

**Report of the Committee on Women's Rights
of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean**

**on: 'Women and illiteracy in the
Euro-Mediterranean region'**

Introduction

The concept of 'illiteracy' does not mean the same for the people of southern Mediterranean countries as it does in the West. In fact, in the southern Mediterranean to be illiterate means not being able to read or write, while literacy campaigns are efforts to combat that form of ignorance.

In the West, however, illiteracy is more of a functional problem, in the sense that many state employees do not necessarily satisfy labour market requirements in terms of professional performance and being able to react and adapt to rapid technological change.

Statistics in southern Mediterranean countries show that tangible progress has been made in combating illiteracy and promoting a knowledge-based society, although the results still do not match up to the hopes and expectations. In fact, the illiteracy rate was reduced from 60% in 1980 to about 43% in the mid-1990s and the rate of women's education has tripled since 1970.

- Despite that progress, there are still between 60 and 65 million illiterate adults in the Arab countries today, two thirds of whom are women.
- The problem of access to higher education, which is fundamental to any political entity that seeks a place within the group of civilised nations, remains one of the main stumbling blocks to efforts to improve the level of educational development.

The rate of access to higher education is only just over 13%, which is much lower than the prevailing rates in industrial countries, where it can reach 60%.

That means that the provision of high-quality education must not be the prerogative of those rich enough to pay for it, to the great detriment of the destitute and of moderate-income households that are unable to fund their children's higher education.

One of the proposals put forward for improving the public education infrastructure in the southern Mediterranean countries is to increase the duration of compulsory education from six to ten years at least.

Taking account of the universal phenomenon of globalisation, governed by the law of the strongest, and of the fact that the future belongs to those who organise themselves best, know how to play their cards and, in particular, manage their priorities, it becomes clear that we no longer have the benefit of time and must take efficient action.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope on the horizon, in the form of the million Arab immigrants who live in the West and have scientific skills. It is crucial to create bridges between the members of that community and their home country, so that they can help create greater scientific dynamism in their countries of origin.

Illiteracy in the southern Mediterranean countries

There is still a high incidence of illiteracy in the southern Mediterranean countries, which acts as an obstacle to their development efforts. In the Arab countries, more than 60 million people are illiterate, of whom one third are women, according to the report on education in the Arab world.

According to that report, 9 million children do not go to school and 400 children drop out of school every year, especially primary school, which is a serious blow to the efforts of governments with the political resolve to ensure that all children attend school.

In the Maghreb countries, between 2% and 6% of children leave in the fifth year of primary school. In general, the main victims of non-school attendance are girls, for whom the rate is 58.4%. The rate is around 40% among children from rural areas in some countries of the region. In that regard, a survey conducted out by the Secretariat of State for Literacy and Non-formal Education, in cooperation with Unicef, on non-school attendance in Morocco calculated how much the Kingdom of Morocco could have gained had it not been burdened by this high illiteracy rate. This report found that each additional year of primary education can produce a 12.7% rise in income, compared with 10.4% for secondary education. For girls, the rise is approximately 1% higher. In terms of net profit, the total loss of income to society accounted for virtually 0.50% of GDP for the year 2004, estimated at nearly DH 2 800 million.

That is why Morocco has embarked on formal and non-formal second-chance education programmes to combat school-leaving.

Like the southern Mediterranean countries, Morocco has also carried out post-literacy programmes for adults aimed at providing them with vocational skills, in association with new governmental partners: the General Directorate of Local Collectivities, the Human Rights Advisory Council and the Partnership for Development Agency.

Morocco has involved undertakings and associations (32 000 associations) in this project and also received support in the framework of international cooperation.

The Arab and international reports emphasise that only eight States achieve the required averages in terms of access to education, i.e. between 85% and 95%, thanks to the introduction of compulsory schooling until the end of primary school. Those countries include Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco and Syria, which aim to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2020.

Jordan is seeking to promote long-term education in order to satisfy the requirements and meet the challenges of globalisation and the knowledge-based economy, while Algeria is allocating \$750 million to literacy programmes for the benefit of 17% of the population (34 million people) in both urban and rural areas. According to the statistics, 22 Algerian wilayas have high illiteracy rates.

For its part, Tunisia introduced a national adult literacy programme to reduce the illiteracy rate among the working population aged under 60 to 10% across the country in 2009, establish the right of all to education and respond to the rapid changes in the world.

As a result, the illiteracy rate has fallen to less than 21% in Tunisia. The national adult literacy programme has also led to the employment of 5 994 teachers under contract, of whom 3 917 hold postgraduate diplomas.

In Turkey, only 10% of the population is illiterate. There are 18 universities in Istanbul alone and women are highly educated, as reflected by the large proportion of women among the university teaching staff, i.e. 21.5%.

Reasons why children drop out or do not attend school:

- the shortage of basic equipment and the distance between their places of residence and the schools;
- the high cost of school stationery;
- the high cost of evening, weekly and monthly remedial courses;
- the poor contact between pupils and teachers because of the prevalence of violence and marginalisation;
- parental illiteracy, the disintegration of the family, the bad influence of the streets, drugs and unemployment, and the wish to emigrate to the northern countries;
- the worsening quality of public education;
- the paucity of non-school activities that address children's needs and problems.

Recommendations

- There is a need to: pass laws making schooling compulsory;
- apply the principles of equality and the right to education as stipulated in the southern Mediterranean countries' constitutions.
- It is vital for the countries in the Euro-Mediterranean area to: show the political resolve to eliminate illiteracy;
- emphasise the role of state schools and civil society associations in encouraging schooling and combating non-attendance and dropping out of school;
- give the private sector more experience as a stakeholder in funding all literacy initiatives (as was done in Jordan and Palestine);
- establish mechanisms to follow up and evaluate the situation as regards illiteracy and improve the system for monitoring the relevant data.
- There is a need to: create government ministries and departments responsible for improving literacy;
- create sources of funding to combat illiteracy;
- provide rural areas with basic equipment and build schools and roads to give the young generation access to schooling;

- give grants to poor families to encourage school attendance and combat non-attendance, especially among girls in rural areas;
- offer allowances to teachers to encourage them to work in rural and mountain areas (as was done in Morocco);
- make it compulsory for parents to send their children to school (as was done in Hungary);
- remove the cultural obstacles to taking part in literacy programmes;
- teach reading and writing to illiterate women working in the crafts sector or other production jobs, to underpin sustainable development projects;
- combat illiteracy in the legal, administrative, scientific, cultural, social and health sectors in order to make citizens more aware of their rights and obligations, to build up the sense of being full citizens and make women more able to speak up for their rights;
- develop teaching methods, especially in regard to adult literacy projects, that are appropriate to students' needs;
- highlight the fact that by its specific nature improving literacy is a project that concerns all the northern and southern Euro-Mediterranean countries, speed up learning projects at all levels and seek to eradicate illiteracy among the various age groups, and especially among girls and women.
- The scourge of illiteracy feeds on poverty and ignorance and provides fertile ground for violence and extremism.