

Background paper

Empowering Women through access to decent work in the MENA region: examples from SOLIDAR's members in the field

Introduction

Equality between women and men is one of the values on which the EU is founded and a principle it is expected to **promote both in its internal and external policies**.

With the general objective of **promoting gender equality in EU external action 2021-2025**, the EU has adopted the Gender Action Plan III, which provides the EU with a policy framework with five pillars of action for accelerating progress towards meeting international commitments and a world in which everyone has space to thrive. Within its Gender Action Plan III, the EU acknowledges the importance of women's socioeconomic empowerment.

The unequal participation of women in the labour force is a concern across the global, but especially in the MENA region where high **unemployment rates, underemployment and the informal work remains some of the main labour market's features**. When no employment opportunities are offered in the formal sector, **women in the MENA region seem more likely than men to work in informal and unpaid employment**.

Moreover, the widespread diffusion of the **Kafala System** exposes migrant workers to human rights violations and abuses including

confiscation of passports, debt bondage, visa trading, irregular residency status and forced labour.

Domestic workers, a women dominated sector, face the most abuse, including sexual violence.

The current briefing paper showcases examples of SOLIDAR members' contribution to **promote women's access to decent work in the MENA region**. It will present good practices from **ARCS Arci Culture Solidali, ACPP and SOLSOC** work and emphasize the work of these organisations on promoting SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

1. EU Policy: Gender and the Mediterranean

Equality between women and men is one of the values on which the EU is founded and a principle it is expected to **promote both in its internal and external policies**. In order to better mainstream gender in its external policies, the EU has adopted two successive gender action plans GAP I and GAP II, from 2010 to 2020. **GAP II particularly focused on:**

- ensuring girls' and women's **physical and psychological integrity**;
- promoting the **economic and social rights** and the empowerment of girls and women;

- and strengthening girls' and women's **voice and participation**¹.

On 25 November 2020, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the European Commission presented the **Gender Action Plan (GAP) III - an Ambitious Agenda for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in EU External Action**. Drawing from the EU gender equality strategy 2020 - 2025, which calls for a gender-equal Europe, this new EU gender action plan for 2021–2025 (GAP III) calls for a gender-equal world and is complementary to the LGBTIQ equality strategy for 2020-2025. It aims scale up the EU contribution to reach SDG 5 in all EU internal and external policy areas and across the 2030 Agenda².

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The **five pillars of action of the GAP III** are:

1. **85% of all new actions throughout external relations will contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment by 2025.**
2. **Shared strategic vision and close cooperation with Member States and partners at multilateral, regional and country level.**
3. **GAP III calls for accelerating progress**, focusing on the key thematic areas of engagement, including fighting against gender-based violence and promoting the economic, social and political empowerment of women and girls.
4. **Leading by example.** The action plan calls for the European Union to lead by example, including by establishing gender-responsive and gender-balanced leadership at top political and management levels.

¹ [PR INI \(europa.eu\)](https://pr.europa.eu/pr/INI)

² [join-2020-17-final_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://join-2020-17-final_en.pdf)

5. **Measuring results.** GAP III adopts a new approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning, with a stronger focus on measuring results³.

Another key engagement for the new GAP III is the inclusion of **intersectionality**. The EU aims to address intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination, focusing on the most disadvantaged women, for instance **indigenous peoples and persons belonging to racial/ethnic/religious minorities, forcibly displaced, migrant, economically and socially deprived women**, and those living in **rural and coastal areas**, as they face multiple discrimination. The EU also remarks the **specific challenges for girls and of elderly women**, as well as **women with disabilities**, and advancing the **rights of LGBTIQ** persons, claiming that all intersecting dimensions are equally relevant.

The perspective of the post-COVID-19 recovery offers a rare opportunity for Europe and the Mediterranean region to commit to a common and people-centred agenda and the actions necessary for its implementation. The *Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new Agenda for the Mediterranean* aims to relaunch the EU's and Southern Mediterranean partners' cooperation and realise the untapped potential of our shared region, with the ground-breaking opportunities of the twin green and digital transitions. The new Agenda aims for a green, digital, resilient and just recovery, guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal. It proposes the following **key directions for the partnership**:

- An *Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours* will help spur long-term **socio-economic recovery, foster sustainable development, address the region's structural imbalances**, and tap into the region's economic potential.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2184



- Joining forces to **fight climate change**, decrease harmful emissions, use resources sustainably and speed up the **green transition**.
- Renewed commitment to the **rule of law, human and fundamental rights, equality, democracy and good governance**.
- Addressing the **challenges of forced displacement and irregular migration** and seizing the benefits of legal migration efficiently and effectively, through comprehensive tailor-made and mutually beneficial partnerships, protecting migrants and refugees' rights, in line with the European New Pact on migration and asylum.
- A renewed commitment to **unity and solidarity** between EU Member States, as well as a mutual and shared commitment and joint actions with partners in the Southern Neighbourhood.

