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Taking the gender agenda forward in EU programming

GENDER

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In December 2020, the European Commission released its new Gender Action Plan (GAP III), detailing the European Union (EU)'s policy ambitions for inclusion of gender in its external action. The plan was released during the process of programming of the EU external action instrument, now in the form of the new €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI). To achieve the ambition of the GAP III, the EU will need to expand on its growing technical understanding of gender in development cooperation, whilst ensuring that a more strategic vision for gender is embraced at the highest levels within delegations and shared with member states.

This paper analyses how the EU is approaching gender through a three-pronged approach, based on political dialogue, standalone projects and gender mainstreaming. Drawing on three limited case studies of Ethiopia, Mozambique and Mali, it looks at how gender will be integrated into the programming process, at the level of strategic involvement of member states, and at how delegations are interacting with local actors. Based on our findings, we propose ideas for the EU institutions, member states and delegations as they work to implement the EU's gender goals in the coming months.

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Acronyms

CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CLIPS	Country Implementation Plans
COREPER	Comité des représentants permanents
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil society organisations
DG INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships
EC	European Commission
ECDPM	European Centre for Development Policy Management
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSD+	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
EIB	European Investment Bank
EU	European Union
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali
EUD	European Union Delegation
EUSR	European Union Special Representatives
EUTM Mali	European Union Training Mission in Mali
FAC	Foreign Affairs Council
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEWE	Gender Equality and Women’s and Girls’ Empowerment
GFP	Gender focal persons
HQ	Headquarters
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice President of the Commission

KFW	Kreditanstalt Für Wiederaufbau (German Development Bank)
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, intersex and queer
LNOB	Leave no one behind
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MIPS	Multiannual indicative programmes
MS	Member States
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ORTM	Radiodiffusion Télévision du Mali
PAG	Principal Advisor on Gender
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDG PF	Sustainable Development Goals Performance Fund
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
TEI	Team Europe Initiatives
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
VAWG	Violence against women and girls
WPS	Women, peace and security agenda

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the European Union (EU) has gradually invested increasing political capital into the issue of gender equality in its external action. This included the third iteration of the Gender Action Plan (GAP III) in December 2020, detailing how the EU should approach and promote gender equality in its external action over the next five years. At the same time, the EU is in the process of programming its external action budget, notably the €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI), for the period 2021-2027. As part of this exercise, EU delegations are working on integrating gender, both through standalone projects and programmes and by mainstreaming of gender throughout other actions. As a whole, the EU aims to reach the target of gender mainstreaming in 85% of its external actions.

COVID-19 was yet another set-back to gender equality - both in Europe and around the world. It had a negative impact on many aspects of women's and girls' rights, notably leading to a global increase in gender-based violence (GBV), affecting the economic opportunities available to women and girls and exposing many women frontline workers to dangerous working conditions. This provided an additional impetus to the drive for the EU to increase its political commitment to gender equality in its external action, and in turn fed into the formulation of the GAP III.

Yet, it is clear that gender equality is one amongst many priorities in EU foreign and development policy, and one that EU delegations (EUDs) in partner countries often struggle to prioritise. The GAP III takes a more expansive vision of gender than past GAPs, integrating the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and mentioning the importance of prioritising gender in the EU's wider foreign policy and trade. However, EU delegations often have a very technical approach in partner countries, rather than having a strategic approach to gender with a clear vision for what it hopes to achieve and how. The challenge that the EU faces as it seeks to apply the GAP III will be to continue to expand on the growing technical understanding of gender in development cooperation, whilst also building a wider strategic understanding of gender that is embraced at the highest levels within delegations and shared with member states.

This paper analyses how the EU is approaching gender through a three-pronged approach, based on political dialogue, standalone projects and gender mainstreaming. It particularly focuses on the programming process, of which standalone projects and mainstreaming will be a part of, while the paper will also explore the scope of political dialogue and how this is linked to the programming process. The paper also proposes ideas for the EU institutions, member states (MSs) and particularly for delegations as they work to implement the EU's gender goals in the coming months.

The research is based on 36 interviews with officials from the EU, EU member states, partner countries and the United Nations (UN), as well as representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs) in Europe and in partner countries. We conducted limited case studies focused on EU action in three partner countries: Ethiopia, Mozambique and Mali. The choice of three countries in Africa stems from ECDPM's focus on EU-Africa relations in particular, while we also chose to look at three countries that are geographically and culturally quite different, have different track records on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment (GEWE), and have very different histories and relationships with Europe. Our analysis focuses on EU action in these countries, rather than on the gender situation in those countries.

The structure of the study is as follows: A first section will look at the GAP III, some of the political drivers behind it, some of the challenges identified in a recent evaluation and the key positive changes between GAP II and GAP III. A second section focuses on the current NDICI programming process and how it looks to integrate gender, notably through the integration of gender in the Multi-annual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) and the country level

implementation plans (CLIPs) on gender. Thirdly, the paper will explore the three-pronged approach the EU is following in partner countries, and specifically the state of play on gender mainstreaming, standalone projects and political dialogue in the countries covered by this study. Fourthly, it will ask to what extent European Union Delegations (EUDs) are managing to work with civil society and local governments in partner countries. Finally, it will lay out some recommendations based on the findings of this study.

2. GAP III: Political drive, lessons learned and steps forward

The political drive for gender action in the EU

There have been several strategies to promote gender equality in the EU over the past decade, and there also appears to be a growing political drive for gender equality in EU external action. Although the EU's commitment to gender equality precedes the current Commission, Ursula von der Leyen's desire to highlight gender equality was particularly clear from the beginning of her term, with her demand that each member state put forward both a male and a female candidate for Commissioner. The Commission is currently made up of fourteen men and thirteen women. However, it is also important to note that the EU has never before been quite as divided on gender equality, with several states, notably Poland and Hungary objecting to the term "gender equality" due to their concerns that the term opens the door to greater lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) rights. They argue that the treaties refer only to equality between men and women (von der Burchard 2020; Zalan 2020).

Yet, the EU has proceeded to move forward in its pursuit of gender equality - both domestically and in its external action. The EU launched a new domestic gender equality strategy in March 2020, composed of six pillars:

1. tackling Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and stereotypes;
2. tackling economic inequalities;
3. women's leadership;
4. mainstreaming of gender across EU policies;
5. funding gender equality actions; and
6. gender in external action (EC 2020a).

This was followed in November 2020 by the EU's first ever LGBTIQ Strategy, "Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025." (EC 2020b) The EU's new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Relations 2020–2025 (GAP III), which follows and builds on two previous action plans, was then launched in December 2020. It lays out the EU's vision for how to integrate gender into its foreign, development and security policy in a more coherent way. It is based on five pillars:

1. ensuring that gender equality is a cross-cutting priority in EU policy and programming work;
2. EU and member states ensuring that gender is prioritised in engagement at multilateral, regional and country level;
3. pursuing focused engagement across six thematic areas;
4. leading by example by making gender equality a priority in EU leadership structures; and
5. reporting and communicating results (EC 2020c).

For the policymakers and CSOs we interviewed for this research, the political drive for gender action in EU external action comes from different places. For some it comes from a strong human rights tradition within Europe, together with strong commitments throughout EU development policy. For others, especially within the EU institutions, personal leadership by former Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, and now by Commissioner for International Partnerships Urpilainen, has played an important role, together with the

strengthening of the gender unit within DG International Partnerships (INTPA). These developments also make the GAP III's fourth pillar - Leading by example - somewhat more credible, although achieving actual gender equality in the top ranks of EU foreign policy personnel will also be important for that credibility (Jones 2021; de la Baume 2021). For most actors the advent of COVID-19 made the push for gender equality all the more imperative.¹ At the same time, four EU member states adopted a feminist foreign policy in recent years,² which means: "applying a systematic gender equality perspective throughout the whole foreign policy agenda" (Government of Sweden 2019). One interviewee considered the Gender Action Plan III to be a positive step towards an EU-wide feminist foreign policy, as it integrates gender into foreign policy and trade to a greater extent than in the past, including the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. However, the ideal would be for the EU as a whole to adopt a feminist foreign policy, and in the meantime to include gender on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council more often.³

However, multiple official and civil society actors interviewed noted with worry the growing tendency of certain member states, led by Poland and Hungary, to block Council Conclusions on any topic that includes reference to gender equality instead of equality between men and women. This was the case both for the Council Conclusions on GAP III itself and for the Team Europe Council Conclusions that were blocked in December 2020 because they mentioned "gender equality". The same member states have also been attempting to block instruments in the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) that mention gender in their regulation. This has led to strong concerns that the EU's legitimacy and leadership on gender equality might be undermined.⁴ After the failure to agree Council Conclusions on GAP III, there were Presidency Conclusions (CoEU 2020), but these do not have the same weight.

