

Tunisia Hosts Workshop on Improving the Position of Women in Islamic Countries



Finnish Ambassador Jortikka-Laitinen's opening speech creates interest

Representatives from Islamic countries gathered in Tunisia between 8-10 March 2012 to take part in a Parliamentary Workshop for Advancing Maternal and Reproductive Health and Women's Rights in Member Countries of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). The Workshop was organised jointly by the Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) and the Tunisian Ministry of Women and Family Affairs.

The Finnish Embassy in Tunisia supported the Workshop by, for example, making it possible for representatives from developing countries to attend. The Workshop was a venue for parliamentarians to meet and exchange best practices and the steps they had taken in their countries to advance reproductive health and equality. During the three days of the Workshop, many interesting and informative presentations were given, creating a good deal of discussion among the participants.

The Workshop was opened on International Women's Day, the 8th of March. At the opening session, the Minister for Women and Family Affairs, Sihem Badi, warmly welcomed the parliamentarians to Tunisia on behalf of President Moncef Marzouki. In her speech, Finnish Ambassador to Tunisia Tiina Jortikka-Laitinen explained the Finnish social innovations which have increased equality and improved women's health in Finland. This aroused a great deal of interest in Finland and Finnish work for equality. The Finnish Ambassador also extended the greetings of Finnish President Tarja Halonen. President Halonen's thoughts on empowering women and increasing possibilities for women to participate more fully in society, and her wish that other Islamic countries would follow Tunisia's example, excited the audience to break into enthusiastic applause.

At the end of the lively panel discussions held on Friday and Saturday, the participants approved the Tunis Plan of Action. This Declaration aims at binding parliamentarians to take concrete steps forward to advance and improve women's reproductive health and equality.

The Tunis Plan of Action lists nine themes that were also discussed in the Workshop. Central to the Plan is the ratification and implementation of The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The parliamentarians at the Workshop will undertake to see this done in their own countries. The Tunis Plan also presents a good overview of the special needs of Islamic countries in regard to achieving the UN Millennium Goals 3 and 5, on equality and health.

Both participants and organisers extended heartfelt thanks to Finland for the support provided to the Workshop. The parliamentarians who attended came away with concrete tools for developing their country's legislation, as well as many new ideas for increasing the participation of their colleagues in the advancement of health and equality.



Minister for Women and Family Affairs Sihem Badi congratulates Workshop participants on their achievements. Next to her is the Secretary General of PGA, Shazia Z. Rafi.

More action is indeed needed, since many Islamic countries are lagging behind in achieving the UN development goals on the reproductive health and equality of women. In addition, many countries are now in the process of creating a new constitution and body of law, which will affect the position of women far into the future. The Tunis Plan should ensure that improving maternal and reproductive health, and gender equality, are written in to the new laws.

Text: Kaisa Oikarinen/SI Tunis/

Photos: PGA



The parliamentarians at the Workshop comprehensively represented the Islamic world.