



“Spring Forward for Women” Conference

European Parliament, Brussels

5 and 6 November 2014

Background

The under-representation of women in the public sphere constitutes a serious hinder to the legitimacy of the contemporary democratic ideal. Parity democracy and the promotion of women in decision-making positions are therefore fundamental areas of action as underlined by international commitments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action. However, in parliaments worldwide, women continue to be under-represented and numerous obstacles hinder their participation in politics including economic, political and socio-cultural factors. As of August 2014, the world average of women members of parliament (for both houses) is 21.9%¹.

Based on lessons identified in parliaments worldwide, among the key factors that contribute to enhancing women parliamentarians’ impact for gender equality are their abilities to network across party lines and with key stakeholders, including with their male colleagues and with the media. Other factors include effective communication skills, mentorship by more senior MPs, experience sharing and learning from women lawmakers from other countries and national, regional and international networks of support.

In the past three years, the changes sweeping the Arab States region have built new momentum and unprecedented opportunities for supporting women’s political empowerment in a region where women’s political participation is among the lowest internationally². However, many of the post-2011 opportunities to boost women’s participation in formal leadership positions have fallen short of expectations. In the European Union, although women make-up more than half of the population and electorate they remain under-represented in all political decision-making bodies at all levels. The average representation of women in the European Parliament after the 2014 parliamentary elections is 37%³.

To support the economic empowerment of women in the Southern Mediterranean region and to

¹ <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

² In the Arab region women’s representation in parliament is the second lowest in the world (17.8%) and Arab States women occupy the lowest number of ministerial seats globally (7%).

³ The last European parliamentary elections took place in May 2014: <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/gender-balance.html>

enhance their participation in the political and decision-making spheres, the European Commission and UN Women launched, in October 2012, the Regional Programme for the Economic and Political Empowerment of Women in the Southern Mediterranean Region (*Spring Forward for Women*). Within this framework, an international conference is organised at the European Parliament in Brussels, on 5 and 6 November 2014.

The conference takes place at a historic moment in time, ahead of the Beijing+20 review in 2015 and it provides yet another opportunity to reaffirm gender equality and women's rights as essential means for achieving peace and security, human rights and sustainable development. The conference will bring together female parliamentarians from the Arab States region and members of the European Parliament to foster networking, knowledge and experience exchange, peer-to-peer exchanges and common consensus-building around key issues of gender equality and effective leadership and policymaking.

The “Spring Forward for Women” Conference

The conference aims to provide the opportunity for an exchange of experiences and views between women lawmakers from the Arab States region and members of the European Parliament to identify common challenges and opportunities for women's effective political participation. The meeting will bring together women parliamentarians from the Arab States region as well as representatives of the Arab Parliament and the European Parliament.

The conference will:

- Provide a space for fostering alliances amongst Arab States women parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament.
- Support exchanges and experience sharing in addressing gender equality issues in parliamentary work from successful initiatives in the Arab States region and Europe.
- Explore potential for stronger regional networks.