

« Legislation alone is not enough for the optimum promotion of women's entrepreneurship in North Africa », stresses Mrs. Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane of ECA

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Marrakesh, 02 March 2010 (ECA) - About 100 women entrepreneurs, along with high officials from trade, regional integration and gender ministries, have been considering since yesterday the options for making women's entrepreneurship a tool for promoting economic development and subregional integration in North Africa. These discussions were held on 1 and 2 March 2010, within the context of a workshop jointly organized by the ECA Office for North Africa and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), with support from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).

« Women in the Maghreb face no legal barriers in terms of access to economic activity... but legislation alone is not enough and women remain a largely untapped resource » [said Mrs. Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane](#), Director of the ECA Office for North Africa, at the opening of proceedings.

According to recent studies conducted by the ECA Office for North Africa, women entrepreneurs constitute an emerging workforce in North Africa. In Tunisia, the number of women entrepreneurs, estimated in excess of 10,000 in 2004, has increased 40-fold since 1970. While such a trend common to all countries of the subregion reflected greater gender equality in terms of education and training, much still remained to be done in the area of business opportunities. In her view, « women still have more difficulties accessing the job market and face many inequities in terms of wages, working conditions, status and professional responsibilities ». Regarding the informal sector where North African women have high pride of place because of their traditional and time-tested skills in the textile, weaving, pottery and decoration trades, the important thing would be to preserve that cultural capital and adapt it to the ever-changing demands of the marketplace.

The Marrakesh workshop provided an opportunity to map out, beyond the role that women entrepreneurs play in the economic development of the Maghreb in general, targeted strategies for enhancing their contribution to the subregional integration process. The forum also allowed for the sharing of views on the use of new technologies and the support that financial institutions could provide Maghreb businesswomen within the context of the current economic and financial crisis.

The ECA Office for North Africa works together with AMU on a Multi-Year Programme of Work which began in January 2008. Gender issues lie at the core of this partnership. For [Mr. Habib Ben Yahia](#), AMU Secretary-General, the challenges of subregional integration and the implications of the economic and financial crisis have made the empowerment of women entrepreneurs a must for all Maghreb countries.

Also participating in the workshop were [Mr. Ahmed Ben Ali](#), representing IDB and Mr. Youssef Mouhyi, President of the Maghreb Employers' Union.

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