¹ Interviews, 10 February & 1 March 2021.

² Sweden, France, Luxembourg and Spain.

³ Interview, 25 February 2021.

⁴ Interviews, 18 February & 3 March 2021.

Figure 1: Key Findings, Evaluation of the EU's external action support to gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment (2010-2018)



Source: EC 2020d, p.4.

Most important changes between the GAP II and the GAP III

Many interviewees highlighted that GAP II had already marked an important advance on GAP I, including a much higher degree of political buy-in. GAP III marks another level of ambition and commitment, notably because of its timing which allows for it to be taken into account during the EU's NDICI programming process. Officials and civil society representatives interviewed in Brussels and other European capitals also highlighted a number of other positive advances, including the importance of the three core principles underlying the GAP III and the integration of new thematic focus areas into the GAP III.

Integration of GAP III into the programming process: The programming process is a key decision-making moment that offers an important opportunity to incorporate the goals of GAP III into the EU's external action. Through the programming process, the EU and its partners agree on the priority areas of intervention and the financial allocations for cooperation for the period 2021-2027. EU delegations around the world, in consultation with partners, are currently identifying how they will spend their allocation of the €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI), for the 2021-2027 period (CoEU 2021). Over the past twelve months, the EU institutions in Brussels and the delegations have engaged in a complex programming process that, for the first time, included a pre-programming phase under which EUDs developed country analysis and an assessment of EU interests in partner countries, sometimes carried out jointly with member states. This exercise was meant to serve as a basis to identify the priority areas of mutual interest for cooperation, including GEWE. In late February 2021, each delegation submitted their draft MIPs to headquarters, identifying key priority areas for intervention. In the coming months, delegations will need to fill out the details of what programmes and projects will fall under each of these areas of intervention, with the current calendar indicating submitting of their final MIPs in late July, followed by the more detailed Annual Action Programmes. GEWE should feature prominently in the MIPs, especially given the ambitious gender-related spending targets embedded in the NDICI regulation.

Gender equality is mentioned as a priority in the NDICI regulation and the NDICI recalls the GAP III objectives. Programming guidelines require that at least one project per country has gender equality as its main objective and to update gender country profiles and gender sector analysis. The publication of the GAP III in December 2020 offers an additional opportunity to integrate gender into the programming process, with clear guidelines for how to go about this. Notably it includes the three-pronged approach to gender, meaning delegations should 1) fully integrate gender into their political dialogue, 2) design stand-alone projects as part of the programming process that further gender equality; and 3) reach the mainstreaming target of including gender in 85% of new external actions initiatives as a significant or principal objective. While this latter target implies that most EU interventions will need to have a gender equality angle, the target is set for the NDICI as a whole, and not for individual partner countries or actions. Member state representatives interviewed were concerned that gender must be fully mainstreamed into the programming of the EFSD+, but felt that there were still many questions about how this would be done. Given the current political drive to leverage investments with loan guarantees, it is essential that gender is fully mainstreamed into this process, including in large infrastructure projects (Ahairwe and Bilal 2020).⁵

The core team that put together the GAP III included people who had previous experience in delegations working on the programming process, and therefore sought to align the GAP III with the needs of delegations to the greatest extent possible. A joint letter from the Director General of DG INTPA and Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS) emphasised the importance of the GAP III. A series of follow-up actions have been designed to ensure that it is well understood and implemented by delegations and Headquarters. The gender team within DG International Partnerships (INTPA) delivered several information sessions for EU delegations and Brussels-based staff following the adoption of GAP III, provided training sessions that were open to all EU staff and specialised training sessions specifically for gender focal points in delegations, and are planning trainings for Member States

⁵ Interview, 10 & 25 February 2021.

representatives and on new topics such as the gender dimension of the Green Deal and Digital. They also reviewed the guidelines on gender analysis and the terms of reference for getting a country gender profile.⁶

Guiding principles: The GAP III goes a step further than its predecessor in clearly laying out three core principles that should undergird EU external action on gender. These are: a) a gender-transformative approach, b) addressing the intersection of gender with other forms of discrimination such as disability, ethnic background or sexuality, and c) a rights-based approach to gender. The transformative approach is defined as “examining, questioning, and changing rigid gender norms and imbalances of power which disadvantage women and girls and generate discriminations at all ages, starting from early childhood, in societies.” It proceeds to state that the EU will seek to tackle social norms and to engage men and boys, as well as centring young people and working closely with civil society to ensure context-sensitivity. The intersectional approach means that the EU should pay attention to other factors that might further disadvantage women, including racial/ethnic and religious background, age, disability and sexuality, noting that the EU LGBTIQ equality strategy should be read in conjunction with the GAP III. The human-rights approach specifies that the principles of non-discrimination and countering inequalities should be front and centre in all EU actions.

While several member state representatives appreciated the ambition of these principles, it was clear from interviews that the level of understanding and commitment to these principles at field level varied much more. One member state representative at headquarters (HQ) interviewed highlighted that the focus on the transformative change agenda was particularly important, demonstrating a move away from a surface deep understanding of change towards an approach based on understanding intersectionality and underlying power dynamics that are essential for real change. This would in turn require a new approach to monitoring and evaluation that moves beyond just reporting deliverables towards tracking social dynamics.⁷ The capacity and commitment of EU delegations to integrate these principles in their daily work differs from one delegation to another, but we will discuss this further in the next section.

Thematic areas: The GAP III moves beyond the three thematic areas featured in the GAP II,⁸ and expands the focus areas to six key thematic policy areas. These are:

1. ensuring freedom from all forms of gender-based violence;
2. promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights;
3. strengthening economic and social rights and empowering girls and women;
4. advancing equal participation and leadership;
5. integrating the women, peace and security agenda (WPS); and
6. addressing the challenges and harnessing the opportunities offered by the green transition and the digital transformation.

Overall, most stakeholders in Europe consulted (EU institutions, several MSs and CSOs) felt that the broader range of thematic areas was positive, as delegations could then choose which of the areas were most relevant in their local context. Indeed, the thematic areas of the GAP III seem to include all the preferred gender-related topics of the member states, as confirmed by several interviewees consulted for this study. There was a general consensus that the integration of WPS into the GAP III was a positive step, while several member states mentioned that they were glad to see sexual and reproductive health added, as well as the newer policy agenda around green and digital.⁹ Further analysis will be necessary to establish what the EU’s added-value might be in many of these areas, but that

⁶ Interview, 1 March 2021, email, 8 April 2021.

⁷ Interview, 10 February 2021.

⁸ The three thematic areas of GAP II were: Ensuring girls’ and women’s physical and psychological integrity; Promoting the economic and social rights / empowerment of girls and women; Strengthening girls’ and women’s voice and participation.

⁹ Interviews, 10, 25 February, 3 March, 8 April 2021.

is beyond the scope of this study. Given the separate frameworks for WPS and often the separate personnel involved, we hope to look at how effectively this is integrated into the GAP III in future work, but we have not covered that in this study.

3. Implementing GAP III: Processes, Expertise and Coordination

The country level implementation plans (CLIPs)

In the current programming process, DG INTPA has introduced Country Level Implementation Plans (CLIPs) on GAP III. The CLIPs should be developed by EUDs. While guidelines on the CLIPs are being finalised, the idea is for EUDs to use the CLIPs to identify all the actions that will be undertaken in fulfilment of the MIPs' commitment to gender. The CLIPs will be formulated based on an updated country gender profile, and an analysis of the expected challenges in the country. This process requires the delegations to be more specific in their gender objectives and to think about 'how' exactly the commitments in the MIPs will be realised.

