



The Governance  
Programme

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THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY  
(International) in the United Kingdom  
Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations

## **Reflections on, and practical suggestions for, gendered language in Arabic for human rights & humanitarian texts (Working paper)**

Summary of propositions from the Arabic for Gender workshop organised by the Governance Programme at the Aga Khan University's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC), 13 December 2019

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On 13 December 2019, a workshop titled “Arabic for Gender: Practical views on gendered language in human rights and other policy contexts” was held at the Aga Khan University's Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) in London. It comprised eight presentations by participants who had been selected following an open Call for Papers. The workshop also included group discussions on practical questions around both interpersonal and textual challenges to gender-conscious translation of policy texts between Arabic and English. The workshop was followed by keynote lectures and presentations open to the public. The programme can be found on the web pages of the Governance Programme of the AKU-ISMC.<sup>1</sup> This working paper summarises the propositions of the workshop and keynotes.

## 1- The importance of getting gendered translation right

Arabic translators and editors for International non-governmental organisations (INGOs such as Human Rights Watch<sup>ii</sup> and Amnesty International<sup>iii</sup>) and for International governmental organisations (such as the UN<sup>iv</sup>) feel responsibility for accurately and effectively conveying the campaigns for the protection and rights of people and communities identified with gendered terminology. They also want to avoid homogenising with reductive or imposed labels, and they devote time, and human and financial resources, to achieve this, within the limits of organisational requirements and possibilities.

Regionally or culturally defined organisations and projects explore and foreground local discourses on equality and activism. These include Ikhtiyar<sup>v</sup> and The Women and Memory Forum<sup>vi</sup> in Egypt, Kohl Journal<sup>vii</sup> and Musawah<sup>viii</sup> for Muslims worldwide, the film Hunna<sup>ix</sup> as a channel for the voices of Syrian women refugees, and London Queer Muslims.<sup>x</sup>

Humanitarian workers, whether at the ICRC<sup>xi</sup> or Geneva Call,<sup>xii</sup> underline the high stakes and delicate nature of negotiating access to vulnerable populations, whether incarcerated men, or families and communities in conflict and crisis zones. These negotiations with national or regional governmental authorities involve the dynamics of gender as one form of interpersonal power dynamics. In some instances, the principle of gender equality must be sidestepped or watered down in order to gain or maintain humanitarian access. Though humanitarian assistance is urgent in the short term, the weakening of gender equality provisions may have longer-term impact on the advancement of rights in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA).

The involvement of humanitarian and human rights actors constitutes, on the one hand, an opportunity for using gender-conscious progressive discourse on prominent platforms. On the other hand, their involvement poses the risk of imposing homogenising and reductive methods and standards, including inattentively translated terminology, issued by the Global North to the Global South. The risk is that such programmes and operations leave local organisations, and the intended beneficiaries, disempowered.

Attending to the communicative relationships and processes both internal and external to organisations may be key to avoiding this risk. Some of these relationships are informed by intersections of gender with other categories, including socioeconomic hierarchies in the political economy of crisis. Highly educated and salaried mobile women who are also Arabic-speaking figures of interpretation employed in INGOs, for instance, undertake mediating work to alleviate risks to the organisations' beneficiaries and enable opportunities for their employers, while experiencing unequal job conditions and unsafe personal situations. Multilingual refugees who take on informal interpreting jobs suffer from the low status of

communication work, but see English as a key to escape precarity. Centring the communicative work at organisational interfaces, including properly resourced and valued translation and interpretation, would help recalibrate the power dynamics and decolonise the international knowledge infrastructure.

