

BRIEFING NOTE No. 157

Gender equality in EU external action: Leadership from the EU headquarters

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By Mariella Di Ciommo, Maëlle Salzinger, Sophie Desmidt and Katja Sergejeff

Summary

The EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) is a wide-ranging plan for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU foreign and development policy. Two years into its release, this first brief focuses on how gender equality is addressed in the agendas of the working groups of the Council of the EU and through the role of the EU's ambassador for gender and diversity. It looks at how the EU and its member states can speed up the implementation of GAP III as well as the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and exploit synergies between the two.

GAP III is a document of reference for EU development cooperation but has limited relevance for EU external action overall. Different thematic and regional working groups of the Council could increase

the references to GAP III and foster its full uptake, both in the EU institutions and across EU member states. Mainstreaming is an effective strategy to keep gender equality on the Council agenda and avoid resistance by some members, but it does come with some costs. The EU's ambassador for gender and diversity should be better equipped to fully champion GAP III and the WPS agenda across the EU institutions and beyond.

This is the first of a series of three briefs. Together, these pieces analyse the leadership of the EU to GAP III, including on WPS.

Introduction

The EU Gender Action Plan III – an ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action (GAP III) is a wide-ranging plan for gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) in EU external action. The full realisation of GAP III requires structural changes to the way in which the EU operates and extensive support across the different components of the EU administration, especially its leadership.

One of the main ambitions of GAP III is to enhance political leadership on women's empowerment and gender equality across the full spectrum of EU external action and, while not binding, it serves as a reference for member states' foreign and development policy. Two years into its release, this brief analyses to what extent gender equality issues are addressed in different preparatory bodies of the EU Council, including in relation to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (Desmidt and Salzinger, forthcoming). We focus primarily on whether and how gender issues are included in the agendas of these bodies.

We then look at how the role of the EU's ambassador for gender and diversity could increase political leadership and improve EU interinstitutional collaboration on gender (Di Ciommo 2021; Teevan 2021; Teevan et al. 2021). Leadership on GAP III is a collective endeavour that also involves other parts of the EU Commission and administration, from the level of EU commissioners to the level of EU delegations. Although these other aspects and actors are relevant and would deserve further investigation, they are not covered in this study.

This brief is one of a three-part series. The other two briefs look at how GAP III is implemented at country level in the area of women's economic empowerment and in connection to the WPS agenda, with examples from Bangladesh, Mozambique and Kenya.

Enhanced leadership on gender will be important to follow up on GAP III as a whole, including on the WPS agenda. In addition, leadership is essential to meet the EU commitment to mainstream and scale up financing for gender equality under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe). The instrument regulation requires that at least 85% of new external spending initiatives have a gender equality objective, either principal or significant and 5% should have gender equality as a principal objective (EP 2021). The interinstitutional agreement on budgetary disciplines for the whole of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework commits the EU to develop a method for measuring gender-related expenditure in relevant programmes (EP 2020).

The EU still needs to work hard to meet these commitments. Preliminary data on the NDICI-Global Europe suggest that, while DG INTPA is reportedly performing well in terms of the gender equality targets, other parts of the EU Commission seem to be lagging behind (EC 2022). Additional evidence points to the need to improve funding allocations as well as the quality of projects that intend to support gender equality in EU external action (EC 2020; ECA 2021; ECA 2021b).

This study is based on a limited set of interviews with EU officials, Council delegates and civil society organisations as well as documentary research. It also draws on past ECDPM research on the subject. The study covers the Working Party on Development Cooperation and International Partnerships (CODEV-PI), the Africa Working Party (COAFR), the African, Caribbean and Pacific Working Party (ACP), and the Mashreq/Maghreb Working Party (MaMa). The Political and Security Committee (PSC), the Military Committee and the Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management (CivCom) are covered when it comes to the relationship between GAP III and the WPS agenda.

The brief is structured as follows. Section 2 presents how gender is addressed in the agenda of the different configurations of the Council preparatory bodies. Section 3 discusses mainstreaming as the principal approach to those discussions. Section 4 delves into the role of the EU's ambassador for gender and diversity in the realisation of GAP III and the integration of the WPS agenda and GAP III. The conclusions and recommendations are presented in section 5.

