

Χαιρετισμός της Άννας Καραμάνου με αφορμή την επίσκεψη της Σιρίν Εμπαντί στο Ε.Κ. (στα αγγλικά)

COMMITTEE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Chairperson

Visit to the European Parliament of Ms Shirin
EBADI, Nobel Peace Prize Winner 2003

February 25, 2004

Statement by Anna KARAMANOY, Chairperson, European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities

On behalf of the European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, I would like to welcome you whole-heartily to the European Parliament and to this meeting. It is a great honour for all of us to receive you. I congratulate you for the Nobel Peace Prize for 2003, which was awarded to you the first Iranian and the first woman from a Muslim country for your efforts for democracy and human rights and your focus especially on the struggle for the rights of women and children. Let me express my deep admiration for your work, for your courage to speak out clearly and strongly in your country and far beyond its borders, for standing up as a sound professional and a courageous person, and for never heeding the threats to your own safety.

You are one of the few women who received the Prize so far. Undoubtedly, your selection is an

inspiration to the masses of women who are striving to realize their rights, not only in Iran but throughout the region and the rest of the world.

The history and cultural inheritance of your country is impressive and famous world-wide, and it still has a great potential to give an important contribution to the rest of the world. However, persistent conflicts between tradition and modernity lead to the governance of traditional, patriarchal and paternalistic methods, which are often not compatible with democracy and human rights.

The discriminatory plight of women in Iran has its roots in the prevailing patriarchal and male-dominated culture and this situation is of deep concern to the Committee, which I chair, and to the European Parliament as a whole. Let me underline that we are in favour of a dialogue with all societies and with all civilizations and we promote solving of all conflicts by peaceful means. However, we cannot accept a culture, which does not tolerate freedom and democracy, and which neither believes in equal rights of women and men, nor in the liberation of women from a male domination (fathers, husbands, brothers etc.).

It is with horror and great concern that we have seen the ill-treatment of women in Iran. There are still provisions on lapidation and stoning, this cruel punishment of women, although with an official moratorium on the execution. Our Committee has addressed several letters of protest against this inhumane practice to the leaders of your country. Furthermore, family violence is a common practice as are the so-called morality crimes; bare suspicion of adultery can entail a man to kill his wife, sister or daughter. A woman's testimony in the court is considered half the value of that of a man. A very simple example of the discrimination between men and women is also the way men and

women dress: while Iranian men are dressed in western style suits, women are still covered in black. This, after all, also illustrates the lack of gender equality.

But there is also some light in the tunnel. Some reforms of the practices based on Islamic Sharia Law have been implemented, for example a girl now has to be 13 years old before a marriage can be arranged for her, whereas the minimum age used to be 9 years, but also 13 is too young age. We also note with satisfaction the very positive progress in the Universities in your country, where now already 60 per cent of new students are girls. Nowadays women are better educated than men and this gives promises for a future with more women in decision-making positions. However, for the moment unemployment is still high among women, which indicates that women resources are not used in the best way, unfortunately to the detriment of the progress of the whole society.

In your Nobel Lecture you said you are the descendent of Cyrus The Great, the very emperor who proclaimed at the pinnacle of power 2500 years ago that "...he would not reign over the people if they did not wish it". And he promised not to force any person to change his religion and faith and guaranteed freedom for all. Unfortunately, we regret to see that this is not the attitude of present Iranian leaders. Already the decision of the Council of Guardians^[1] to disqualify 2.300 reformist candidates, including 80 members of parliament, from standing in the elections, raises doubts about fair and free elections. According to the Council the disqualifications were necessary because of the candidates' alleged indifference to Islam and to the constitution, or accused them of questioning the supreme leader's powers. Combining this with the poor turnout in the elections, which was just over 50.6% of the

electorate – the lowest since the republic was born 25 years ago, it is a shame to assert that the people choose their own leaders. According to the official information election-related violence claimed at least eight lives and injured 38 others in towns in southern Iran. The latest results of the February 20 election show that the conservatives won at least 149 seats out of 290, assuring them of a majority in the next parliament. It is clear that the new parliament will have even fewer women members than the last one, where there was only 13 (unclear – some sources speak about 11 members in previous parliament) women members. The vigilance of the citizens, especially the human rights defenders like you are, is necessary more than ever.

In March 2003, a small delegation of high-level women visited us and an informal meeting was held with Members of our Committee. Both sides found it very useful to conduct a dialogue and we agreed to try to meet again and exchange views on how women's rights and gender equality can be better promoted in our respective regions. Our Committee would like to welcome a delegation from your Parliament and we have recently sent an invitation for such a visit during the Committee meeting in March.

I wish you great success in your fight for human rights, as well as women's rights and children's rights, and I am sure that many women are prepared to follow your brave example.