The formulation of CLIPs is a new feature of programming and it is part of headquarters' attempt to bring about an organisational cultural change whereby delegations take more ownership of the implementation of the GAP. In principle, the CLIPs will be submitted by the end of July, along with the final MIPs, but the timeline might slip through as delays may be expected in the programming process which follows a very tight and ambitious calendar. Delegations will thus need to use the time after the submission of the initial MIPs which was in January/February to work on the CLIPs.

With the introduction of the CLIPs, the objective is that all sections of the delegations (political, development cooperation, trade etc) come together to discuss their respective gender-related actions to formulate coherent and strategic EUD wide plans. The process is also aimed at getting buy-in and collective ownership among staff members at all levels in the delegations, from cooperation and political officers to head of delegation. The hope and expectation from headquarters is that delegations would formulate CLIPs through a reflective process that doesn't treat it like a "copy paste and tick box exercise".¹⁰

Experience shows however, that this is easier said than done. Some delegations have already asked for technical assistance in getting started with the CLIPs, suggesting that formulating the CLIPs is not straightforward and some are still struggling with how to go about it in practice.¹¹ While technical assistance can be useful, building up internal capacity to work on gender will be important going forward. In fact, the EU has a long history with outsourcing the development of expertise in gender in the form of gender help desks, technical assistance and consultants that has hampered the EU's own capacity development in this area. There is still room to improve the level of leadership and personal commitment of staff to this new way of working, including through incentive and sanction schemes.

At the time of interviews, the delegations in the three case-study countries hadn't started with or were at the early stages of the CLIPs and were still focusing on the draft MIPs. All delegations confirmed their plans to work across units on the CLIPs and acknowledged the merit of the CLIPs in translating the gender equality commitments of the MIPs into practice. One delegation reported that, for that country, commitment to gender equality is already high in the delegation and they hope to meet and exceed the 85% target.¹² In another delegation however, an interviewee questioned the utility of the CLIPs in realising the aspirations of the GAP III if the MIP fails to adequately articulate

¹⁰ Interviews 1 & 12 March, 2021.

¹¹ Interview, 1 March 2021.

¹² Interview, 1 March 2021.

the gender priorities, approaches and principles of the EU.¹³ It has to be noted that a strong gender perspective at the planning stage in the MIP provides better changes to integrate gender afterwards.

The third delegation said they may organise a reflection on how the EU's commitment to ensure that 85% of actions have gender equality as the main or as a significant objective will be taken into account in each of the sectors of the MIP. They mentioned that at the country team meeting with representatives at HQ, there were no specific comments on gender in the MIP at this point. However, they felt that gender integration could be more concretely developed in the annual action plans, starting with that for 2021, which will be prepared in April-May 2021.¹⁴

Expertise to implement GAP III

The EU has gradually developed its expertise on gender, notably by expanding the gender unit, but also developing expertise in other units, within DG INTPA. There have also been efforts to raise the wider level of understanding of gender issues across the EU institutions and among EUDs through training and capacity building. But one civil society interviewee noted that the EEAS at HQ level has not invested as heavily in gender expertise as DG INTPA. As already noted, it has fallen short on women in senior management. It also has no gender working group, although it has an informal Task Force on WPS. The EU/EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender (PAG) role was also left vacant for some time after the mandate of Ambassador Mara Marinaki, the first-ever PAG, ended in December 2020.¹⁵ Recruitment of a new PAG started after advocacy by MEPs, who also called to elevate this position to an EU Special Representative (Neumann 2021).

As already mentioned, DG INTPA in Brussels had organised several trainings to orient the EUDs on the GAP III during the programming period. These practices and efforts are commendable and speak to INTPA's prioritisation of gender in development cooperation. But the extent to which these trainings build the gender capacity of EUDs in the long term, and in a systematic manner remains to be seen. As it stands, the three EUDs differ in their self-assessment of how easily they could use the guidance from Brussels to act on the GAP III effectively. In one of the delegations, an interviewee reflected on the difficulty of translating the guidelines into practice and noted 'it's one thing to say 85% of new EU programmes in partner countries will have gender equality as either a main or partial focus; and another to figure out how to achieve this objective'.¹⁶

In house expertise on gender varies across EUDs, and also across various sectoral areas within delegations.¹⁷ For example, one delegation noted that the level of in house expertise on gender and health and nutrition is different from the level of expertise on gender and infrastructure development.¹⁸ Similarly, an interviewee from one of the delegations observed that younger delegation staff seem to be well informed and more at ease with integrating gender in their work compared with senior colleagues who tend to see it as an added task (EC 2020d, p. 30).¹⁹ In another delegation, the combination of leadership at the level of head of cooperation and the assistance of the gender focal person appeared to facilitate a more collegial way of working in which gender is considered a shared responsibility and is consistently integrated in the EU's action.

To address the lack of capacity and gender expertise, many delegations - including the three delegations relevant for this study - turn to consultants for technical assistance, although overreliance on external expertise may hamper the EU's own capacity development. Delegations also have designated gender focal persons (GFP) who usually bring gender expertise and perspectives across several topics. The GFP role is usually taken on a voluntary basis on top of

¹³ Interview 17 March, 2021.

¹⁴ Email, 1 April 2021.

¹⁵ Interviews, 18 & 25 March 2021.

¹⁶ Interview 17 March 2021.

¹⁷ Interviews 1, 12 & 17 March 2021.

¹⁸ Interviews 12 & 17 March 2021.

¹⁹ Interview 17 March, 2021.

other responsibilities and gender focal persons may not have extensive gender training, but in most cases they are personally and professionally invested in pushing the agenda forward.²⁰ In other delegations this role appears to be carried out by a local expert. From a coordination point of view, the presence of GFPs has facilitated a better flow of information between Brussels and delegations as well as across delegations. For example, in the current programming process, the gender team at INTPA convened the gender focal persons for specific training on the GAP III and also for experience sharing across delegations.²¹

The designation of gender focal persons has its merits but it doesn't automatically translate to structural capacity change within delegations. GFPs generally have other responsibilities and gender is one of two or more portfolios they follow. Hence, they can only do so much to support delegation staff. In addition, a large number of interviewees pointed out that the GFPs can do little on their own. This is an observation shared by the recent evaluation of gender in external action which noted the "marginalisation" of the GFP function and the fact that GFPs are not well positioned or senior enough to influence decision making (EC 2020d, p. 32). Full buy-in and capacity-building of all delegation staff - from the Ambassador all the way down - as well as adequate time and resources - are required to ensure a satisfactory integration of gender in EU external action.

Coordination with Member States

While the GAP III generally reflects the gender priorities and approaches of the member states, EU member states in partner countries are guided primarily by their national development cooperation and gender guidelines (when such guidelines exist). Some member states use the GAP III alongside their own national gender documents, while others make reference to it but are not guided by it. Some member states - for example Sweden, France, Spain and Luxembourg - have formulated feminist foreign policies and this often translates to gender being more central to development cooperation and political dialogue as a matter of principle and practice.

At the implementation level, the level of coordination on gender between the EUD and its member states in partner countries differs across countries. For starters, EU member states are strongly encouraged to take part in reporting on the GAP implementation on an annual basis, along with EU institutions and EUD. Joint reporting on the GAP cannot be taken as coordination, but it can serve as an information hub for coordination. In all three countries, interviewed member states did report on the GAPs, but some also characterised the reporting as perfunctory (visibility-oriented) rather than impact-oriented, and felt it did not facilitate or create incentives to achieve better results on the ground.²² Other interviewees were dissatisfied with how the GAP II reporting was quite heavy while there was little meaningful dialogue between the EU and MSs to accompany this, and no feedback from delegations or EU HQ. If member states will be asked to continue carrying out heavy reporting, there will need to be a better feedback loop moving forward.²³

Other, more substantive avenues for EU-member state coordination are joint programming and joint implementation, as well as the Team Europe initiatives which are being prepared as part of the programming exercise (Jones and Teevan 2021). Donor coordination platforms in partner countries also offer opportunities for the EU and its member states to coordinate amongst themselves and collectively push for specific gender related agendas. The type and level of coordination between EUDs and its member states differs across the three countries studied. However, in line with the recent evaluation on gender in external action, there was a sense that a common strategic vision on gender issues was often missing amongst EU and MS actors in the three countries (EC 2020d).

