in the Mediterranean area is the difficulty of finding financial support for the running costs of the organization, whether it be for renting an office, paying a salary for a worker, administrative and communication costs etc.

It is in this way that organizations find that it is necessary in order to survive to continually take on new projects. This is without doubt the main problem found by the study: women's organizations claimed to be put into a situation where it is impossible to develop programs with long term strategies because the funding that they receive only allows them to invest in specific projects that have time delimited agendas.

### **3.3. Expected relationships with funders**

For Mediterranean women's organizations, a good relationship with the funder must be founded on mutual respect and reciprocal confidence. Interestingly, many organizations make a difference between traditional funding bodies and those donors who are working together for the same objectives. They insist on the importance of having good relations with the team working for the institution which funds them: they should, for their part, show fewer prejudices and be more cooperative.

The procedural weight is also often questioned: most organizations find that they spend far too much time and energy trying to fit themselves into the framework set by the funders instead of getting on with their own work. They claim that the procedures imposed by the funders should take into greater consideration the organizational and management difficulties and should be more flexible, easier to operate, and take into account that the work is being done by voluntary members and is therefore dependant on their free time. They would like to see funders leave them "the possibility to have sufficient flexibility in their budgets so that they can meet needs other than those imagined during the construction of the project".

Another request from organizations, and doubtless that which reoccurs almost systematically in the interviews: that funders "stop considering women's work as being unpaid" and hence accept that a part of the budget should be reserved for day to day management. Women claim that "logistical and technical support is vital alongside support for projects", without which they cannot imagine continuing actions on a long term basis.

Finally they hope that funders provide certain services, which are concerned with aid in looking for funding and in the creation of networks. Some militant members of women's rights organizations say that they expect funders to have a certain ethical approach towards women, such as "giving priority to women's organizations but also to organizations where women themselves are responsible whatever their aims" and "refusing that governments should be involved in the decision whether or not to support a project".

## **Conclusion**

The availability of financial aid, which is nevertheless increasingly important for small-sized organizations –the greatest majority of women’s organizations in the region- remains very limited because of the tendency for funders to prefer to work with state-based organizations or large non-governmental organizations or non-governmental organizations from the north who are responsible for finances for the south.

There exists a certain quantity of the financial support proposed by militant funds but this consists of small amounts of money for time-limited projects, and often for those who conform to the funders’ priorities.

The difficulties expressed by women’s organizations from the region occur above all due to the impossibility to put into place a long-term strategy, in reinforcing their own capacities and in giving enough time for the analysis of the social changes taking place. They stress also their need to have a relationship of confidence with funders, which takes into account the situations in which they are living and working.

The setting up of a Fund which starts from the movement itself and will be therefore available for its own use, by adapting to the specific needs and its own analyses, therefore becomes extremely pertinent. It should be conceived as a means of strengthening the women’s movement in the region, a movement which is particularly fragile by the double action of fundamentalists and free market policies.