

**Speech by Mr. Marcello MORI**  
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**Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon**

*Project "Improved livelihoods for underprivileged women in North Lebanon"*

*Graduation ceremony*

7<sup>th</sup> March 2014 – Akkar

***CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear graduates,

I am very pleased to be here with you today, to congratulate you, the students, for your success in the training that you have completed. This day is not only of great importance to you on a personal level, but it also sends out a strong signal to all men and women who are confronting social, political and economic marginalisation and discrimination.

Tomorrow, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, we will celebrate International Women's Day, an occasion to highlight accomplishments and to reiterate our commitment to achieving gender equality and fair opportunities.

Lebanon is currently passing through a very critical period. The war in Syria has forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee the country. The increase in number of refugees has further aggravated the vulnerable situation of the Lebanese population in general and that of women in particular. One would ask why? Why do women and girls suffer disproportionately during and following wars? Why do

all existing inequalities increase, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation? These questions lead us to one main conclusion: women need to be presented with the opportunity to live their lives in a violence-free world. This means that we should provide men and women with the awareness that they have a right to stand up for themselves, instead of just focusing on changing laws or engaging in legal reform. We have to ensure that all have access to opportunities and exercise their full and equal rights within their societies, regardless of gender identity or considerations. To reach that level of partnership with men, we must fight gender discrimination through access to education, guarantee financial independence through access to credit, and that all can live decently with their children through access to health care.

In reality, the situation of Lebanese women is two-edged: on the one hand, many are active in universities, businesses, social networks, where their professionalism is a tribute to their society; on the other hand, the family codes are still highly discriminatory, while political participation is dramatically decreasing<sup>1</sup>. For example, according to world and regional averages of women in national parliaments, Lebanon saw its ranking drop from 126/187 in 2006 to 139/187 in 2014; Furthermore, only one woman out of 24 ministers holds a ministerial post in the current cabinet.

Many obstacles also hinder women's economic empowerment, namely the socio-cultural barriers that confine women to traditional jobs such as teaching, nursing, administrative work...etc. Their situation is made even worse by several discriminatory laws that reinforce such stereotypes. Women, therefore, find some difficulty in accessing bank credits and in opening bank accounts for their minor children; they face gender employment and wage gaps....

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

Some improvement is palpable in the long battle for women's right in Lebanon and in the fight against gender inequality, which is one of the greatest obstacles to human development: In the last two decades, for instance, considerable progress was made, especially in opening up education to girls based on gender equality, allowing women to start a business without their husband's approval, and introducing harsher punishments for honour killings. However, this is a long battle, and much work is still to be achieved, especially in the realm of economic and political empowerment. We hope to see more and more women reach senior administrative and political positions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If gender equality promotes healthy economic growth, gender inequality has multiple negative effects on communities.

The European Union has a long track record in the promotion of gender equality and in the fight against gender stereotypes. Support to human rights in general, and to women's rights in particular, are at the heart of the EU's engagement across the world. Even in Europe, much remains to be done, notably in reducing the gender pay gap.

I would like to reiterate that the European Union will always be at your side to help you adopt concrete measures to achieve gender equality, through institutional reform, commitment of resources and support for fundamental changes in behaviours and attitudes.

This will not be an automatic process and it will not happen overnight. It will be achieved through the concrete efforts of Members of Parliament, officials, business circles, human rights activists, women's groups and international partners.

Since the promotion, development and reinforcement of the role of women in the economic life are considered the most efficient response to the country's economic and financial crisis, I am confident that the knowledge acquired through the training you received, will help you make a meaningful and positive contribution to your own community.

Finally, I would like to thank Foundation Rene Moawad, its partners and all those who worked hard in carrying out this training and Mabrouk again to all graduates!