

**TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN THROUGH EU
EXTERNAL RELATIONS**

**WORKSHOP FOR THE COMMITTEE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND
GENDER EQUALITY AND THE COMMITTEE ON DEVELOPMENT**

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Implementing the GAP in the Arabian Peninsula:

The Importance of Cultural Contextualisation

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Introduction:

In October 2015, the Council of Ministers of Development adopted the Gender Action Plan (GAP) 2016-2020 of the European Union (EU). The GAP is based on a Staff Working Document and consists of a series of policies founded on the idea that gender equality is a human right.¹ The GAP is a welcome development insofar as it pursues the EU's objectives of attaining gender equality and improving the lives of girls and women internationally through its external relations. This paper focuses on certain points the GAP could consider maximising its potential to attain its overall objectives in the Arabian Peninsula.²

The Arabian Peninsula has made significant progress in reducing gender equality in recent years, especially in the areas of education and access to health care. A majority of girls in the region now attend school, and in the GCC there are now more female university graduates than males. Maternal mortality rates have also largely decreased, and for example in Saudi Arabia women no longer require the permission of a male guardian.³ to obtain healthcare. However, these achievements have not translated into gender equality in the areas of political and economic life. Nor have they managed to eradicate social and cultural norms that deprive women of their mobility and choice, and regard them as inferior beings in need of protection and seclusion. Therefore, the GAP should target those areas where there have not been significant improvements to gender equality. However, to ensure its effective implementation in the Arabian Peninsula, the GAP must take into account the region's cultural context.

¹ For more on the GAP see Luigi Lonardo and Nora Jaber, 'EU Gender Action Plan 2016-2020: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations', (OxHRH Blog, 22 January 2016), <http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/eu-gender-action-plan-2016-2020-transforming-the-lives-of-girls-and-women-through-eu-external-relations/>

² The Arabian Peninsula is a geographical region located in Southwest Asia, to the east of the Red Sea. It consists of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar) as well as Yemen, Jordan, and Iraq.

³ For more on the Male Guardianship System see <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system>

A. Adopting a Local approach:

It should be noted that although the goals the GAP states may be universal, the method of achieving them must be adapted to the context of the region. The importance of culture and religion in the Arabian Peninsula must be considered. All the members of the GCC mention Islam in their constitution. Islam is not only relevant at the political level, but also forms a fundamental part of a majority of the region's citizens' identities and underlies much of the social and cultural norms in the region. Therefore, gender reforms must be contemplated in a way that is ideally compatible with Islamic teachings. This can be done by promoting progressive interpretations of Islam that accommodate gender equality and greater women's rights.

The GAP should consider clarifying that its objectives are in line with Islamic law. This has been demonstrated by many Islamic feminist scholars.⁴ who have engaged in female-inclusive and female-centred reinterpretations of Islamic religious texts to accommodate greater women's rights and gender equality. Adopting and promoting such an approach might also make the region less likely to resist the GAP. Such interpretations of Islam can be promoted through education and consciousness raising. This may require engagement with local actors (below) and the use of social media which is widely utilised by citizens of the Arabian Peninsula. While social media is a widely utilised and effective medium, the Arab Peninsula employs strict censorship around which the GAP must navigate.

B. Emphasising the wider international framework:

The GAP should also consider drawing parallels between its goals and those set out in other international treaties, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [1979], which have already been ratified by the governments of the Arabian Peninsula. In this way, the GAP would not be presented as a new initiative, but rather as part of a larger global initiative to promote gender equality – one which has already been endorsed by the Arabian Peninsular governments. However, for this to be effective, citizens must know about the rights they are granted through these international instruments. Therefore, in implementing the GAP, greater efforts should be made to increase rights awareness and legal consciousness. This should be done through education and legal training.

C. Engaging Local actors:

In implementing the GAP, local actors should be consulted and engaged. Their understanding of the regional context will assist in contextualising the implementation of the GAP depending on the needs of each country. Local actors can also help promote the goals of the GAP, spread awareness, and improve rights consciousness. One way they can do so is by translating the GAP goals into a local language that citizens of the region can understand and relate to (See Section A).⁵

Rather than forming women's organisations and NGOs, human rights defenders in the Arabian Peninsula often work more subtly and on an individual basis. They include academics, opinion columnists, and increasingly social media influencers. Therefore, when thinking of civil society in the region, it must be acknowledged that it does not look the same nor does it operate in the same way as it does in other countries as the risks of

⁴ See for example the work of Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Lila Abu Lughod

⁵ See Sally Engle Merry's concept of *vernacularization*

doing so are often high. Efforts should be made to corroborate with local actors who can form the necessary link between the GAP and the local sphere.

Conclusions:

The main point to consider is that in implementing the GAP in the Arabian Peninsula, the legal and social particularities of the region must be accounted for.

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