²⁰ Interviews 1 & 17 March 2021.

²¹ Interviews 1 & 12 March 2021.

²² Interviews 23 & 25 March, 2021.

²³ Email, 1 March 2021. Interviews, 2, 5, 9 & 16 March 2021.

For example, in Ethiopia, clear and tangible coordination between the EU and its MSs is taking place on gender in the framework of the Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) which are on job creation and digital. These initiatives are at the inception phase and GFPs of the EUD and EU member states are already working together to ensure TEIs align with the GAP III, and are gender sensitive and responsive from the get go. This has been positively facilitated and driven by the EUD-initiated Gender Task Force which constitutes the gender focal persons of the EUD (chairing) and EU member states and the European Investment Bank (EIB). Established five years ago to accompany the implementation of the GAP II, the task force has been revived and is now focused on TEIs. The main activities taken so far towards this end are various consultative meetings, and joint selection of consultants to conduct gender-sensitive scoping studies and develop gender profiles for the TEIs. While these activities may seem rudimentary, the fact that the Task Force took the initiative to integrate GAP III objectives into the TEIs is commendable. Further, their effort, if maintained throughout the design and implementation of the TEIs, will strengthen the contribution of TEIs to gender equality.

Another relevant area where the EU and its member states work together is in the context of their sectoral support to the government's health policy (Health Sector Transformation Plan), in which gender is considered in nexus topics such as maternal health, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), female genital mutilation (FGM) and GBV. This includes a significant budgetary component²⁴. The EU and its member states are significant contributors to the Sustainable Development Goals Performance Fund (SDG PF) for health in Ethiopia. This is an all-donor coordination platform and member states participate in these platforms on their bilateral capacities and are not coordinated enough to project a "European front".

In Mali, interviewees varied in their assessment of the level of coordination between the EUD and member states on gender. There are thematic donor coordination groups in Mali, but in 2020, the architecture of the thematic groups in Mali changed and the thematic gender group became a (dialogue) sub-group within the "Inclusive and Sustainable Economy' thematic group'. Gender nevertheless remains, at least in principle, a transversal element in all the thematic groups. The gender thematic group, extended to include all technical and financial partners and the UN system, was not, however, the only place for discussions between MS on gender issues. Discussions between the EUD and member states sometimes took place in informal or ad hoc groups, particularly when they pertain to specific topics of interest to certain MS at a given time.²⁵

Officials noted that a couple of member states were vocal about gender in meetings of the Heads of Cooperation of the EUD and member states and gender is included in the country analysis in the joint programming documents (more on this in section 4), but gender does not seem to feature systematically on the agenda of Heads of Cooperation meetings. There also does not appear to be an EU specific task force or working group on gender.²⁶ One member state representative interviewed noted having difficulty understanding how coordination around gender worked - either at the EU level or more broadly - and found opportunities to engage in joint analysis and advocacy efforts were very limited.²⁷

In Mozambique, EU member states participated in the yearly reporting on the implementation of GAP II and in 2016 established some division of labour on occasion of the elaboration of the country plan. In the same year, due to a high-profile scandal on domestic debt and corruption, EU budget support and related coordination mechanisms between donors and the government of Mozambique were dismantled. Overall donor coordination has been patchy since then, including on gender matters. At the moment, there are different working groups that discuss gender issues but none of them seem to have either a strong enough mandate or a wide and inclusive enough

²⁴ Interview 23 March 2021.

²⁵ Email, 1 April 2021.

²⁶ Email, 1 March 2021. Interviews, 1 & 2 March 2021.

²⁷ Interview, 16 March 2021.

representation to lead on the agenda. The EUD established the EU gender and citizens group that brings together European gender focal points to push GAP III forward at country level.

Other groups also exist in which European actors take part. Some EU member states, such as France, Belgium, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands, also take part or have expressed interest in the Coalition of the Willing donor group which has a newly established gender-focused working group led by Canada and the UK. While the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Policy has established a Gender Coordination Group, the group has struggled to go beyond operational and short-term matters. The ministry is aware that it needs a stronger and more strategic mandate to steer the gender agenda forward and enhance cooperation between the ministry and the donor community. It is working to improve this in the coming months through a new strategic orientation and new terms of reference.

Overall, the depth and quality of coordination between EUDs and member states in the three countries leaves much to be desired. This is notably the case in terms of 1) systematising the exchange and coordination on gender; 2) active participation (beyond finances) in donor coordination platforms and pushing shared agendas/positions; and 3) pulling together forces when it comes to technical and political dialogue with governments of partner countries. The latter point ought to include dialogue with ministries with specific mandates for gender.

Over the years, the salience of gender in EU and MS foreign and development policy has increased. At the same time, the EU has pushed for more joint action (programming and implementation) with its member states in partner countries. These two developments are pre-conditions for better coordination between the EU and its member states on gender equality. Despite some improvements, the EUDs in the three countries struggled to take the necessary leadership to bring EU member states together for concerted and strategic action on gender. While the EUD and some of the EU member states are recognised as key financial actors in donor coordination platforms in the three countries, they are not always the most active thought-leaders and participants in these platforms. To achieve the transformational ambition of the GAP III, the EU would have to deploy more tools than its financial leverage in partner countries.

The EUD-led Gender Task Forces (as in Ethiopia and Mozambique) are entry points for improving coordination and also strategising on concerted and effective ways of contributing to gender equality in partner countries. The Task Forces also offer an opportunity to bridge the gap in gender capacity within EUDs and across EU member states as they can pool their respective gender expertise. But strategic guidance from headquarters and a stronger political backing from Heads of Delegation is required to realise the full potential of the task forces.²⁸ That said, caution should also be exercised to avoid making the gender task forces too bureaucratic and resource-consuming,²⁹ as the GFPs have other responsibilities and gender is only one of the topics they cover in their day-to-day work.

Applying the GAP III principles

The application of the GAP III guiding principles (discussed above) is one of the main cross cutting challenges most interviewees in partner countries identified. The conceptual basis of the principles is not generally contested and the relevance of these principles to the three countries (but also many more) is acknowledged by all stakeholders - European and national alike. Yet, the major difficulty is how to apply these principles in practice - notably the expectations around intersectionality and transformational approaches - during the formulation of the MIPs and then during the design and implementation phases.

²⁸ Interview 17 March, 2021.

²⁹ Interviewees in Ethiopia mentioned how the ad-hoc set up of the process seems to work better as the work of the task force will be on a needs basis and based on the personal/professional drives of the gender focal persons as opposed to designated persons who do it only because it's their job.

EUDs and member states had mixed feelings about the possibility of having more interventions that espouse a transformative and intersectional approach as advocated in GAP III. Many interviewees noted that all actors - the EU, its member states, the partner countries, and implementing CSOs - struggle to translate the concepts of transformative change and intersectionality into their interventions, although some interesting examples also emerged. The shared challenges across countries are mainly about the following points:

Considering the differentiated needs of women: Many existing projects do not seem to target the differentiated needs of women. In Ethiopia, there are some attempts to introduce intersectionality by paying attention to the inclusion of women with disabilities in particular. Some interviewees in Mali and Mozambique also highlighted women with disabilities as a particular focus for intersectional approaches. There is hope that GAP III implementation will improve the integration of intersectional approaches into design, planning and reporting of actions.

Taking into account gender and sexual minorities: In the context of Ethiopia and Mali, LGBTIQ rights are a highly sensitive issue and appeared to have very little salience in national debates or in development cooperation. The topic is taboo and doesn't feature in political dialogue or on development programmes.

Tackling normative aspects of gender inequality: Several interviewees reflected on how there is a tendency to focus on women's participation and livelihood creation as primary pathways to women's empowerment without addressing cultural dimensions of empowerment and disempowerment. For example, despite the recognised role of women in African agriculture, working on changing behaviour and attitudes and looking at women as capable economic agents and capable household/community decision makers is still a challenge in some instances. Addressing this would require working closely with rural communities and community leaders, including engaging men and other stakeholders (e.g. religious leaders) in the process.

