

**Speech by Ambassador Angelina Eichhorst,
Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon**

Launching of the EU-funded Programme
"Promoting Gender Equality in Lebanon"

21 February 2014 – NCLW Training Center – Baabda

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

First Lady Wafaa Sleiman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

أيها الحضور الكريم،

أنا سعيدة بوجودي بينكم اليوم ! أود في البداية ان أشكر السيدة الاولى على رعايتها هذا الحفل الكريم الذي يجسد بداية هامة لمشوار الدعم القوي الذي يقدمه الاتحاد الاوروبي للمرأة في لبنان عموما و للجنة الوطنية لشؤون المرأة خصوصا.

In a few weeks, on 8 March, women around the globe will again be celebrating International Women's Day, highlighting achievements and pointing to challenges and hurdles that are still lying ahead.

The European Union places a high importance on gender issues including at the political level as well as in almost all the areas of our cooperation. However, despite of our and many other organisations' and individuals' efforts to improve the situation of women in society, we remain very concerned about the situation of women in

large parts of the world, including in the southern Mediterranean, notably in relation to the high prevalence of violence against women and the low participation of women in public life.

When women are operating on a level playing field with men, if they can be socially and politically active, economies and societies flourish¹. Equality benefits everyone. We know that all-embracing equality cannot be reached quickly nor easily; it requires profound changes of socio-cultural and political nature, particularly in societies that tend to be more traditional and where the roles of men and women are seen to be distinctly different. Being aware of such underlying cultural issues is a necessary first step to analyse their effect on the development of societies. Working hard to change the barriers holding back women from fulfilling their potential across the globe is the imperative next step. We must all together raise awareness and fight against this structural violence that runs through laws, policies, services, institutions and even private life.

In Europe as in Lebanon, the situation of women is not as it should be. As you are aware, the Lebanese Constitution guarantees equality before the law regardless of gender. Moreover, the cultural diversity as well as the democratic values existing in the Lebanese society should, in theory, lead to some degree of equality.

Then why is the situation not so rosy? It is regrettable to note the low participation Lebanese women in Government and Parliament, in key positions, and in the decision making process. Besides, one can ask how it can be possible that women in Lebanon in the year 2014 still lack judicial protection from violence, an act considered to be among the major human rights violation and obstacle to gender

¹ *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. The World Bank, Washington DC, September 2011

equality? How is it possible that women still cannot pass on their nationality to their children despite the equal rights granted in the Lebanese constitution? I could ask many more questions at this point that all underline the sad truth that discrimination against women in Lebanon is a bleak reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Equality between men and women is a fundamental principle of the European Union since its inception and the principle of gender equality is central to all our activities and remains high on our agenda. We regularly monitor the progress in achieving equality between men and women and actively work towards its realisation in Europe and worldwide. What I mean by gender equality is equal rights, an equal voice, empowerment, responsibility and participation for both women and men in all spheres of public and private life. It also means an equal access to and distribution of resources between them.

To address gender inequality most effectively and on all levels, we all need to work together as strong partners. We have support coming from the highest level, as witnessed today by the presence of the First Lady. We have jointly agreed powerful commitments in the EU-Lebanon Action Plan to effectively enhance the rights of women in Lebanon. We need today concrete initiatives that will yield visible results that will change the perception of women to be active drivers of change. And of course we need a strong involvement of the State institutions, including the newly formed Government and the Parliament as well as of non-state actors and the private sector.

I am confident that the programme we are launching today will provide an excellent opportunity for the National Commission for Lebanese women to progress on the advancement of women and to contribute to a brighter - fairer - future in which all Lebanese women can enjoy a life of equity and dignity. I wish the NCLW and its team all the success in this programme and I am confident that you will contribute to the advancement and empowering of women in Lebanon.