

BRIEFING NOTE No. 163

Gender equality in EU external action: Mainstreaming women's economic empowerment

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Summary

The EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) is an ambitious and wide-ranging plan to achieve gender equality in EU external action. This is the final briefing note of the three-part series that looks at GAP III implementation two years into its release.

We focus on the EU's efforts to promote women's economic empowerment in its foreign and development policy. We ask to what extent women's economic empowerment (WEE) objectives are pursued in a comprehensive and integrated manner in EU external action, including through the programming of EU external resources, innovative financing modalities and the Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs). Our focus is mainly on mainstreaming as a core strategy to promote WEE consistently and at scale.

We argue that there is room for more comprehensive and coordinated approaches around WEE, along with strengthening expertise and ownership of the women's economic empowerment agenda in the EU delegations and member states. The Team Europe approach and Initiatives bring many opportunities to advance gender equality and work together to promote WEE. Still, it should be ensured that gender equality considerations are mainstreamed in the TEIs in a way that enables transformative, long-term impact.

Introduction

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is one of the key areas of the European Union (EU) Gender Action Plan III – An ambitious Agenda for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in EU external action (GAP III) and a longstanding sphere of engagement for the EU's external action. It is also an area of growing interest and relevance for the EU. The disproportional negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women are well known (see Ahairwe and Bilal 2020) and GAP III itself, as well as several documents and statements across the EU institutions, refer to the need for a gender-sensitive recovery (EP 2021a; CoEU 2021; CoEU 2022). Moreover, GAP III underscores that empowering women and girls as economic actors is core to the achievement of inclusive and sustainable development and includes an extensive agenda on women's economic empowerment.

This briefing note is the final part of a series of three briefs that looks into the implementation of GAP III two years after its release.¹ Focusing on mainstreaming WEE in EU external action, we look at GAP III implementation at country-level drawing examples particularly from Bangladesh, Mozambique, and Kenya. We ask to what extent WEE objectives are pursued in a comprehensive and integrated manner in EU external action, especially through Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) and guarantee agreements signed under the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). The latter form a crucial part of the financing of the EU's external action, including on gender equality, due to the sheer size of the envelopes.

We focus on mainstreaming since our research found it to be the main approach through which the EU works on WEE. We offer some insights on targeted projects when they are of particular significance to WEE. The regulation for Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-GE) requires that at least 85% of new actions have gender equality as a principal or significant objective. Mainstreaming gender equality considerations is thus crucial to achieve this target. According to its own latest report on the implementation of the European Union's external action instruments in 2021, the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) has fared well on gender mainstreaming in quantitative terms: in 2021, 84% of its new actions were

considered gender-responsive (EC 2022a). However, past evaluations have pointed out the weaknesses of the quality of mainstreaming that we also encountered during the course of this research (see EC 2020c). Overall, we argue that there is room for more comprehensive and coordinated approaches around WEE, along with strengthening expertise and ownership of the WEE agenda in the EU delegations and member states. It would be important to ensure the quality of mainstreaming of gender equality in the TEIs in particular.

The note offers some initial remarks on how mainstreaming is linked to the other two approaches of GAP III – dedicated actions and political dialogue–, building on this research and past ECDPM work (Sabourin and Jones 2023; Di Ciommo et al. 2023). However, more research is needed to better understand how the ‘three-pronged approach’ of GAP III works in the case of WEE.

The note is based on desk research of policy documents and literature. To get an overview of how the EU approaches WEE at country level, we reviewed the EU’s Multiannual indicative programmes (MIPs), Annual Action Plans (AAPs) and GAP III’s Country Level Implementation Plans (CLIPs). An innovation of GAP III, the CLIPs outline how the EU intends to go about its gender equality commitments at the country level. However, the integration between the CLIPs and the programming of the NDICI-GE varies greatly from context to context (Di Ciommo 2021; Teevan et al. 2021). This study draws from the review of these documents for 16 African countries. These countries were chosen based on regional representativeness and aim to include a diversity of countries, including in terms of fragility and socio-economic conditions.² We complemented this work with interviews with relevant policymakers and stakeholders held between September and November 2022.

