

Crans Montana “African Women’s Forum” hosted in Brussels

The city of Brussels hosted on 14 – 16 November the African Women’s Forum, organised by the Crans Montana Forum, in association with the New Leaders for Tomorrow.

Important personalities extending beyond the African landscape, took the word stating the state-of-play for women in African countries, the challenges they face and the changes needed to achieve gender equality.

Among the topics discussed during the sessions were giving priority to women and girls’ education, providing access to employment and societal responsibilities, empowering rural women Empowerment, promoting women’s entrepreneurship and professional equality and encouraging women leadership in the maritime industry.

The Forum was opened by **Jean-Paul Carteron**, Chairman and Founder of Crans Montana Forum. Carteron highlighted the significant role women play in today’s societies, praising African women and characterising them as a “decisive element in building African societies” as well as “bearers of values essential for Africa but also for the world”.

The Forum highlighted the need for a robust education and health strategy in Africa that will mobilise the means to reach the Sustainable Development Goals and will foster a peaceful, just and inclusive society.

Without education there is no development

The view that reforming the education system by making it more inclusive and adopting smart technology is a prerequisite for the development of the workforce and women’s advancement was shared by all speakers. The educational system in Africa still prepares citizens jobs that are not relevant to new markets, leading to an increasing growth of the gap between Africa and the West.

In fact, 30 million of young people still do not have access neither to primary or secondary education, while when it comes to entering university, the number of women that reach this educational level struggles to reach 5%.

Africa needs to respond to the on-going digital revolution. “Africa needs to know what’s happening in the rest of the world to be integrated”, highlighted one of the speakers. To this end, the integration of IT courses into the school curriculum was at the centre of conversation. Yet, when it comes to making choices in Africa, the role of the family is pivotal. There is little encouragement for learning new skills and taking ICT education, while the constantly growing digital divide between Africa and the West is further deteriorated by their cultural background and the poor financial conditions that surpass the continent. Yet, “the solution is not in the technology, is in the human behaviour”, commented a speaker, echoing the opinion that more steps need to be made to build a sustainable future for African women.

Women in leadership

African women are today heads of states, business CEOs, ministers, proving daily the importance of their touch in societies. Yet, under-representation of women both at a political level was agreed to be the core of the challenges Africa is currently facing. Speakers unanimously urged for real women empowerment that will not be limited to high-skilled women and that will significantly improve

women's life. Women's role as major players is crucial to the battle for development, as they can prove that they constitute an indispensable part of the political life, bridging day by day the gender gap.

Even though in many African countries, the number of women representative is extremely low, some significant steps have been taken to combat the phenomenon, as the case of Senegal which has the highest representation of women throughout Africa, by 42% of parliamentarians being women.

Next steps for Africa

Africa is going to be the most populated continent in the world soon and will have the highest potential of growth in the years to come. "Africa is an engine today, an engine that is not driving in full speed." So far, significant progress has been made both in terms of educational and societal level, but to find its pace, a common ground among the civil society, organisations and politicians needs to be found, that will coordinate all the stakeholders' efforts.

Among the suggestions heard was the creation of an institute for digital technologies that will be targeting women with the aim of building their capacities. Women empowerment is the means to responding to Africa's challenges and opening the door for women to the world is they key to social cohesion and thus, peace.