How gender is addressed in the agenda of the EU Council

Development cooperation and geographical working parties

Our study found that beyond the CODEV-PI, GAP III is rarely used as a document of reference by different configurations of the Council. It largely remains a reference for EU development cooperation, as opposed to wider EU external action. The CODEV-PI is where gender equality is brought up in agenda points more frequently and with reference to GAP III, whereas the geographic working groups covered by this study cover gender much less regularly and not necessarily in relation to GAP III.

The sporadic reference to GAP III may be justified by a division of tasks between the Council's working groups in which the CODEV-PI has an explicit mandate on GAP III. The division of labour among working groups aims to avoid duplication of analysis and reporting exercises on different files. While useful, this division needs to be balanced against GAP III ambitions to instil a gender perspective in the whole of EU external action beyond development cooperation. This is an ambition that cannot be sustained only through the workings of the CODEV-PI and needs other working groups to be more aware and take more ownership of the EU gender agenda.

Political/security and military working parties

Similarly, the WPS agenda remains the main reference to discuss women's and girls' experiences and their situation in crisis or conflict situations in the PSC, the Military Committee¹ and the CivCom. Since the adoption of GAP III, the EU Action Plan on WPS has to be implemented jointly with this document and their reporting needs to be aligned. This conceptual integration of the WPS agenda in GAP III

has the potential to strengthen the implementation of WPS commitments (for instance, the 2018 EU Strategic Approach to WPS and the 2019 Action Plan on WPS), to provide incentives to address operational challenges and raise WPS more clearly as a comprehensive component of the EU's external action (Desmidt 2021).

Findings from interviews suggest that GAP III has not made a notable difference in terms of how WPS is addressed. Therefore, some of the more ambitious aspects of GAP III, such as its intersectional and transformative approaches, have not informed discussions on WPS. One major reason seems to be that, in the current context, the Council delegates consider that keeping the WPS agenda implementation and GAP III separate is more productive and even necessary since WPS is deemed a less controversial entry point than GAP III.

Interviewees consistently suggested that there is resistance from a few EU member states who oppose the gender equality language present in GAP III since it goes beyond the man/woman binary categories. Conversely, member states find easier agreements to mention women's need for protection in conflict and recognise the track record of the WPS agenda.²

A notable development has been the adoption of recent Council conclusions on Women, Peace and Security (14 November 2022), which make a reference to GAP III. The conclusions reiterate the need to report on WPS within the reporting for GAP III, which helps reaffirm that WPS is a key dimension within the EU's gender equality work. This is the first set of Council conclusions on WPS since 2018 and the first since the adoption of GAP III in November 2020. The reference to GAP

It might help to better position it as a reference document for EU actors, including member states.

At a more fundamental level, according to the Council delegates interviewed for this study, there is a lack of understanding among all member state delegations of how these two agendas connect. In the PSC, the application of the WPS agenda is often limited to discussions on the need to protect and account for women's vulnerabilities in conflict. These discussions have had positive repercussions, by allowing for women's vulnerability to specific challenges, like SGBV, to be better taken into account in the context of Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Still, strong references to the role of women as actors of conflict, as peace enablers or on how gender norms affect both genders may be fuelling conflict in specific contexts are missing. Stronger linkages would allow the WPS agenda to adopt more transformative and intersectional approaches to gender equality, for example, taking into account the diverse roles and experiences of both men and women in conflict or how protection measures could consider the multiple backgrounds of women and men (socio-economic, educational, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, et cetera).

In CivCom, a more technical committee, it has proven even more challenging to mainstream gender in a meaningful, practical way. This is in misalignment with the EU's own commitments towards integrating the WPS agenda in civilian CSDPs and the EU's Strategy and Action Plan to Enhance Women's Participation in Civilian CSDP Missions 2021-2024.³ In this committee, the WPS agenda is currently a recognised agenda, but gender equality is often seen as competing with other priorities, such as, for example, human rights.

A discussion on how EU member states are contributing to the implementation of the WPS agenda, either through their national action plans or in support of the EU's Action Plan on WPS/1325, does not take place in Council Working Parties. The EU Informal Task Force on WPS/1325, chaired by the EEAS and gathering EC and member states' officials, would be an additional and informal space in which this could be done.

Gender at headquarter level: Mainstreaming versus specific discussions

Gender equality is a perspective that is mainstreamed across discussions on EU external action and development cooperation, though not always with an explicit reference to GAP III, in all the Council preparatory bodies analysed for this study. This means that gender issues are usually dealt with as part of other topics on the agenda of the Council working groups, especially through questions asked by member states.