Impact of COVID 19 pandemic on the EU’s gender equality agenda

The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate negative impact on women, who were more affected than men in terms of loss of income, increased gender-based violence (GBV) and higher exposure to the virus itself due to their social role as caregivers and their higher presence in professions that led to more

exposure to the virus, for example in the health sector (see Ahairwe and Bilal 2020). GAP III, jointly with Council Conclusions on Team Europe and on Renewed partnerships with LDCs, refers to the need for gender-responsive recovery (EP 2021b; CoEU 2021; CoEU 2022). The EU programming documents analysed for this study show a certain degree of awareness of this issue and include general considerations of the impact of COVID-19 on the country's socio-economic situation, for example, the 'negative impact on the socio-economic outlook, in particular, for vulnerable groups' in the case of Kenya ([MIP Kenya](#)).

Despite these mentions, it is not evident from these documents how the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women affected the EU's action at country level when it comes to WEE and gender equality more generally. Previous ECDPM research indicates that the pandemic has influenced the EU's priority setting more widely, for instance on human development, putting the immense needs in health and education more to the forefront of the EU's programming than was likely to be the case before the pandemic (see Sergejeff et al. 2022). Yet, the CLIPs analysed for this study do not systematically take into account the negative impacts COVID-19 has had on women's incomes (Di Ciommo 2021; Teevan et al. 2021). The CLIP for Bangladesh makes an exception, as it points out that 'measures to counter the social and economic impacts are urgently needed, especially since those who have been most disproportionately affected are/were disadvantaged groups before the pandemic' ([CLIP Bangladesh](#)). Several CLIPs also refer to school closures and the increase of GBV during COVID-19 (Di Ciommo and Cumbi 2021).

Women's economic empowerment is mainstreamed in wider EU programmes

GAP III follows a 'three-pronged approach' to promoting gender equality: mainstreaming, dedicated actions and political dialogue (EC 2020a).

'Multiple-track' approaches are indeed the most promising in promoting gender equality (UN Women 2014; UN Women 2020). This section focuses on mainstreaming of WEE and how it is pursued under the country programmes of the EU for the current programming period. It also offers some initial remarks on how mainstreaming is linked to the other dimensions of the 'three-pronged approach'.

Box 1: What is WEE in GAP III?

WEE is embedded under the priority on 'Promoting economic and social rights and empowering girls and women' of the GAP III. This is broadly understood and some links are made between gender equality actions and human rights. The GAP III urges the EU's actions to contribute to, for instance:

- Decent work and labour rights, equal pay and transition to formal economy;
- Supporting an enabling environment for female participation in economic activities and women's access to productive resources, including natural resources like land and sea, but also financial resources, technology and access to safe and affordable transport options;
- Supporting universal social protection systems, addressing issues in domestic work and unpaid care;
- Challenging gender norms both in households and labour markets, also through the recognition of men and boys' responsibilities;
- Supporting and enabling female entrepreneurship and women-led businesses;
- Supporting and empowering migrant women; and
- Promoting gender equality through trade policy.

These areas are broadly in line with the results of the GAP III consultations, carried out when it was formulated (EC 2020a). GAP III also recognises that the support to WEE should aim at transforming gender relations in the broader society and challenge social norms in the private and public sphere to achieve sustainable results.

The overall picture of gender mainstreaming in EU cooperation programmes and, more specifically, mainstreaming WEE is quite positive. Documents analysed for this study show that WEE is mainstreamed through different EU programmes and actions across the board. While the explicit terminology on WEE is rarely used, nearly all reviewed MIPs and CLIPs at least mention women and girls in the context of interventions in education, Technical and vocational education and training (TVET), entrepreneurship or decent work. To a lesser extent, WEE is mainstreamed in climate change and digitalisation actions.

Proper implementation of mainstreaming will be essential to realise the approach presented in the MIPs and CLIPs. This would require a change of step in the way the EU has operated so far in several situations. Despite a long-term commitment

to mainstreaming gender in EU external action, mainstreaming has been weak in the past (EC 2020c). While the proportion of actions where gender has been mainstreamed has grown over the years and reached up to 84% in programmes managed by DG INTPA in 2021, past evaluations highlighted that the quality of mainstreaming needs to significantly improve. Past research also shows that mainstreaming in EU programmes can sometimes get lost in implementation or be poorly done, often due to an insufficient understanding of the context or a lack (or poor use) of good local partners (Teevan et al. 2021; Brechenmacher et al. 2021). Often mainstreaming tends to merely mean the availability of sex-disaggregated data, or identification of women as a target group. These are important intermediate steps to support gender equality but mainstreaming would need to go further and progressively tackle the societal, political and cultural norms that hamper WEE (EC 2020c).