Regarding **gender equality**, the EU states that gender equality is not only a universally recognised human right but also an imperative to well-being, economic growth, prosperity, good governance, peace and security. Therefore, the **EU will promote initiatives to protect women's rights and their socio-economic, civic, and political participation**, in the New Agenda for the Mediterranean as well. Amongst its action points, the EU aims to:

- Support steps to **combat all forms of discrimination**.
- Promote **international social and labour rights**, as well as international labour standards as classified by the International Labour Organization (ILO).
- Support the **economic empowerment of women and youth** (including children), encouraging their active involvement in decision-making.

- Promote steps to **eliminate violence against women and girls**, including conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence⁴.

Furthermore, the EU acknowledges that is highly beneficial for a country to **create prospects for young people** in their country and preventing brain drain, as well as creating **decent employment for all**, and **increasing women's labour market participation** and their economic empowerment, which should be placed at the centre of the design and implementation of socio-economic reforms and investment initiatives. Moreover, it aims to focus on the **impact of the informal economy** on people's welfare and partners' public finances and support skills policies for all, also in view of supporting formalisation.

EU Gender and Decent Work

The unequal participation of women in the labour force is a concern across the global, but especially in the MENA region. Within its Gender Action Plan III, the EU acknowledges the importance of women's socioeconomic empowerment and lists a series of actions in which EU external policy should contribute to:

- **Promoting decent work**, equal pay and labour rights, and women's transition to the formal economy, among other by reducing labour market segregation, boosting women's leadership and increasing their bargaining power in economic and household decision-making and social dialogue, in sectors with a majority of women workers, including domestic work, as well as in non-traditional sectors;
- Creating an enabling environment for women's economic activities and **access to productive resources and eco-system services**, including women's access to land, seas and oceans activities, remittances, technology, finance, as well as to

⁴ [Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new Agenda for the Mediterranean | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](#)



identification and control over mobility, including access to safe and affordable transport options;

- Supporting **universal social protection systems**, and recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work by providing more support for gender-responsive budgeting;
- **Challenging gender norms** within the household and the labour market, recognising men and boys' responsibilities and fostering legislative developments, such as the introduction of paid paternity leave;
- Supporting **women entrepreneurship and women-led businesses**, including social entrepreneurship, and their access to finance by providing innovative investments schemes through the EIP, addressing the market's failure to reach women and promoting the creation of SMEs. Additional targeted action will include business development services and support for employment, including for women in recovery contexts and in forced displacement;
- **Supporting and empowering migrant women** contribute to the sustainable development of countries of origin, transit and destination through remittances, skills and knowledge;
- **Promoting gender equality through trade policy**, including through the EU's engagement in the World Trade Organisation and its work on Aid for Trade, and ensuring robust use of sustainability impact assessments of trade initiatives and policy reviews⁵.

2. COVID-19 and Female Labour in the MENA Region

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected men and women differently and has worsen existing social and gender inequalities across the globe. A gendered approach to the impact of the

pandemic is needed to assess the reality that women have faced during the COVID-19 crisis. Firstly, women have suffered **disproportionate job and income losses partially because of their over representation in the hardest-hit sectors**. In the MENA region, with already low level of participation in the labour force, **women's informal labour in agriculture and as domestic workers** made them especially vulnerable to job losses. Disparities between native and migrant women also strengthened in some GCC countries under the kafala system, where native women were favoured in the new accommodating work policies⁶.

Secondly, the **overrepresentation of women in healthcare and care sectors** is a global trend⁷. In the EU, women make up 76% of the continent's healthcare workers. In many countries in the MENA region, they represent over 50% of healthcare workers, including nurses, nurse assistant but also physicians (3). These women have been on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, deriving into a greater number of female healthcare workers being **infected with COVID-19**. Moreover, women represent the majority of social care workers, elderly care workers, childcare workers and domestic assistants. These occupations are most at risk of infection due to proximity to others, many of whom might be high risk. Therefore, efforts must be made to ensure that women are provided with suitable protection to be able to perform their function as key workers, and the feminised nature of this work must be recognised.

Finally, **lockdown affected many women as the primer carers in their households**. School closures and stay at home mandates have dramatically **increased the domestic labour** within households across the EU and the MENA region. They hit many working women in either loss of jobs for lower-paid or unskilled women; intensification of household labour; and early retirement or decision to leave the labour market because of increased care work. Moreover, there has been an increasing of cases

⁵ [join-2020-17-final_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ [COVID-19 and Female Labor in the MENA Region | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](#)

⁷ [wcms_814499.pdf \(ilo.org\)](#)



of **domestic violence and gender-based violence** because of the pandemic. COVID-19 has seen surging rates of domestic violence across the globe and EU. Socioeconomic pressures, such as economic insecurity, additional childcare work, and inability to interact socially with friends, are risk factors for an increase in violence. The lockdown also challenged the ability to report domestic abuse, and calls to domestic violence hotlines have increased by 20-40% across the EU since February 2020⁸.