Engaging men (addressing the relational aspects of gender inequality): According to interviewees across the three countries, many initiatives fail to look at men as agents of change and organisations that bring this perspective are not sufficiently engaged - despite some exceptions. For example, both official and CSO interviewees in Mali noted the importance of engaging with men, including traditional and religious leaders, and working to change mentalities, notably on GBV and on SRHR. Engaging men and boys is an important part of pillar 3 of the Spotlight Initiative, while interviewees also mentioned the "École des Maris" (School for husbands) (PSI Mali n.d.), a project co-financed by several EU member states including the Dutch Government, Sweden's SIDA and Germany's KFW, as an important example of how to engage with men on the topic of SRHR.³⁰ In Mozambique, civil society and some international donors, including European ones, are aware of the important role that men can play in transformative change but there is still a way to go to input this perspective in actual programmes and consultations.

While the above seem to be the shared challenges, each delegation also has its own experiences, challenges and also best practices:

In the case of Ethiopia, some interviewees who had read the draft MIP shared the concern that it fell short of addressing the structural elements of gender inequality in the country and didn't reflect the GAP III principles well enough. One specific observation related to the draft MIP's lack of an intersectional understanding of gender in Ethiopia (based on ethnicity, geographic location, different age groups (older women), levels of education). The other observation was that the MIP did not aim to contribute to transformative change, for example by tackling gender norms that can undermine women's decision-making power even when their socio-economic conditions improve.³¹

³⁰ Interviews, 16 & 22 March 2021.

³¹ Interviews 1, 17, 23 & 25 (a, b, c) March 2021.

In Mozambique, there is no shared understanding or cohesive action towards the realisation of the GAP III principles and they are unevenly taken into account depending on the issue. Intersectionality is taken partially into account, for example looking at how geography, age and conflict interact with gender. So far, addressing the needs of women in rural areas, supporting female ex-combatants in support of the peace process in the country and addressing the needs of youth (for example preventing early marriages and adolescent pregnancies) are areas that have received more attention than the overlaps between disability and gender and economic empowerment. The EUD aims to focus more on the latter through Team Europe initiatives that will look at youth and women entrepreneurship.

A transformative approach and the human rights principle would deserve more efforts. Interviewees mentioned the involvement of men as change agents as crucial in Mozambique and accompanying support to organisations that work with men.³² Similarly, attention to women with disability is seen as transformative. Both areas have been neglected and it has been difficult to bring the EU delegation and European donors on board.³³ One interviewee from civil society mentioned that a human rights approach can favour a more transformative and intersectional approach.³⁴ This point couples well with a strong call from Mozambican civil society for a more vocal and active EU on women and human rights in situations where women suffer from unbearable discrimination and violence including gender based violence, as it is the case of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique.³⁵

In Mali, interviewees working on gender projects emphasised that it is above all important to adapt to the context of the country, and above all to adapt the GAP III to social realities, economic and cultural aspects of the country - and have realistic expectations.³⁶ Working on gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms strongly rooted in society requires long-term support and collaboration with different categories of societal actors and intervention at different levels.³⁷ One interviewee working with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the field argued that for a gender transformative approach, it is important to strengthen the capacities of the EUD, to make an effort to explain clearly the themes related to gender, to develop tools that advance qualitative approaches to mainstreaming, to create a synergy between the various funders so that they adapt communication and training to disseminate information and monitor people likely to be transformative actors.³⁸

The challenge of pursuing transformative and intersectional approaches is in part an accountability/incentives issue. While EUDs have a number of policy directions, legislative obligations, and benchmarks they need to follow and have various reporting mechanisms, there are no clear sanctions - by the EU or partner countries - if they do not meet some of these benchmarks or effectively apply the GAP principles.³⁹ EUDs do receive feedback from member states in partner countries, the EEAS and INTPA Brussels on draft MIPs. They have to submit CLIPS and also report on the GAP III implementation in due time. All of this fosters learning, iterative adaptation and some level of accountability. But the depth and nature of these exchanges do not automatically constitute a strict accountability mechanism which compels EUDs to make sure the MIPs are intersectional and transformational enough.

Similarly, governments in partner countries do not usually insist that the EU should effectively integrate intersectional and transformational approaches. Partner countries are primarily focused on ensuring MIPs are aligned with broader national development objectives or gender priorities. Therefore, they may not push the EU in the direction of the GAP III principles unless partner countries themselves are deliberate and politically invested in these principles as pathways to tackling the root causes of gender inequality. That said, the observation that EU

³² Interviews, 1 & 5 March 2021.

³³ Interview, 5 March 2021.

³⁴ Interview, 18 March 2021.

³⁵ Interviews, 1, 9, 17, 18 March 2021.

³⁶ Interviews, 9 & 22 March 2021.

³⁷ Email, 3 March 2021.

³⁸ Interview, 9 March 2021.

³⁹ Interview 17 March 2021.

gender interventions in the three countries are not transformational or intersectional enough doesn't mean EU's interventions are trivial. Rather, it's to say these interventions are relevant, well appreciated and add value in and of themselves but they fall short when juxtaposed against the full ambitions of the GAP III.

The other reason why some delegations struggle with applying two of the GAP III's principles - intersectionality and transformative approaches - is because these two are new features of GAP III. Hence EUDs would need time to process, contextualise and reflect on these principles in their work and develop their capacities in doing so.

In Brussels, there is indeed an understanding that an effective implementation of the GAP III requires organisational cultural change.⁴⁰ This notably and immediately requires a change of approach for incorporating gender in the programming process, from a 'tick-the-box' exercise to a reflective, consultative, and delegation-led and owned process.⁴¹ But this takes time. In the meantime EU institutions in Brussels are also considering incentives and accountability measures to promote and push such an organisational change. Some ideas in this regard include tying the assessment of senior management of Delegations to their performance on gender equality.⁴² This is one positive approach which in due time, should be adapted to allow a nuanced, qualitative and quantitative assessment of delegations' and senior management's performance vis-à-vis the objectives of the GAP.

4. Three-pronged approach: Political dialogue, standalone projects and gender mainstreaming

The GAP III employs a three-pronged approach to gender in partner countries that combines gender mainstreaming, targeted interventions and political dialogue. We will look at each of these elements in turn:

Gender mainstreaming

The GAP III attributes a central role to mainstreaming and presents it as the “primary means” to achieve gender equality to ensure that all EU policies and actions contribute towards that objective (EC 2020d). This regards also regional and multi-country engagement, for example under the Africa-EU partnership. The EU has reiterated its commitment that 85% of all new external action spending will have gender equality and women's empowerment as a principal or significant objective. Despite including this target already in the previous GAP II, the EU struggled to achieve it by 2020 and has now established a new deadline for 2025.

Our research asked how mainstreaming is understood at the delegation level and whether delegations are effectively mainstreaming gender in their future programming and activities. We found that some delegations are better equipped than others in that regard. Support and guidance from EU headquarters combined with strong leadership by EU heads of delegation/cooperation and expertise from gender focal points at country level should lead to a collaborative working environment where all staff feel compelled to ensure gender mainstreaming at the planning stage.⁴³ The coincidence of the publication of the GAP III with the NDICI programming process seems to have offered a better opportunity to instill a gender perspective in the different objectives of country MIP early on. This seems to be the case in Mozambique. Yet, for some, the GAP III is perceived as another layer of work and gender primarily seen as the responsibility of the gender focal point.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Interviews, 1 & 12 March 2021.

⁴¹ Interview, 1 March 2021.

⁴² Interview, 1 March 2021.

⁴³ Interview, 1 March 2021.

⁴⁴ Interview, 2 March 2021.

Mainstreaming should take place already at the programming design stage, including in the analysis of the situation in partner countries. For example, several interlocutors pointed out that the country analysis in the Joint Programming document for Mali includes a section on the status of women, but that there was no effort to mainstream gender throughout the analysis of the country situation that the document contains. Considering the particularly difficult situation of women in Mali, and the disproportionate impact of conflict on women's well-being, this kind of mainstreaming of gender into the country analysis is vital to ensure that gender is truly considered across the board in the programme design phase (EEAS 2021).