Interventions in education and social sectors offer a more positive perspective since they have been relatively strong at integrating a gender lens. Similar to past practice, indicative evidence provided by the MIPs also suggests that **education and TVET remain the main entry points to promote WEE**, linked to human development interventions and to the promotion of decent jobs, female entrepreneurship and enhanced access to finance (see EC 2020c). Education is often also a way to enhance women's participation in digital, green and circular economy activities. For instance, in Kenya, there is a strong focus on reducing the digital divide through TVET and skills development. In Mozambique, the EU delegation has taken on projects to support skills development for women and girls in male-dominated sectors, including bioconstruction, logistics and gas industry. In Bangladesh, the TEI on Decent Work brings together interventions in skills and training, employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue with the overall objective of improving working conditions and labour rights in the country, including for women. Bangladesh is an interesting example of a country transitioning to middle-income status, where EU due diligence as well as broader trends around corporate due diligence and automation will require deep changes in sectors where women form a large part of the labour force, such as garment production. The EU has a strong role to play in supporting this shift for the benefit of the whole economy and to address the key barriers to women's access to equal economic opportunities (EC 2020a; Shojag Coalition 2021).

WEE is also integrated in some interventions in green transition and climate change. The agricultural sector is a frequent entry point (for instance, in Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Congo). In Kenya, for example, the [AgriBiz](#) programme, focuses on early-stage women and youth-owned businesses in rural and peri-urban areas and promoting sustainable exploitation of natural resources, providing them with a range of services related to access to finance, business advice and technical assistance (EEAS 2020).

Beyond focusing on providing education and training, or financial services and facilities to women, WEE in partner countries also hinges on broader changes in the society. **The challenges that women face relate to prevalent gender norms, power relations and wider socio-economic constraints** that affect women as well as men. These factors are context-specific, but examples include tackling the barriers to women's participation in the economy by addressing GBV in the workplace, strengthening sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) as a catalyst for WEE, widening access to affordable childcare and work on broadening the meaning of masculinity and male gender roles.

There would thus be room for more politically informed, and innovative approaches to mainstreaming WEE. Some examples that aim at tackling the political barriers to WEE more broadly do already exist. Approaches in Mozambique (identifying SRHR as a key factor for economic empowerment of young women) and Bangladesh (addressing GBV in the workplace in the context of the TEI on Decent Work) for instance, are interesting. The [Investment Climate Reform Facility](#) provides technical assistance in African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries to support business environment reforms to create a more enabling environment for women-led businesses. This includes a plethora of activities, from analysis of the informal economy in Rwanda to advancing women's position in manufacturing in Kenya. The EU considers the facility a successful example to promote the WEE angle in the context of broader business environment reforms, and promoting WEE has gained a more central position in the facility recently.

Many barriers to WEE in partner countries are inherently political, and linked to power imbalances in the broader society and systemic corruption. Yet, the MIPs make only limited links between WEE and these more political dimensions and, despite some promising results, initiatives building on the links between WEE and

rule of law are scarce (EC 2022c). However, some positive examples do exist. In Kenya, the EU, together with FAO, worked at the intersection of rule of law, WEE and anti-corruption in land governance issues. With the primary aim to digitalise all the land records and to develop the land management system in the country, the land governance programme was effective in promoting gender equality before the law. The online tools and systems that were developed, helped to address the increased cases of fraud, forgery, and corruption in the sector. Support for centralised digital registration of land titles allowed women to defend their rights without being subjected to corruption. Furthermore, data collected on the land rights revealed that only 2% of land is owned by women. This evidence, in turn, shaped dialogues with local stakeholders on the topic, taking into account cultural gender biases and discriminatory laws that affect women's opportunities for land ownership (EC 2022d).

