
IDLO AND EBRD FORUM: TOWARDS A WOMEN JUDGES PLATFORM IN THE SOUTHERN AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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Marie-Anne Birken, EBRD: I am in Casablanca and to welcome you to this conference, on behalf of the EBRD. And, this forum, really has brought an extraordinary number of women leaders from, from the region and beyond to discuss matters relating to the leadership role of the women can play in the justice sector. Excellent networking forum to exchange knowledge, our experience and lay the foundation for a future judges' platform. I'm very honored to speak to such a distinguished audience, including, I think, about a forty of us, fifty of us here, from the region and beyond, even including Poland, the USA, Sri Lanka. Very great to see such a diverse group of women. The fact that there are so many outstanding women justice professionals participating in this forum and working in the legal profession around the world, shows the progress that has already been made. Just a few decades ago, it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to organize this kind of event, to gather this kind of audience here today.

For a long time, the legal profession was exclusively male. And, and in several western countries, women gained access to the legal profession at the beginning of the 20th century. But, were not even admitted as judges until much, much later. Before the 1970s, the number of women in the legal profession and their career opportunities were extremely limited. And, women were excluded from any law schools, the night job opportunities and not considered for leadership roles.

We have made a lot of progress, and now, increasingly, we have women participating in, in the judicial sector and, and generally in the law. And, it's quite amazing actually today, as we in EBRD are hiring women, hiring lawyers to join the Legal Department, the vast number of applicants are women. However, I think, there is still a lot of progress to be made. And, in particular, in my own experience, where I was part of a sort of trend for more women to join the legal profession, the hurdles were not so much with getting into the legal profession, but, advancing, progressing, and becoming the leader.

EBRD is committed to promoting gender equality and equality of opportunities in our own organization, but also in the countries in which we operate. We have adopted a strategy for the promotion of gender equality for our operation, which promotes a vision for the future, in which women and men regardless of their socio-economic status have the same rights and opportunities. To access finance and assets, to establish and lead businesses, to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, and to have equal and safe access to public services.

We have identified three specific areas, where we can most actively respond to gender needs and deliver better business. Access to finance and entrepreneurship, access to employment and skills, and access to services. One of the programs that we have to support this, this goal is our Women in Business Program. And, really, it's a striking example, of what we as an institution can do to close the gender gap in terms of access to finance. The program provides financing and technical assistance to financial institutions across 16 countries, which is then used to fund and to train women entrepreneurs.

In the Office of the General Counsel, that I lead, we have a dedicated team of 13 lawyers, the Legal Transition Team, which helps to establish laws, regulations and institutions, that support the development of a transparent and predictable investment climate in our region. And, as part of this work, we engage with policy makers, regulators and legislators, on gender related issues and

issues that affect the investment climate more generally. But, with disproportional impact on women.

So, let me give you an example, of the initiatives that we, the Legal Team, is working on to help the peace efforts. We are currently working with the IDLO on increasing women entrepreneurs' access to justice in Jordan and Egypt. As part of this project, we are analysing the barriers that women entrepreneurs face in accessing justice and resolving disputes affecting their businesses. We incorporate gender components into our dispute resolution technical assistance projects. For example, the output indicators for our ongoing commercial mediation projects in both, Serbia and Moldova, are linked to the number of women that are trained to become private mediators. Our aim is to increase the number of certified women mediators by 20 per cent in Serbia and by 10 per cent in Moldova.

With respect to access to finance for women led businesses, we are working on collateral regimes for movable property, which have a strong impact on women entrepreneurs, who often do not have access to real estate to secure their loans. In fact, we've been working on the new movables pledge law, here in Morocco, which we hope will be enacted soon.

And, finally, a big part of our work includes advising companies on their corporate governance practices. Given that there is an established link between gender diversity on Boards and companies' financial performance, we are actively encouraging our investee companies to ensure greater gender diversity on their Boards. At the same time, we are trying to increase the number of women that we place as nominee directors on the Boards of our investee companies.

We also believe the Professional Women Networks are crucial for reducing gender barriers and advancing the role of women within the legal profession and, more generally, in society. I have personally benefited from legal, from networks in my career. I think, it is to get women together and support each other, to find role models, to seek inspiration is extremely powerful. Women leaders in the justice sector emerge as leading actors in their respective areas. And, in turn, as champions for other women legal professionals and aspiring young women. This is particularly true for women judges in this region, who are instrumental in driving forward legal reforms, aimed at reducing gender barriers to women. It's precisely because of the importance of professional women networks in reducing gender barriers and the leading role of women judges in advancing gender reforms, that we have arranged for this conference. The aim of this forum is to lay a foundation of a women judges' common platform for this region and develop a common advocacy platform to reduce gender barriers to women in the judicial profession and in related strategic areas.

Through both, the plenary and the sessions today, and the breakout sessions tomorrow, we will discuss and formulate a vision and the objectives of the women judges' common platform for the SEMED region. It's immediate and long-term priorities and action items with the aim of establishing a regional forum of women judges. I am really excited about this opportunity, and I hope you are and I wish you a very productive and enjoyable forum and, all of you, who have come here from abroad to enjoy your time in Casablanca. Thank you very much for your attention.