Ensuring effective gender mainstreaming, however, requires further actions that go beyond the planning stage and which may be difficult for all EUDs to implement due to constraints in leadership, expertise or capacity. Our research detected a general acknowledgement of the need to follow through on the gender equality agenda across all steps of programming and implementation, but not always a detailed understanding of how to do that. For example, additional clarification and steer will be necessary on how to use the updated gender profiles required by the GAP III as a basis for integrating gender in policy and political dialogues, programmes and other actions for programming purposes. In a similar vein, it will be important to adopt adequate indicators that provide the right incentives to implement an impactful gender agenda. However, it is still a challenge to do this systematically across all EU interventions, especially in EU delegations where awareness and leadership on gender is low.

In principle, all actors interviewed consider mainstreaming as useful and necessary in light of the immense scale of the gender equality agenda. Integrating a gender perspective is not only good as a principle but a necessary step, because as one interviewee in Mozambique remarked: "women are agents for national development."⁴⁵ However, interviewees also raised concerns that mainstreaming results in a dilution of the gender agenda or that mainstreaming is not translated into practice. Putting gender front and centre of all actions, including adequate planning, consistent monitoring and adaptation is therefore essential. Further, it is difficult to tackle gender issues without calling upon the expertise and long-term engagement of local experts or activists in trade unions, academia or civil society that know the context the best.⁴⁶ In this regard, adequate capacity and support at the EUD level to give continuity and depth to relationships with different stakeholders and gather adequate information to read the country context is an area that calls for great improvement.

One interviewee from an EU delegation noted that the leadership in their delegation must be thoroughly convinced, and that there should perhaps be consequences for not achieving gender targets. However, they did also argue that context was important as this can limit what is possible. Officials emphasised the importance of training and adequate tools, noting that there had previously been something of a checklist, but this box ticking exercise did not adequately ensure that gender was integrated in a qualitative manner. It was argued that there was a need for suitable tools that allow them to verify that gender has been thoroughly integrated into projects.⁴⁷

Standalone projects

In addition to mainstreaming, the GAP III calls for actions that target gender equality and women's empowerment as a principal objective and requires that at least one action in each country has this framing. Globally, aid with a primary focus on gender equality has stalled in recent years, despite the added value of such dedicated actions (Holton 2020).

⁴⁵ Interview, 18 March 2021.

⁴⁶ Interview, civil society, 18 March 2021.

⁴⁷ Interview, officials, 2 March 2021.

The [Spotlight initiative](#) was widely mentioned as the EU's main project at global level in the area of gender equality. It is a flagship global partnership between the EU and the UN to end all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. Launched in 2017, the initiative has six complementary and mutually reinforcing pillars:

- promoting laws and policies to prevent violence and discrimination and address impunity;
- strengthening national and regional institutions;
- promoting gender-equitable social norms, attitudes and behaviours;
- making essential services for survivors of violence available;
- improving data on violence against women and girls; and
- supporting strong civil society and women movements.

Despite being the most known EU project on gender, some interviewees in Europe did wonder whether it has had as high a level of impact as the communication around it suggests.

In Mozambique, the Spotlight is a well-known and highly relevant project. The EU leadership is visible, but the EU is perceived as a distant partner with limited involvement in the actual work due to the implementation arrangements with the UN. One of our interviewees highlighted that these arrangements can be cumbersome and expensive and sometimes act as an impediment for a more direct relationship with the EU.⁴⁸ Economic empowerment seems to be a promising area for future dedicated work: it is a rising topic on the national agenda and also one in which the EU hopes to invest more, for example through Team Europe initiatives.

In Mali, Spotlight was also highlighted as one of the major standalone initiatives of the EU, and the EU delegation appeared to be quite involved with the coordination team of the UN, with frequent consultation between the two. The initiative was not able to work in the conflict regions of the country, but some of its communication efforts, such as a series to be broadcast on national TV channel, ORTM, should reach beyond the six regions covered by the project. The coordination team is working to develop a network with civil society, and already engages with around 250 CSOs. The project team appeared conscious of the need to adopt an intersectional approach, reflecting the "Leave no one behind (LNOB)" principle of the SDGs - noting that they try to include disabled women - and a transformative approach, emphasising the importance of working with religious leaders and engaging in efforts to change men's perspectives.⁴⁹

Political dialogue

The GAP III approach puts an emphasis on scaling up EU engagement on gender equality and to do so in a more strategic manner. In the GAP III, political dialogue at global, regional and country level is considered of utmost importance to achieve this goal and align EU and partner countries priorities. Political dialogue can facilitate an integrated and comprehensive approach to gender, whereby GEWE issues are addressed throughout the EU cooperation with partner countries, including development policy, trade, peace and security and broader foreign policy.

The GAP III is a step forward in this direction with a call to include gender matters in trade, fisheries, migration and research and innovation policies. But the realisation of its high ambitions for transformation will require a step up for political engagement. Our research found that gender is included in some political dialogues and has been a point of discussion in some sectoral dialogues. In Mozambique the political dialogue under the Art. 8 of the Cotonou Agreement usually has a point on gender and the topic has been discussed also in relation to the women, peace and security agenda. It will be important to guarantee that this dialogue continues under future post-Cotonou arrangements. The first sectoral dialogue on justice between the EU and the Government of Mozambique that

⁴⁸ Interview, official, 19 March 2021.

⁴⁹ Interview, 22 March 2021.

occurred in 2020 included a point on women, peace and security, where the EU underlined the importance of including women in peace processes and in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration efforts. In Ethiopia, the donor coordination platform on health, which includes the EU, is used to discuss gender-related issues with the Ethiopian government. The Donor Group on Gender Equality which has been around for some years, now includes the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth but this started only in February 2021. Often, due to political and societal realities, the dialogue on gender is limited to men and women rather than LGBTIQ.

In Mali, formal political dialogue usually occurs only once a year. Due to the Malian institutional crisis following the coup in 2020, no dialogue took place that year. Discrimination against girls and women, gender-based violence, women's participation in decision-making bodies, FGM and early marriage have all been discussed on occasion. It was noted by interviewees that the systematic inclusion of gender in political dialogue would need to be reinforced. However, as this political dialogue happens only once a year, it is also sometimes more useful to tackle these questions at informal occasions such as EU events, inaugurations, and ministerial dialogues. It was also noted that all EU actions and projects are approved by the government.⁵⁰ The EU also has two CSDP missions in Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali and EUTM Mali, each with a gender advisor, which have had the prime responsibility for the women, peace and security agenda. The EU thus has a wide range of tools available to it, allowing it to advance its gender goals on a number of fronts.

While gender equality and women's empowerment have become more prominent in the EU development and foreign policy, they still remain relatively marginal topics with limited political traction at country level. Dialogues do not necessarily lead to policy change and translating political commitments into practice has proven challenging. In Ethiopia as well as in Mozambique, the national discourse is one that endorses amplifying the role and participation of women in all sectors, preventing violence in all its forms, ensuring women are able to exercise their rights and addressing socio-economic discrimination. But national policies and laws and budgetary allocations are not always aligned to these intentions. In the three countries, the ministries responsible for leading on the gender agenda - the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Policies in Mozambique and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and Family in Mali - are among the most under-resourced and weakest ministries, politically and bureaucratically. In all the three countries, there is ample scope to strengthen relationships between these ministries and the EU and increase involvement in political and policy dialogues that include or focus on gender.

5. Local ownership

Meaningful and sustained engagement with a variety of actors is the cornerstone of successful action, including central and local governments, networks and civil society organisations working on women and girls' rights and/or LGBTIQ rights, experts and activists, religious leaders and businesses. This is also recognised in EU policy and approaches: both the GAP III and the programming guidelines require EUDs to consult local actors for the preparation of the CLIPs and of the MIPs. Programming guidelines require that EUDs submit the list of the CSOs they consulted in the programming process. Civil society roadmaps are required to take a gender perspective and ensure participation of local actors working on gender, including at grassroots level.