Another approach that looks at public sector policies and systems to promote gender equality and WEE in particular is gender-responsive budgeting, an approach also supported under GAP III. Gender-responsive budgeting broadly refers to the application of gender mainstreaming in the public budgeting processes, and restructuring revenues and expenditures in a way that promotes gender equality (EIGE 2020). Gender-responsive budgeting can promote WEE in different ways, for example, through better support to women in the informal sector and increased social protection coverage (Goni et al. 2022). In 2021, 18% of new EU actions around public finance management reforms included a gender budgeting component (EC 2022b). The target is 20% by 2025. However, applying gender-responsive budgeting in practice is challenging. Some of the common challenges for partner countries include a lack of guidance, coordination, and expertise in gender analysis and data (Curristine et al. 2022). Going further, the EU could support gender-sensitive budgeting in more countries, where there is political interest and buy-in from the authorities.

From our review, it is not evident how mainstreaming of gender under broader programmes is linked with dedicated actions on WEE, how the links are made with policy dialogues and how the synergies between the three approaches of GAP III are sought. Building synergies and links across the theme – namely combining gender mainstreaming, targeted actions and political dialogue – would be a key step towards more comprehensive action on WEE. The building blocks are there: as required in the programming guidelines, many EU delegations

have come up with dedicated actions to support gender equality and social and economic empowerment is one of the key areas of engagement, with 49 dedicated actions including it as one of the priority areas (Sabourin and Jones 2023; EC 2022b). All CLIPs also include a section on the EU's plans on political and policy dialogues in support of gender equality, which often take place under working groups in different sectors where both the development partners and the government are present. However, the interviews suggest that there is a lot of variance in how active these groups are, and how much political interest there is from partner country governments (Teevan et al. 2021).

Making these links in practice is not necessarily an easy exercise. As this section has shown, WEE is mainstreamed across a variety of priority areas and the EU has appointed 141 gender focal persons in EU delegations. Yet, these focal points may not have an overview of all the activities that contribute to WEE. The focal points often lack the time and resources to dedicate to their tasks, and, due to organisational silos, they may not be well informed on gender mainstreaming efforts across the different sections of the EU delegations. All of this hinders their ability to identify and build synergies between different initiatives. This round of research also highlighted that sometimes the WEE agenda does not have clear ownership and defined responsibilities in EUDs. On the one hand, gender focal points often sit in governance teams and do not deal with economic issues; on the other hand, EU staff who work on economic development or other relevant issues do not have gender as an explicit part of their mandate. Our research shows that, while some delegations have found collaborative arrangements across different domains of interventions and put gender high on the agenda of all staff, others struggle to do so. In these latter cases, it is unclear who owns and can champion the WEE agenda in a given context. As implementation of EU programmes proceeds, lending leadership to gender equality as a whole in all EUDs and ensuring collaboration and accountability of WEE results will be key.³

Team Europe Initiatives bring opportunities for more coordinated action on gender equality

Mainstreaming gender across Team Europe Initiatives (TEIs) is strategically important to give visibility to the European commitment to gender equality and to achieve the EU spending targets on this topic. DG INTPA aims to mainstream gender equality across TEIs, but early data show that more work needs to be

done. According to DG INTPA's reporting, in 2021, 52 TEIs have incorporated GAP III objectives. Yet, the report does not mention the overall number of TEIs at that time (EC 2022b). A preliminary assessment of 126 TEIs concept notes from the EC shows that only 7 TEIs have a strong focus on gender equality. Of the 126, 41 include at least one action specifically targeting gender and mention gender at least once in their narrative. In 49 TEIs, gender is not referred to in the description of the context section in the concept note, but there are indications of gender mainstreaming, for instance in the intervention logic. Finally, 29 TEIs do not target gender or include gender in the project's narrative (see also EC 2022b). This data shows some awareness around gender equality in the framing of TEIs but raises some questions on the quality of mainstreaming under those initiatives. To unlock their full potential to strengthen EU external action on gender equality, the gender-responsiveness of TEIs should be improved.

Box 2: Advancing WEE in TEIs: Investing in young businesses in Africa (IYBA)

The Investing in Young Businesses in Africa (IYBA) aims at supporting the development of new and early-stage business ecosystem actors and scaling up investments into these businesses. Women form a large part of this group and face bigger challenges in accessing financing. One strand of this TEI focuses on innovative and tailored funding tools for young and female entrepreneurs, especially addressing the specific challenges faced by rural women with small enterprises. IYBA works through three working groups: (1) creating a pipeline for the businesses, that also looks at how can women entrepreneurs be reached; (2) providing services in the business sector, for example, on business development; and (3) women's economic empowerment that aims at supporting the other 2 working groups to tailor the services to women's needs. As part of the TEI, the EU is also working to identify and address the barriers and challenges in reaching women-led businesses.