Our research did not detect a strong drive to have gender equality as a separate item for debate. First, delegates consider mainstreaming more effective than having separate points in keeping gender equality on the agenda, since thematic or context-specific discussions allow to address this topic more often and in the context of specific sectors. Second, mainstreaming is perceived to help overcome resistances related to gender terminology and language, usually led by Poland and Hungary. These two countries, jointly with Bulgaria, opposed Council conclusions on GAP III in 2020. Finally, mainstreaming is considered a better approach to counteract the argument that addressing gender equality separately risks detracting space to debate other topics.

Mainstreaming may be an effective approach to further develop a gender perspective across different EU Council working groups that deal with EU external action. It can also be a pragmatic approach to avoid controversy, but it does come at a cost. One risk that needs to be managed is to perpetuate the existing limited understanding or lack of prioritisation of how gender equality can contribute to achieve objectives in other policy areas or high-level strategies. Even in areas with obvious overlap, such as between the WPS agenda and GAP III, political and security-focused working parties have not made significant advances in mainstreaming gender (Desmidt and Salzinger, forthcoming).

Another risk of the mainstreaming approach is that the multifaceted gender equality agenda is not treated as a whole, losing track of possible synergies across different domains of EU external action and development policy. Gender mainstreaming can be understood as a way to deal with the gender equality agenda as a whole and a perspective to analyse all areas. But this has to be an intentional choice.

In the case of the EU Council working groups, this intentionality was not detected and would need to be pursued. In addition to mainstreaming, gender-focused discussions could be incentivised on a regular basis, for example by extending an invitation to the EU ambassador for gender and diversity and her staff to address different working groups of the Council beyond PSC, like CODEV-PI and the geographic groups. This would be welcomed also by the delegates of CivCom and the Military Committee, where there is scope to mainstream gender into discussions, but where expertise is currently limited (see also Smit 2020).

With a few exceptions, gender equality gathers support across the spectrum of EU member states. Still, most of them do not necessarily dedicate their political energy to drive the realisation of GAP III. Demands to working party chairs to address gender seem to be infrequent and only a core group of member states raises gender points with consistency.

Sweden has long had a certain degree of leverage and political capital in the Council with regards to issues of gender equality, supported by its long-term commitment to this agenda and a dedicated Feminist Foreign Policy until 2021. Going ahead, the expectation is that Sweden's efforts to raise questions and make suggestions on gender equality in a specific and concrete manner would continue to be appreciated by other member states, some of whom have followed Sweden's lead to shape their own positions.

The role of the EU ambassador for gender and diversity

In July 2021, an EU ambassador for gender and diversity was appointed. Different from the previous position of 'principal advisor', this position is at ambassadorial level, with reporting lines directly to the secretary general of the European External Action Service (EEAS 2022b). The increased attention to gender equality issues, for example across the EEAS, is the result of the broadened mandate of the new EU ambassador on gender and diversity, along with steps to strengthen institutional capacities.⁴

Since GAP III, there is a network of gender advisors across the EEAS departments and a number of promising initiatives have been

launched, for example, the CSDP Mentoring Programme for Women (CoE-CIV 2022) or the establishment of the Missions and Operations Gender Monitoring Team (EEAS 2022). The network of gender focal points also includes staff from the European Commission and EU member states.

The ambassadorial status is a welcomed innovation since it allows participation in high-level political groupings such as PSC and senior management meetings. This access to senior EU leadership allows for more strategic and timely interventions to raise gender issues. It sends the right signals across the administration that gender equality and diversity do matter for EU external action.

In addition, whereas the previous position of principal advisor was focused on gender and the implementation of UNSCR 1325 (and WPS), the current EU ambassador covers both gender and diversity, connecting organisational improvements (for example, gender-responsive leadership, management training, internal procedures and staffing) with the EU's external action work. This is seen as a major improvement, giving the EU ambassador more political clout.

The current ambassador, Stella Ronner-Grubačić from the Netherlands, has prioritised the issue of fostering an EU gender-responsive leadership to implement GAP III. The EU ambassador has engaged on several fronts, including through the introduction of the concept of gender-responsive leadership in senior EEAS management meetings, a dedicated session on GAP III at the EU ambassadors conference 2022 and the conceptualisation of a gender-responsive leadership training programme in collaboration with DG INTPA and the Folke Bernadette Academy.⁵

Strengthening gender-responsive leadership is a sensible strategic focus and potentially has a multiplier effect on how gender objectives are pursued across the EU institutions. Past research shows that the support of individual EU ambassadors to partner countries is a key factor in determining if and how EU delegations approach gender in their own work (Teevan et al. 2021).