The issue of local ownership is of special salience for the gender agenda, where cultural norms and political sensitivities enter into play, while the need for urgent and sustained action is more and more evident. In a way, the increased prominence that the EU has given to the gender agenda requires showing some sense of progress at partner country level. This, in turn, is likely to be the result of a wide-ranging set of cooperation and political actions rather than a bureaucratised approach that bets on good projects or even gender mainstreaming. One fundamental

⁵⁰ Interview, 2 March 2021.

change that the EU could consider is how it engages more politically and creatively with local champions and change agents, including those at the margins of society or sitting in gender ministries, even if these are politically weak. This requires going beyond formalised policy dialogue, and the EU's recognised added-value as a funder, to encompass a more dynamic and informal set of relationships and actions.

Historically, the EU has not been well prepared or has chosen not to take such an approach due to limited capacities, staffing decisions at HQ and in delegations, existing accountability and careers incentives and political circumstances. A more political approach to external action could lend some space for the way the EU works at country level to change progressively. Due consideration to limited local capacities will also need to be factored in, with a view to continue providing or initiating targeted support to strengthen the local actors that can push for change. While some of these actors are weak in terms of being able to deliver visible results in the timeframes required by the EU, their ability to frame action for impact and read the national context are likely to be much higher than those of the EU itself. As a consequence, if the EU is ready to make the necessary changes to its own workings and approach at country level, there is much to gain from a more political and innovative engagement with local actors.

CSO engagement

The ability to reach local actors and the extent to which they have been included in consultations for programming or, more broadly, engage with EUDs varies greatly from country to country and over time. Nevertheless, there are some shared points that come across from the case studies. Overall, delegations have different channels to engage with civil society in Ethiopia, Mali and Mozambique, notably through programmes and the funding attached to it, the civil society reference groups of the Spotlight Initiative, the civil society roadmaps, working groups or coordination mechanisms (where they exist) and through consultations.

In the case of Ethiopia, CSOs that work on gender and feminist organisations were consulted for the development of the MIP through sectoral workshops. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EUD in Mozambique conducted a virtual "road trip" through 10 virtual meetings in which the EUD presented programming priorities for the country and gathered feedback. In parallel, the EUD has started a CSO mapping that will be the base of a new CSO roadmap, where gender will be an important objective. In Mali, a civil society roadmap is also being prepared, while the delegation also funds civil society organisations through the Hibiscus programme. While neither of these has a specific gender focus, some women's organisations are certainly funded through the latter. EU funded programmes such as the Spotlight Initiative and Haoua, a project working with women's rights defenders in Mali and Algeria, have strong outreach with civil society. This includes a network of 250 CSOs working on gender in the case of Spotlight, but this is coordinated by the UN.

Ongoing efforts to boost CSOs' contribution to the programming process is commendable however, a few critical points need to be addressed. Firstly, there are several entry points for CSOs and local organisations to engage in EU processes and have exchanges with the EUD. However, such opportunities may be confusing and hard to identify for local actors as often they do not have enough information on what these processes aim to achieve or follow them throughout their development. In Mozambique, for example, organisations have engaged in the programming consultations, as well as in the CSO mapping the delegation is currently running. But it is not always clear to them what the differences between these processes are and what each one is supposed to lead to. Ensuring that the EU processes are understood and make sense for local organisations can enhance the EU's credibility and also level mutual expectations on the results.

Secondly, while civil society usually acknowledges that EUDs have taken various steps to consult with CSOs in the pre-programming and MIP formulation process, they usually question whether the consultations go beyond mere information sharing. They are also not sure if and in what ways their input has an impact on EU plans and approaches. In Ethiopia, CSOs raised the additional point that such exchanges, while useful and offering a space to exchange

views, are not sufficiently deep and systematic and run the risk of becoming a simple formality or box-ticking exercise.⁵¹

Another potential area for improvement would be for EUDs to provide feedback on whether and how stakeholders' inputs have been used in the MIP or in other EU documents. Such a step would improve accountability, build mutual trust and strengthen local ownership. While government stakeholders are consulted and usually given an opportunity to comment on the draft MIP, this is not enough for genuine ownership that goes beyond state authorities.

Thirdly, to make progress on gender issues, consultations must include a broad range of women's groups and gender advocates, including those at grassroots, outside national capitals and in hard-to-reach areas. This would ensure that differentiated experiences are given due considerations and ensure fair representation. Admittedly, reaching out to grassroots organisations based outside of capitals can be challenging and expensive. Genuine and systematic engagement with CSOs would require serious political support and planning at the level of the delegation, adequate financial support and potentially use of virtual tools as well as sufficient time and capacity-building for CSOs to participate. However, there are different ways to overcome these bottlenecks. For example, one way the EUD in Ethiopia has tried to deal with this issue is by inviting a network of women's organisations with sufficient representational power and also reaching out to non-traditional networks like trade unions. Virtual regional consultations in Mozambique have also helped in that regard.

In some circumstances, engagement with non-governmental actors can become a sensitive issue if national public authorities feel they are overridden or that the EU is trying to push an external agenda of which they have no ownership. Local cultural norms and political reasoning can be presented as a rationale for not working on gender issues or take a different approach to deal with those. While this was not the case in the three countries covered by this study, this is a broader concern that may apply to other contexts. The EU is therefore called to navigate complex political environments to back its values agenda. Solutions to this type of conundrums may vary - we offer some reflections on the value of closer engagement with the government through political and policy dialogue and of working with agencies dedicated to cover gender issues in a partner country.

Government ownership

The EU takes into account a series of strategic documents at country level, including national development plans and gender plans (when they exist), and those are in fact the point of departure for identifying priority areas for cooperation. The EU consults with the governments of partner countries in this process. But in most cases, the direct counterparts of EUDs - formerly known as National Authorising Officers - are housed in the Ministries of Finance (or similar line ministries) and Foreign Affairs. Political dialogue tends to focus on these stakeholders, and also other ministries in specific sectors where the EU's engagement is stronger, such as health. In all three countries, engagement with the ministries that lead on the gender portfolio such as the ministry of women or similar - seems to be an area for improvement. An interviewee in one of the three Ministries commented that their interaction with the EUD is limited to sharing documents by email, but never involves any actual meetings.⁵² In all three countries, these are fragile and under-resourced institutions that are sometimes marginalised within national governments. They are generally amongst the Ministries with the least institutional/administrative capabilities to implement large scale programmes. This is problematic as the EU tends to take the role of funder rather than a proactive gender thought leader or advocate.

Some interviewees noted that it would be difficult to achieve broad-based and substantive changes on gender if the agenda is not owned and steered by a strong line ministry which pushes both the government and the donors

⁵¹ Interviews, 17 & 22 March, 2021.

⁵² Interview, 9 April 2021.

towards coordinated action.⁵³ Therefore, while EU and broader donor strategic engagement with these ministries (ministries of women and equivalent) is nascent in all three countries, it might be a precondition for making substantive contributions to gender equality in partner countries in the long term. This may require the EU to measure progress and results differently, as the structural weaknesses of these ministries is likely to inhibit their ability to deliver tangible results in the short term even if their strategic relevance to the EU has increased. How to work with these ministries in the long term and in a supportive manner would require some thinking how to work with member states that may have more latitude to lead the engagement with these ministries.

Helping public actors that own the gender agenda to overcome their limitations can contribute to progress. For example, Mozambique has a strong legal framework for gender equality. This includes, approval of main international conventions, established rights under the national constitution and more gender-focused policies and legislation, such as the Gender Policy and Strategy for its Implementation (2018-2022), and national plans on gender-based violence, the advancement of women and on women, peace and security, some of which form the basis for cooperation with international donors. Interviews mentioned that the main challenges lie in the implementation of existing legislation and plans, due to limited enforcement of the legal provision, limited resources allocation, scarce capacity and follow-up in the public sector and limited accountability.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The political and technical investment in GAP III was markedly better than in GAP II. EU institutions in Brussels - notably DG INTPA - have provided significant expertise and political backing to GAP III and substantive technical support to delegations to facilitate a smooth integration of the GAP III in the ongoing programming process. This indicates that the salience of the gender equality agenda has increased in the EU's external action over recent years. That said, there is a noticeable discrepancy between the level of enthusiasm and political weight over the GAP III in gender units at HQ level and at the level of delegations in the three countries. This owes to an uneven level of leadership from senior officials in delegations. But it is also a result of the technical and practical challenges of translating the GAP III's ambitious principles, approaches and benchmarks into practice in complex settings amidst several competing priorities, local sensitivities and also established organisational working cultures. **To ensure that gender equality is given the necessary high-level political investment in EUDs, there needs to be continued support and training to EUDs but also incentive and accountability/sanction schemes. The integration of gender markers into management reviews of delegations would be an important step in this direction. Filling the vacancy of EU principal Advisor on Gender, housed in the EEAS, and ensuring that role is appropriately staffed and directly connected to senior management decision-making could have positive contributions as well.**

