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Speech by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the EU Conference " Egyptian Women: The Way Forward" Cairo, Egypt, 19 July 2012

Can I just start by saying what an enormous pleasure it is to be back in Egypt.

When I came to Egypt last year I had the pleasure of meeting with some of the women represented here today and listening to your ideas about the future of your country. You spoke with great passion about the past, about the future and about the fact that this was your revolution.

And I want to say how much I realized that so many of you made so many sacrifices.

You have demonstrated for your rights and the rights of all Egyptians, you have organized, and above all you have contributed and played an essential role in the transition of your country towards freedom and dignity for all.

Along with the women that I had the privilege of meeting in Tunisia, in Libya, in Burma, Afghanistan, you are an inspiration to me and to the women of the European Union and I really want to pay tribute to you.

As I always say, it is not for Europe, not for me nor any other outsider, to offer you any ready-made solutions. Democracy and freedom are built from the inside, not imported from abroad. What we want to do, what I want to do, is to help Egypt to build the kind of democracy that meets the aspirations of all Egyptians, the women, men, young and old. We can help but only you can do it.

It is what I call Deep Democracy – not just organizing free and fair elections – it's about building the civil society and the institutions that guarantee the rights of everyone and guarantee that there will be elections in the future and people will have the choices. It means freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and respect for all communities. It means putting in place the building blocks, the foundations of your country.

P R E S S

FOR FURTHER DETAILS:

Michael Mann +32 498 999 780 - +32 2 299 97 80 - Michael.Mann@eeas.europa.eu

Maja Kocijancic +32 498 984 425 - +32 2 298 65 70 - Maja.Kocijancic@ec.europa.eu

Sebastien Brabant +32 460 75 09 98 - Sebastien.Brabant@ec.europa.eu

COMM-SPP-HRVP-ASHTON@ec.europa.eu

www.eeas.europa.eu

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The recent Presidential elections marked a major milestone in Egypt's transition, as for the first time in history the Egyptian people had the opportunity to choose their President in a real and competitive election. I have come to express my support for Egypt's democracy, for Egypt's democratic transition and today I will meet with President Morsi for the first time. I will congratulate him and I will give him the messages that I think are most important. The first one is that Egypt faces many challenges but there is no going back. The transition has to continue and it has to respond to the aspirations of all the people of Egypt for freedom, for dignity, for economic opportunity. I will call for an inclusive solution to the current Parliamentary crisis and I will emphasize the need for a civilian, democratically legitimate and inclusive government.

And I will also say that it is essential to have an inclusive and transparent drafting process for a new Constitution. You have an historic opportunity to draft a constitution to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to safeguard democratic processes and institutions. I know there are many challenges ahead, I know how difficult it is with the economy, but I am here today to reaffirm the commitment of the European Union, of its 27 Member States - soon to be 28 with Croatia - to support your transition and the people of this country. And women play a crucial role in this regard because I believe women's empowerment is an essential component of building any democracy.

I will never forget the young woman I met in Tahrir Square, who said: "The men were keen for me to be here when we were demanding that Mubarak should go, but now that he is gone, they want me to go home". I said to her "Do not go home!". You have to remain at the heart of the transformations, you have to lead the way towards the future you believe in. Women's rights will be the litmus test of a successful transition. It is a long and difficult road and none of us has yet completed the journey on human rights and gender equality. It is a battle that must be won every day, with every law, in every school, at every election. We have to keep going.

Leaving aside the moral principle, gender equality is also about empowerment, democracy, and economic development. We all know about the talent that is wasted and the wisdom that is lost when a society refuses to break with inequality. A tragedy for the individual and a loss for the society at large. The human aspiration for dignity and freedom belongs to women and men alike, young and old – it is universal. All those engineers and scientists, and doctors and dancers, and artists and musicians. All of those wonderfully talented girls and women who never got the chance to fulfil their potential; a loss for them but a loss for all of us. In short, democracy and women's rights go hand in hand, reinforcing each other.

