

Women's Economic Empowerment Urged

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Female leaders from Syria and Turkish leaders attending a conference in Damascus this week pushed for women to enjoy greater rights and play a stronger role in business.

The Syrian-Turkish women's conference was the first of its kind and came as the two countries build stronger political, economic and trade ties. The gathering, on October 27-28, attracted over 500 participants, who called for more rights and economic power for women.

"There are a lot of similarities between the conditions of Turkish and Syrian women, which allows for a fair amount of opportunities, cooperation and exchange of experiences between them," said Shahnaz Fakush, director of Syria's national office for public organisations, which has oversight over women's groups.

Female economic empowerment was one of the primary themes at the conference, which addressed a range of issues such as helping women in rural areas and ending violence against women, including so-called "honour crimes".

Turkish-Syrian relations have warmed this year, and the Turks are mediating in the indirect peace talks between Syria and Israel. For its part, Damascus is keen to build economic relations with its northern neighbour.

At the conference, Turkish businesswomen were encouraged to launch joint initiatives with their Syrian counterparts, including setting up companies and institutes, thereby creating job opportunities for women in both countries.

The conference recommended that Turkish and Syrian businesswomen establish stronger ties.

One observer noted that a substantial number of those attending were businesswomen, and called the conference a gathering of "female aristocrats".

Mutlu Alka, a Turkish businesswoman, said women needed real decision-making powers rather than merely job opportunities, and noted that "social traditions... hinder [women's] development".

Conference participants also said that women needed to own more property, and that homemakers should be paid wages to give them financial security and support their families.

Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad and Amina Erdogan, wife of Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, hosted the conference.

In her address to participants, Assad said Syria and Turkey had both made progress in opening doors to

women. She noted that women needed to gain economic, professional and educational capacity if they were to advance, and pressed both governments to help women play a larger role.

Erdogan encouraged Syria and Turkey to adopt international conventions on equal rights and to “exert every effort to implement them fully”.

Both Turkey and Syria have signed the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Syria ratified the convention in 2003 but refused to accept certain items, including the right for women to pass on their nationality to their children.

Women’s activists also say that Syria flouts the convention by allowing lighter sentencing for men convicted of so-called “honour crimes”.

Sam Dala, dean of the National Institute for General Management in Damascus, said the government must ensure women have the right to pass on their citizenship and to win child custody in divorce cases. He also suggested that affirmative action programmes would improve the status of women.

Nimet Cubukcu, Turkey's minister for women's affairs, cautioned that improving the status of women would be “a long process requiring huge efforts”.

“Legal rights are very important in improving women’s conditions, but they are not sufficient, as cultural and economic factors must also be taken into account,” she said.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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