In Brussels, the implementation of the GAP III comes against the backdrop of 'cultural change' that EU institutions are trying to instil in the programming process. With the introduction of the NDICI, the EU seeks to be more strategic and policy-driven. This means encouraging delegations to identify and promote EU and partner countries' mutual interests in a more politically savvy manner and work in a multi-stakeholder approach, including more substantive engagement with CSOs. From our observation of the three countries, the envisioned organisational cultural changes (e.g. delegation-wide joint reflection and more in-depth engagement with CSOs) were relatively slow with regard to the integration of gender into the MIPs. But the upcoming steps of the programming process, including the development of the CLIPs, offer opportunities to further exercise 'new ways of doing business'. **To make the implementation of the GAP III meaningful, it will be important that delegations as a whole, particularly at the level of senior management, engage with this process and do not leave it to the gender focal points to lead alone. Truly advancing gender equality requires high-level political commitment, and not just technical know-how, and**

⁵³ Interviews (a, b), 25 March 2021.

thus can only truly be advanced by Heads of Delegation and other senior staff. Not doing this would be a recipe for failure, as has been repeatedly demonstrated in the past.

The NDICI programming process will reach a critical phase with all the draft geographic MIPs being analysed at HQ for consistency and compliance over the coming months. **This provides a fundamental opportunity to consider whether the GAP III commitments are sufficiently reflected in the draft MIPs and what can be improved. In particular, it is an opportunity to harvest best practices and examples to drive forward change where gender is concerned, as well as for course correction where gender has been insufficiently integrated.** Some discussion of this could be undertaken in internal EU institutional programming processes, and through the nascent NDICI comitology, but also in forums such as the Council Working Party on Development Cooperation (CODEV), the European Parliament's Development Committee (DEVE) and at meetings of MS Gender Advisors.

There is a lack of a strategic and systematic approach to how the EU and MSs work together on gender in partner countries. Member states often have a strong political will to support gender equality and may have stronger gender expertise available compared with the EU delegation. Yet, EU delegations and member states do not systematically work together to ensure the GAPs are integrated into the planning and implementation of the MIPs and Joint programming in the three countries. Member states repeatedly complained that EUDs turned to them primarily to fill out onerous reporting on the GAP II, but that there was little or no strategic discussion around how to work together to further gender goals in partner countries, both through development programming and at the political level. In some cases, member states even noted the lack of sufficient channels to discuss joint advocacy or communication efforts. **EUDs and MS must engage and consult with each other on gender issues systematically to ensure there is a joint strategic vision for the way the EU approaches gender in partner countries. These efforts should happen at the level of Ambassadors and EU Head of Delegations through the Heads of Mission meetings (EU HOMMS) since this is the best setting to show the necessary leadership on the topic and enact recommendations on better working together on gender issues. MS champions could play a leading role on coordination mechanisms.**

The GAP III principles - transformative, intersectional and human rights-based approaches - are widely accepted but difficult to implement. Interviewees with European and national stakeholders across countries noted that while the GAP III principles are highly relevant for their respective contexts, many previous or proposed EU interventions are neither gender-transformative nor adequately intersectional. EUDs also shared that despite the guidelines they received from Brussels, they still lack sufficient guidance on *how* to translate the principles into concrete actions and programming. This challenge relates to lack of capacity, both of personnel and expertise, among EUD staff, as well as path-dependency and a certain resistance to change. The diversity as well as the systematic nature of gender inequality in the respective partner countries, make it even harder to conceptualise and implement transformative interventions. Issues around LGBTIQ are not raised in Mali and in Ethiopia, due to cultural and political sensitivities. **To ensure these principles are implemented effectively, EUDs should be provided with the practical and political tools needed to translate the principles into actions and projects. Both DG INTPA and the EEAS (including the regional directorates) would need to back EUDs politically and institutionally. At the same time, the EU would also need to put in place strong incentives and accountability mechanisms which encourage EUDs to innovate ways of working which rely on intersectional context analysis and are geared towards designing transformative programmes. A group of gender advisors from like-minded MSs, that wish to prioritise gender, is already considering putting together an action group on transformative approaches.**

Gender equality has not been a prominent agenda point in political dialogue between the EU and the three partner countries we studied. Political dialogue is one of the pathways through which the EU aims to promote its values and principles, including achieving the objectives of GAP III but not enough investment has been put into raising the salience of gender in political dialogue. This is both at HQ level (EEAS) and in partner countries. The EEAS could do

more to build its capacity on gender and external action, to put its political weight on gender in political dialogue and to assist delegations to do the same. As a result, in the three countries, gender is raised only occasionally in political dialogue between the EU and the partner countries or it is raised as a subtopic in sectoral dialogue between donors (including the EU) and partner countries. **The EEAS should take more leadership to put gender as a key component of external action and support, incentivise and politically back delegations to do the same at the partner country level - even if the scope and quality of political dialogue on gender would vary from country to country.**

While the EU's support to CSOs is well recognised, much appreciated and critical in strengthening civil society in partner countries, the quality of the EU's engagement of CSOs in its own programming process is less impressive. The EU provides both financial and technical support to CSOs including women's organisations and feminist groups in partner countries. However, consultation of CSOs in the programming process tends to be one-off, uni-directional: the EU does not report back to CSOs to inform them of how their input was used in the programming process. Further, this consultation is often limited to CSOs with presence in the capitals or to the leaders of CSO networks and it rarely involves grassroots organisations. While this is largely a result of an organisational culture that doesn't demand systematic engagement with CSOs, COVID-19 and the inability to have in-person meetings has been an added impediment in the current programming process. Nonetheless, the use of virtual meetings may have enlarged the scope of EU engagement beyond the usual suspects. This limited engagement would need to change to ensure EU's interventions in partner countries are well informed and also 'owned' by national actors. **In the area of gender equality, it is essential to engage with local women's groups and women's rights defenders to understand the most essential areas of action from their perspective, particularly if the intention is to bring about transformative change.**

Overall, gender in EU external action has undoubtedly received a much stronger political push in the past few years. But a more deliberate and systematic approach to gender equality in EU external action would be needed to ensure that political rhetoric on gender equality is effectively translated in the EU's engagement with partner countries. For this to happen, organisational culture and working methods of EU institutions need to change. To support this process, the GAP III aims to put in place some measures to raise the profile of the gender equality agenda and increase capacity to deliver on that - both at HQ and in delegations - including training, performance assessments and other measures. The quality of the monitoring system of the GAP III and its use as a tool for learning and to create incentives will be crucial in that regard. Beyond compliance to the EU's own gender related commitments there is a need to identify, laud and reward progress, risk taking, creativity and good examples. While all examples are context specific and probably not immediately replicable, efforts should be made to identify, reward and publicise them to provide a positive incentive to others.

The gender agenda is wide, while bottlenecks in EU institutions' working methods and at country level are often entrenched. The EU's credibility on gender will be tested based on its ability to match its political rhetoric with practical actions - both technical and political - in partner countries. This includes working on sometimes sensitive issues and also being there for the long haul where steady, sustained and far-reaching engagement and action are needed. Momentum needs to be maintained beyond the programming phase and the formulation of the CLIPs. The EU has attempted to raise its game on gender in the past and GAP III is certainly ambitious. Yet, the GAP III comes at a more turbulent political juncture for EU external action and for the EU relationship with partner countries. The EU's credibility on this issue will require a clearer political buy-in at the level of partner countries, together with a sense of urgency and the need to make incremental progress. The EU rhetorical commitment on gender is high, but other priorities such as the digital and green transformations appear to be still more salient and have stronger political backing. Yet, the vastness of the gender agenda and its potential for large scale, systematic impact should be kept in mind in any future discussion on building back better in the wake of COVID-19 and for the EU role in the world.

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