

Full text of Mrs. Ben Ali's address to opening works of forum on "Arab Women and Globalised Communication Space"



First Lady Leila Ben Ali chaired, on Tuesday, the opening works of the forum on " Arab Women and Globalised Communication Space " and delivered the following address:

"In the name of God, Merciful and Compassionate

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my distinct pleasure to open, by the Grace of God, the Forum on Arab Women and the Globalised Communication Space which we proposed to organise in Tunis during the third meeting of the Arab Women Organisation Higher Council, held on May 27, 2007 in sisterly United Arab Emirates.

I would like, first of all, to welcome our distinguished guests, and to thank all who have participated in the organisation of this Forum, particularly the Arab Women Organisation, and the Arab Organisation for Information and Communication Technologies. My thanks are also due to all parties supporting this Forum which we want to be a renewed opportunity to discuss one of the fundamental issues of concern to Arab women, in a world witnessing deep and rapid changes in all fields.

While expressing my sincere thanks and deep consideration to Mrs. Wadouda Badran, Director General of the Arab Women Organisation, for her kind words and noble feelings toward Tunisia, its people and its Leadership, and for awarding me the Shield of the Organisation, I would like to pay tribute to the Arab Women Organisation for the commendable role it assumes to promote women's status in our societies, and to improve women's conditions in all fields.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This time of ours is characterised by a rapid proliferation of information and communication technologies in their multifarious forms and various systems, as well as by an international race for the use of these technologies on the largest scale possible. In this time of ours, distances have been shortened and barriers abolished, which has given rise to the Global Village, intensified contacts and communication among individuals, peoples and cultures, and opened up fresh, unprecedented prospects for knowledge, action and production for all humanity.

Today, the spread of digital technologies, and the growing use of terrestrial and satellite communication networks, both fixed and mobile, are strong factors that have turned information and communication into a crucial, strategic sector for all countries.

As we are keen to make sure our Arab societies are in tune with their time and join the tremendous communication revolution, we are required to invest in intelligence and in the building of the knowledge society, and to promote the information and communication sector,

as it is a strategic sector that should be given priority in our national concerns and objectives. We, in fact, have the lowest rate in terms of Internet use. This rate does not exceed 16.25% in our Arab societies, against 43% in Europe, and 71% in North America. We are, therefore, called on to give further attention to digital culture in our societies, to disseminate it among all social categories and generations, to promote the teaching of this culture in primary and secondary schools, in higher education institutions, and in all associative spaces, to establish incentives for Internet access for all individuals, public services, institutions and organisations, and to encourage businessmen to use and invest in information and communication technologies, in order to improve performance and quality of production, and prompt economic enterprises to join electronic commerce, consolidate their capacity for export and competition, and assert their presence on world markets.

No doubt, this choice poses great challenges for our Arab countries, regarding, in particular, the equitable opportunities we will offer all citizens, men and women, for joining information and communication technologies, and the way in which we will make use of these technologies to serve our societies. In fact, building the information and communication society on solid grounds is contingent upon ensuring equal rights for all individuals and social categories, men and women, as well as upon offering young people of both genders equal opportunities to achieve sustained progress in terms of education, culture, training, employment and active presence in public life.

Faced with the large digital disparity currently existing between the two genders in our Arab societies, we are required to act for offering women access to information and communication technologies, and enabling them to produce digital content and information. For women are not less intelligent, less diligent, less active and less creative than men. They indeed contribute, alongside men, to preserving society's balance and stability, and to achieving its progress and prosperity.

In this regard, we are required to show a high sense of awareness and vigilance in dealing with information and communication technologies, and to master the various components and networks of these technologies, so that we can take optimum advantage of their rich contents, while guarding against types of content that threaten our spiritual values and socio-cultural specificities.

On the other hand, we should exert all efforts to make sure the globalised communication space serves as a tool for dialogue and mutual understanding, and as a means to materialise such common universal principles as freedom, justice, equality and tolerance. This will offer humanity better and wider opportunities for communication and complementarity, within a context of co-operation, solidarity and mutual respect.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tunisia has early gained awareness of the deep and rapid technological changes that have taken place during the past couple of decades. It has accordingly established a coherent strategy for promoting ICTs and increasing their contribution to enhancing the process of socio-economic development.

Since the 1990s, computer science has become a distinct subject in Tunisian school curricula. A gradual plan has been established for providing educational, youth and cultural institutions with Internet-connected computer equipment. A national committee on electronic commerce

has been set up to prompt enterprises to use modern means of communication, advertising and marketing. A Family Computer programme offers price incentives to encourage families to purchase computers and promote their use among family members. A plan has been established for promoting software development, website design and remote labour systems, as well as for the maintenance of computer equipment and the use of digital documentation and digital maps.

No doubt, our country's success in ensuring free, compulsory and universal education has helped it achieve full gender equality at all stages of education. The schooling rate of girls in first year of basic education currently amounts to 99%. In higher education, females represent 59% of the total number of students.

On the other hand, women's presence in the ICT field has significantly increased. During the current academic year (2007-2008), female students involved in ICT specialties represent 45% of the total number of students.

During the previous academic year, the rate of female students graduating in ICT specialties verged on 47%. Evolution in this field also finds its illustration in the fact that the rate of female university teachers of computer science amounts today to 42% of the total number of teachers, and that female civil servants specialising in this fields represent 30% of the total number of public employees.

While endeavouring, jointly with sisterly countries, to promote joint Arab action and enhance the process of modernisation and progress in our societies, in terms

of formulating visions, setting objectives and proposing programmes and policies, the new world situation prompts us to step up efforts in order to enhance the status of Arab women in our societies, and offer them propitious conditions to achieve natural integration within working life and assert their presence within the globalised communication space.

We are also called on to intensify cultural and economic co-operation among Arab women, to promote the use of new and modern technologies for consolidating this co-operation and enlarging its fields, to assert the ability of Arab women to make optimum use of the communication space, to foster their role in serving their causes and their Nation's causes, to establish a positive and equitable dialogue with other cultures, and to redress the Arab society's image in the eyes of the international public opinion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To conclude, I reiterate my sincere thanks to all those who have participated in organising this Forum and contributed to enriching its proceedings. I wish

all our distinguished guests from sisterly and friendly countries a pleasant stay among us, and hope our Forum will come out with practical recommendations that can help Arab women hold the position they deserve in the globalised communication space".