It is also crucial to see how each of these impacts are amplified when considering **additional drivers of vulnerability**. Race, location, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socio-economic group (and beyond) will further affect women's experience of COVID-19, as women are not a homogenous group.

3. *SOLIDAR Members' work*

ARCS Arci Culture Solidali – TERRE: du territoire au revenu

TERRE: du territoire au revenu is a project coordinated by ARCS in Tunisia with the objective to promote economic development in the rural areas of Tataouine, reinforce the traditional practices and knowledge, and encourage the opportunity for independent work for women and youth within the area.

This project took place between February 2016 and January 2020, with the funding from the Italian Agency of Cooperation for Development (AICS), the Fondo Ottomille della Chiesa Valdese, the regions of Sardinia and Emilia-Romana, as well as Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Modena, the Embassy of Germany in Tunisia, IRA – Institut des Régions Arides and ARCS. Starting at the villages of El Farch and Ras el Oued, in the region of Tataouine, the project soon expanded to three additional villages: Douiret, Bir Amir and Bir Thalathine. The project involved the total participation of 144 women from ages 16 to 54 from rural areas,

⁸ [The gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis and post-crisis period \(europa.eu\)](#)

divided in different groups, who participated in a set of trainings related to the artisanal values from the South of Tunisia. In 2016, the activities focused on learning about aromatic and medicinal plants, as well as the value of local products and cosmetics. In 2017, the trainings centred around food products such as dates and figs, food preparation and extraction and distillation techniques. Finally, in 2018, the focus was on the creation of artisanal cosmetic products, and the hygiene and sterilisation processes of food products.

Another outcome of this project was the launch of a new brand for the artisanal products developed in Tataouine, named TATAOUI, in March 2018, participating in festivals and exhibitions throughout the year and across the country. TATAOUI won the first prize of the Tunisian Government for the valorisation of women and rural products in 2018, and won several medals and competitions in 2019. TATAOUI has its own [website](#), and a physical distribution point was established in Tataouine in 2020. TERRE has also enabled the creation of new small businesses in the region of Tataouine, including a tea shop, a local product shop, a traditional clothing sell point, a production unit for cosmetics and essential oils, etc.

ARCS has identified two main difficulties for the implementation of this type of project in the region: the unstable economic circumstances, which imply the migration to the north areas of the country; and a weak transport network that hampers the mobility of people in the area. Regardless, these difficulties did not prevent the implementation and achievement of goals set by the project, although they might have delayed parts of their execution. In 2020, some activities also needed to be adapted to the global health crisis of COVID-19.

ARCS Arci Culture Solidali is an NGO founded in Rome in 1985 by Arci, an important national network of the Italian Third Sector. ARCS runs international cooperation activities through the



involvement of communities and citizens in the widespread creation of relations and cooperation between territories and communities, the enhancement of civil aggregations, the building of networks of interest and the strengthening of democratic ownership. ARCS' bases its activities in a set of priorities including civil rights, democracy, migration and co-development, and **gender rights and empowerment**, amongst other. ARCS works internationally with projects in Cameroon, Colombia, Rwanda, Senegal, Cuba, Lebanon; and particularly holds **gender equality and decent work projects in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia.**

ACPP – Gender and Social Economy in the MENA Region

Morocco

Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (ACPP) has been working in Morocco since 1999 giving support to the most vulnerable groups. Its main areas of interventions are: the defence of basic social rights, such as education and health, the fight against gender inequality and support for the migrant population; always with a special emphasis on the conservation of the environment, the configuration of social structures and support to public entities that can contribute to the processes of pacification.

Tunisia

ACPP began its work in Tunisia in 1994. Our areas of intervention are support for comprehensive rural development, the fight against gender inequality and the promotion of effective equality between men and women, promoting associations, social participation, gender equality and youth employment. During the last five years, we have been developing a program to promote the socio-professional inclusion of young people in the poorest areas of the country, carrying out a strategy that encourages economic activity based on a model of social and solidarity economy. We also would like to

highlight the recovery of a textile factory by the employees themselves, taking a hand of it and turning it into a social and solidarity economy initiative for a positive impact on the community. At the same time, we are also developing an advocacy strategy for the implementation of the ESS bill presented by the UGTT. In addition, in the last year, a program for the regularization of domestic work and the eradication of human trafficking and slavery has been carried out. In the last 3 years, we have influenced the approval of the Comprehensive Law against Gender Violence, accompanying its entire process. We have also supported a centre for Women Victims of Gender Violence, owned by the Ministry of Women and managed by AFTURD, which has become not only a centre for women victims of gender violence, but also an incubator of professional projects under the prism of the SSE carried out by these women. This last experience is part of the ENI MedTown project that ACPP is carrying out in the Mediterranean and aims to launch experiences of Co-production of social policies with social and solidarity economy (SSE) actors and duty bearers to fight poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