The office of the EU ambassador for gender and diversity has a broad remit, especially in light of the expansion of her mandate. Despite the elevation of her office to an EU ambassador, the role does not envision a dedicated budget to take initiative; and the EU ambassador's staff is seconded by EU member states.

At the moment, the ambassador's team has taken a selective approach in terms of what to focus on and who to engage with within the EU. Priority has gone to senior-level management within the EEAS and PSC and a stronger focus on WPS especially. This approach may result from the need to make hard and pragmatic choices in a situation of limited resources. However, it means that the EU ambassador cannot avoid narrowing priorities that defeat the purpose of the role itself, namely tackling gender issues consistently across multiple fronts and truly enabling a transformative (see Box 1) and intersectional approach.

box 1: Different approaches to tackle gender inequalities

Gender issues can be approached along a continuum that ranges from gender-sensitive to gender-responsive and then gender-transformative approaches. Gender-sensitive approaches recognise the different needs of women, men, boys and girls and acknowledge gender power dynamics. Gender responsive approaches go a step further and seek to mitigate or address negative consequences arising from gender inequality (for instance, legal support for GBV victims). Gender transformative approaches aim to address the structural factors behind gender inequality and gender discrimination. Gender-transformative approaches aim to achieve sustained change through action that targets harmful gender roles, norms and power relations (OXFAM 2019).

For several decades, a range of gender equality advocates have called for the adoption of a gender-responsive lens to the work of the EU. They advocated for explicit effort to take into account gender dynamics and gendered experiences in EU engagements, or else potentially negative consequences for gender equality may result from EU action. In more recent times, gender advocates have started to point out that gender equality work needs to be transformative to have impact. GAP III promotes such a transformative approach, following the assumption it can make the EU's efforts to advance gender equality more effective and sustainable.

Another risk of limited resources is to slow down the progress towards interinstitutional collaboration across the EU Commission and the EEAS, despite all the good will and efforts of EU staff.

This interinstitutional collaboration on shared agendas such as GAP III is a collective responsibility of the EU's senior leadership and not of the EU ambassador for gender and diversity alone. Still, this role could play a much larger part in stimulating the needed change of attitudes and refine the needed institutional arrangements and, in doing so, achieve a gender-responsive and gender-balanced administration (Plan International 2021).

Further, several other high-level appointments in the EU system, such as the EU special representatives, do have a separate budget, funded from the Foreign Policy Instrument (FPI) budget (Costa Reis et al.

2019). The EU should learn from international experiences, which suggest that most successful gender ambassadors or envoys combine a senior, often ambassadorial, ranking, a broad politically-backed mandate and well-resourced offices (CFR 2020).

Conclusions and recommendations

GAP III is an inspirational document, but it risks being trapped into a narrowly defined international development agenda. The absence of Council conclusions on gender equality or GAP III continues to limit a wider buy-in from the EU institutions and member states. The challenge is, therefore, to raise the profile of GAP III, in combination with the WPS agenda, and make it a document of relevance for all EU external action beyond development cooperation, including in the European member states. Implementation of the GAP III needs to be improved and sped up.

The EU political leadership and senior management play a fundamental role in shaping the future of GAP III. Member states also have a fundamental role to play, fostering the political conditions and supporting the technical processes to support GAP III, including in their own international cooperation and foreign policy.

Collectively, they have the responsibility to send a consistent signal to the whole administration that gender equality is core to EU external action and development policy. An unchallenged finding of our research on GAP III is that this leadership is a key factor to mobilise staff and resources for gender equality. Leadership is a quality that can manifest itself as a commitment and drive of the EU and member states staff at multiple levels and different bodies, including at the level of the EU delegations, member states'

embassies, the EEAS and Commission departments, and in the EU Council.

In this study, we paid attention to the latter and to the role of the EU ambassador for gender and diversity. Further research would be needed to build a more holistic approach of how leadership on gender equality is enacted and how it can be supported at different levels and in different parts of the EU institutions and among the EU member states.

There are a number of relevant processes that could help to shape action to speed up the realisation of GAP III ambitions. The mid-term evaluation and review of GAP III, to be presented in the second half of 2023, is a key process to assess the status of the implementation of GAP III, inform the next steps and build accountability of all actors. As a formal and dedicated process on GAP III, it could be used to build up momentum for its realisation.