As many of you have just told me, 18-months later there is much progress to be made. You fear that women's rights are not a priority in this ongoing transition phase. And you are right. And of course that is wrong. The proposed amendments to the Personal Status Laws, the lack of language on gender equality or women's rights in the new Egyptian Provisional Constitution, the attempts to decriminalise Female Genital Mutilation are some worrying developments.

This is why there is a need for strong Egyptian institutions, like the National Council for Women, working to protect and support women's rights.

An active and independent civil society is a key component of any democratic society and women must be allowed to play their part.

The scarce representation of women in the ministries, their exclusion from leadership and political positions, and their small representation, only 2%, in the Egyptian Parliament show the many challenges ahead.

But as I have also said to the women I have met – in many countries that I know well - you have to build from the base where actually there are very few women and you have to build the opportunities to become involved and engaged. I say to the women who are here: we have to make sure that we as women are helping the next generation of women to participate. We want to see them as part of the new government.

But only comprehensive actions and solutions will make a difference and in that education is essential. Governments across the world must take proactive measures to address the factors preventing women from participating in politics and public life. These include violence, poverty, lack of access to quality education and health care, the double burden of paid and unpaid work.

Women and girls account for 2/3rds of those across the world who live below the poverty line; who cannot read or write; who are refugees and displaced; and who are kept out of school.

Education is the critical first step. Women becoming leaders and helping to demonstrate to other women the possibility of becoming leaders. I was Minister for Education and Skills and know well how, even with small changes, we can achieve significant results - reducing dropout rates, improving retention rates and promoting that young girls study at higher school levels. I should say too that I was the first woman in my family who went to University.

Fifty million of the world's 72 million children currently not enrolled in primary school are girls. In 47 out of 54 African countries, girls have less than a 50% chance of completing primary school. Two thirds of the nearly 800 million adults who lack basic literacy skills are women.

Social inclusion will ensure that girls have time and space to become active citizens and develop social networks and life skills. Girls achieving their full potential will bring growth for the society as a whole.

You are well positioned to educate women on their rights and I know how much effort and energy you put into this. We need to support business training for women to make sure that talented entrepreneurs are given a chance, that women's economic empowerment is a core part of what we do. The World Development Report for 2012 on Gender Equality and Development talks about smart economics but we need to make sure that in this country women are able to demonstrate the smart economics and use their capacity to be part of the economy.

Everyone should have the chance to reach their potential. That is our objective and that is why the European Union wants to overcome discrimination and the political and social barriers to gender equality. We want to help women choose and ensure that their place in society and their capacity to lead is recognised by everyone.

So, support for women's rights is core in everything we do but it is even more so in our cooperation with countries in transition. We want to help mainstream gender issues in all the programmes that the EU has. We want to give special attention to women's rights in their own right and it already represents more than one quarter of our overall support to civil society in Egypt. We want to help promote women's participation in political life, to help with legal support to victims of violence, we want to help women in remote areas to learn about their rights and promote their access to microcredit and so on.

But I want to do more. This is why we want to announce today an initiative of EUR 4 million which will bring EU support for women's rights in Egypt up to EUR 11 million.

And to use that money to support the ID cards project that we have heard about to 2 Million women across the country. It is the first and basic step to enjoy basic rights as an individual. We want to provide financial support to 18,000 poor women living in rural areas and 3,000 women living in the most impoverished areas of Cairo; and to work to reduce violence against women especially in urban areas.

This new project with this new money will be implemented by UN Women Egypt, headed by Mrs Maya Morsy, who I would like to thank for her leadership and dedication to women's rights.

These are practical ways in which women can get involved in their own future. But as I began, the future belongs to you. No-one can do it but you. The road is long but you have the knowledge, passion and ability to make this successful.

It is time for the transition to deliver for women of this country and for women across the world and it is an enormous privilege to say that we wish to work with you and to offer support not just from me but from the EU. I wish you every possible success and we will stand beside you every step of the way.