Palestine

ACPP started working in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereinafter TOP) in 1993, with the aim of to contribute to strengthening basic sectors to sustain the future Palestinian State. For this we have supported local initiatives for the improvement and strengthening of educational, health, and water services, food, socio-economic capacities, female empowerment and organizational promotion and democratic through multidimensional, holistic and sustainable interventions.

Asamblea de Cooperación por la Paz (ACPP) is a nonprofit, secular and independent NGO that defends democratic values and fights for social and economic justice. Regarding the work of ACPP in impoverished countries, it promotes an autonomous and democratic development, in which respect for the



environment is non-negotiable and of which women and men must be equally protagonists and beneficiaries. In Europe, ACPP monitors European policies, aims to promote the critical character of its inhabitants and set political and social priorities. It also works to convey its proposals to the European institutions. ACPP works in 18 countries from Maghreb (Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia), West Africa (Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal), the Caribbean (Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic), the Middle East (Lebanon, Israel, Occupied Palestinian Territories), Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua) and South America (Colombia).

all the space. Often, if their professional activities have been affected by the pandemic, men are angry and they turn their anger on their wife. However, the conditions of the pandemic have also opened a field of transformation and possibilities for all partners with the rise of the use of digital tools to organize activities and operationalize certain strategies remotely. Eight women's cooperatives including young women elected their bodies and run their business independently. In cooperation with local associations, they organized, with their own means, activities for the benefit of women in the neighborhoods, they opened to other cooperatives and engaged in the constitution of a regional centre for social and solidary economy.

SOLSOC – Decent work and women in Morocco

With the support of P&V insurance, Solsoc and its three partners in Morocco, AJR, AFAQ and IFAAP, directly support 15 associations and 15 Social and Solidarity Economy initiatives in 6 districts of Casablanca to strengthen them technically, strategically and politically. Projects are thus developed on the basis of the needs of citizens in the fields of health, youth, education, social and solidarity economy, equal opportunities, the environment and access to public services. Local branches have been set up in the neighborhoods to identify the real needs of working-class neighborhoods in direct connection with the daily life of the population.

Solsoc's partner AFAQ identifies women who live significant situations of vulnerability and discrimination: mainly widowed women or divorced. Economic autonomy is the first key to their emancipation and a tool in the fight against the violence to which they are subjected. In 2015, 11 initiatives started providing training to jointly create social and solidarity economy initiatives in different fields, and step by step, women's incomes are improving, and they are gaining financial independence.

In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, their vulnerability increased, since the men in their lives are to remain inside their houses, taking up

Solsoc is a Belgian non-governmental organisation that implements sustainable development programmes in countries from the Global South. It is also the international solidarity organisation of the Joint Socialist Action in which its historical and social roots lie. In partnership with the various components of this group, Solsoc's aims to strengthen social movements and civil society organizations in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America in their capacity to contribute to progressive and democratic social change, to participate in the development of public policies, to mobilize grassroots organizations in the defence of their economic and social rights. Solsoc supports struggles for the respect of human rights and international law, but also initiatives to reduce social, economic, environmental and gender inequalities. Its action is organised around the "Decent Work" agenda of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the pillars of which are part of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is because it believes in its power to transform the economy and give an emancipatory meaning to the "work" dimension that Solsoc has placed the social and solidarity economy at the heart of its intervention strategies and its conception of Decent Work.



Conclusions

The briefing paper outlined some of the EU's commitments to promote the access to decent work for women and presented examples of SOLIDAR members' work in the MENA region that contribute to the implementation of the **GAP III** with a special **focus on intersectionality**. Addressing intersectionality means focusing on disadvantaged women and promote their human and economic development in rural areas, as well as providing information and support to migrant women and vulnerable groups of women such as domestic and healthcare workers, brutally affected by the pandemic.

Organising women is crucial in this scenario. In the MENA region, there are still wide legal, social and economic disparities between men and women. Women find difficulties in joining a trade union, they usually organise amongst themselves and do not have access to social protection mechanisms, such as social security. In addition to that, social norms impede women to access formal employment. Therefore, they are obliged to work in the informal economy. To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to promote women's education and bring them into the workforce. The real gain from gender-equality can only be achieved when women act collectively and begin to organize themselves to advocate for greater rights.