In addition, the EU Commission is developing a methodology to measure expenditures promoting gender equality at programme level in the MFF 2021–2027, in alignment with the interinstitutional agreement on budgetary discipline (Art. 16/f) (EP 2020). This methodology could help measure GAP III implementation and identify gaps in expenditures.

Based on our findings and analysis, our recommendations are:

- 1. Expand the uptake of GAP III beyond the CODEV-PI working group to geographical and political working groups of the Council and their related technical groupings.** This is an important element to realise the ambition of GAP III to serve as a document of reference for EU external action, while respecting the mandate that CODEV-PI has on GAP III. Some EU member

states' delegates have an interest in bringing up gender equality in their discussions and realising GAP III, including in the areas of European and international peace and security, stability and democracy, food security, global health, migration, or trade.

2. **Complement the mainstreaming approach adopted in working parties with punctual discussions** in which gender equality is approached as a whole, including through the involvement of the EU ambassador for gender and diversity. This could happen in the form of an interinstitutional steering committee, attached to GAP III, with the purpose of supporting a whole of EU effort to steer GAP III implementation until 2027.
3. **Allocate more resources to the office of the EU ambassador on gender and diversity.** This is essential for the EU ambassador to fully deliver on her expanded mandate on GAP III and the WPS agenda. There is scope for the gender and diversity ambassador and her team to invest more in steering the full implementation of GAP III and the WPS agenda, including clarifying the benefits for EU external action as a whole.
4. **Strengthen EU interinstitutional collaboration to advance the implementation of GAP III.** The EU Commission and the EEAS should enhance their collaboration through:
 - a. Working level exchanges on gender, including GAP III implementation, among relevant geographical desks and gender advisors in the EEAS, DG INTPA and DG NEAR, including in military and civilian planning units.
 - b. Continued support to existing informal networks of gender advisors of DG INTPA and the EU member states.
5. **EU member states should endorse GAP III as part of their foreign and development policies to strengthen the EU's collective commitment and delivery on gender equality.** EU member states could:

- a. Strengthen accountability mechanisms and raise the political cost of not pursuing the objectives and actions of GAP III.
- b. Encourage specific briefings on gender in geographical working groups, and on gender and the WPS agenda in CIVCOM and the military committee, in particular cross-briefings with the UN, which has made more advances in integrating gender in their peace operations.
- c. Share the experience of European administrations across member states and other European actors on how to effectively mainstream gender across foreign and development policy and become more gender-responsive institutions.
- d. Present in the Council or informally, and on a voluntary basis, their self-assessments and data on their performance in terms of GAP III objectives. They could agree on follow-up action on how to improve the delivery of GAP III and the WPS agenda across the EU institutions, how to strengthen the uptake of GAP III within national development cooperation programmes and how to increase the gender-responsiveness of national administrations.
- e. Present their progress on GAP III as part of their Voluntary National Reviews on their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. On the occasion of the 2023 High-Level Political Forum, Belgium, the European Union, France, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia will submit their reviews.⁶ Other countries could be invited to do the same in the following iterations of this process.
- f. Improve the institutional memory and the retention of gender expertise while staff rotates. This could be done through a structured system of handover and briefings to staff as well as guidance on how to adopt a gender-responsive perspective in their work, to the benefit

of GAP III as well as the consolidation of gender in their own external policies.

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Endnotes

1. In the Military Committee, there seems to be limited awareness of gender-related discussions or of the relevance of the WPS agenda for the work of the Military Committee. This is based on a limited number of interviews: only one with a delegate from the Military Committee and one with another interviewee who commented on the workings of this Committee. The latter commented that the Military Committee was relatively detached from gender-related discussion, having “somewhat of a separate status”.
2. In the PSC, gender dynamics were discussed recently in the context of the conflicts in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).
3. Including, for example, the objective to increase the gender balance of staff in all EU CSDP missions by the end of 2024.
4. The former position was called ‘Principal Advisor’ and covered only UNSCR 1325 and WPS.
5. This initiative was supported by Sweden through the Folke Bernadette Academy, which was responsible for implementing this training course. So far, the European Commission has trained about 1000 staff members from EU institutions and member states on gender issues and the network of gender focal points and gender advisors is extensive.
6. <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>