## 2- Strategies available to organisations

**Consult with a wide range of local activists, experts, and campaigning organisations.** To gain a sense of the various, and changing, connotations of terminology, of popular and general understandings of rights-promoting campaigns or of gendered aspects of humanitarian assistance, organisations should devote time and other resources to consulting a wide range of actors in MENA countries. This type of knowledge is often well understood by marginalised activists and organisations, who are realistic about their influence on societal change, general education, and governmental policy. They might welcome the mutual benefits of communicating with larger organisations which have channels of communication with governments and other official actors, or they might reject such involvement. Often this knowledge is local, context-specific, and difficult to transpose from one country to another in MENA.

**Consider the gendered and other elements of a respectful, inclusive, equitable, and safe workplace.** Putting policies in place regarding workplace harassment is a valuable first step. However, there could be more awareness and self-reflection on the implications of placing workers of different, and possibly variable, genders and sexualities, in positions of negotiators or presenters who are public facing, or who collaborate in teams or pairs. The specific combinations of relationships and positions impact how workers perform. Male and socially conservative beneficiaries or interviewees seem to sometimes find it easier to share their personal information with female humanitarian and human rights workers, because their dignity is less threatened than when disclosing to a male interlocutor. Female organisational delegates may accept to be spoken for by male colleagues, if it builds trust with governmental officials and thus enables practical outcomes. LGBTIQ workers may choose not to be identified as such in their professional capacities, for reasons of safety and effectiveness, and this choice may be impervious to reform regardless of institutional policies in support of LGBTIQ visibility.

**Value translators and interpreters, and provide support commensurate with the expectations and responsibilities placed on them.** Time pressure and heavy workloads combined with little or no recognition for accomplished work are demoralising. Realistic planning and budgeting, and giving credit for the delivery of human rights and humanitarian

programmes, will raise the status of translators and interpreters in organisations. The status of translators and interpreters, when they are critical to the achievement of project goals, might be on a par with other prestigious actors. These material and structural investments will be crucial to improving the quality of communications and promoting effort and talent. Effort and talent may be collective, interactional, and creative, and may involve communicators beyond professional interpreters and translators. These improvised interpretations may be recognised as translation too. Less space may be given to formal written communication, if it is only for the official record. It may be possible to explore joint meaning creation with beneficiaries and interlocutors, upon their request, and thus enable the conveying of organisational messages in ways that are better received.

### **3- Strategies available to translators and interpreters**

**Trust Arabic to convey meaning idiomatically and without jargon.** Arabic being a gendered language allows the possibility to give visibility to gender specifics in the form of pairing and listing, in ways that the more gender-neutral English does not allow.

**Arabic's registers and its geographical and historical varieties are valuable resources.** Modern Standard Arabic and its lexicon, morphology, and syntax should not limit the range of possible styles that are used for conveying gendered realities accurately and with sensitivity. The audiences of human rights, humanitarian, and policy texts may be more flexible in their acceptance of non-standard discourse than is assumed.

**As meanings and terminology evolve, the process of translation may feel unfinished.** Gender is a subject for which innovations move apace, established terms receive slightly different meanings (sometimes pejorative and sometimes reclaimed appreciative meanings), and buried words and long-lost syntax are given a new lease on life. Glossaries will be in constant flux. Variation and change are acceptable.

**As campaigns for recognition and protection of women's and LGBTIQ rights mature in MENA, legal codes will set around specific terms.** These legal terms might not be the same in every Arabic-speaking country, and definitions and references in footnotes will become even more necessary. This translational strategy should be coupled with promotion of a movement for language comprehensible to the general educated reader, specifically with respect to the evolving gender specific legal codes in contemporary Arab world. Efforts of linguists and legal scholars should be mobilized to develop terminology and labels that straddle the gap between tradition and contemporariness through close attention to the difold process of signification and communication underpinning the construction of language as social practice.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.aku.edu/govprogramme/conferences/Pages/home.aspx>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.ikhtyar.org/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.wmf.org.eg/en/>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://kohljournal.press/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.musawah.org/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.hunna-mor.com/>

<sup>x</sup> <https://londonqueermuslims.com/>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.icrc.org/en>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.genevacall.org/>