Pulling together the EU Institutions, member states, their implementing agencies as well as their development finance institutions, TEIs offer a potential opportunity for more concerted and transformative action on gender equality, allowing European actors to build on each other's expertise, networks and financing to increase their impact (Jones and Sergejeff 2022). Interviewees, however, highlight that the level of ambition to mainstream gender in TEIs depends on the participating actors. If, for example, promoters of a given TEI involve EU member states with a strong expertise and commitment to gender, the resulting TEI is most likely to have a strong gender equality perspective. Conversely, if participants are sceptical about the gender equality agenda or do not see its benefits, then TEIs tend to be weaker in this regard. GAP III encourages member states to use the selected indicators and report their results under the implementation of the strategy, however, in the absence of Council conclusions on GAP III due to objections of three member states, EU institutions have limited opportunities to push member states to implement this reporting.

So far, the EU has approached TEIs with flexibility: TEIs are the sum of coordinated, but mostly independent, interventions implemented by different European actors under a joint intervention logic (EC 2020b). This means that participants agree on key indicators on a case-by-case basis and those do not necessarily include a gender perspective. In addition, only the EU is bound by the reporting on the gender target of the NDICI-GE, which also applies to TEIs, but not the other European actors.

Moving forward, a major challenge will be to ensure a common approach between the EU and the other participants of TEIs on setting gender equality objectives and monitoring criteria for all TEIs. The absence of such a framework is a major bottleneck to getting an overview of how gender is mainstreamed in TEIs, and how they contribute to gender equality. This is especially the case because TEIs are complex initiatives: particularly large TEIs can consist of over 100 specific interventions, so it is important that the participants coordinate with each other to ensure synergies and address potential overlaps, also when it comes to gender aspects of the TEI.

While there may be little appetite for binding guidelines and frameworks for gender analysis and mainstreaming for TEIs, TEIs should mainstream gender in a way that ensures good-quality interventions. The actions to mainstream gender

should be based on a gender analysis that is based on the context for the region or country for the specific intervention, the interventions should include one or more specific objectives on gender equality, and have a monitoring and reporting framework that includes relevant indicators and is based on disaggregated data by sex as well as other important variables. The EU member states and EU institutions could also share practices, expertise and lessons learned on gender mainstreaming within and across the TEIs.

A shared approach can enhance the commitment of European actors on GAP III implementation. Collaboration on policy dialogue is especially valuable as it can strengthen EU messaging around gender and better link practical programmes of action to joint efforts to steer the needed policy and political change. Some TEIs do have a policy dialogue component, for example, the regional TEI on SRHR. Further steps could be taken to systematise this type of approach. In addition, the European External Action Service (EEAS), who leads on political dialogue, DG INTPA, who leads on practical programmes, and DG Trade, who leads on trade matters, could work more closely to build a more cohesive action for women's economic empowerment in partner countries.

The consultation of local stakeholders in the context of TEIs needs to be fundamentally strengthened during implementation since, so far, consultations have been very limited, especially in rural areas (Jones and Sergejeff 2022; CONCORD 2022). Engaging with the local stakeholders and building ownership of TEIs can enhance the relevance and suitability of European interventions to country or regional plans and improves the chances of sustainability of the impacts. It also reduces the risk of projecting the EU as lecturing others on how to go about sensitive value-based interventions and can open opportunities for mutual learning on how to advance the gender equality agenda between the EU actors and their partners. The EU could do more in explaining to CSOs in partner countries what Team Europe is about and what it wants to achieve and then meaningfully involve CSOs in the delivery of TEIs (CONCORD 2022).

Bringing gender equality more strongly in the EU's innovative financing modalities

The [EFSD+](#) financing plays a significant role in the EU's external action. It is an umbrella for blended finance and guarantees in the EU's external action. EFSD+ aims, through leverage, to give a scale and reach to EU external financing that grants, and the EU budget alone, will never have. The EFSD+ will make available 40 billion EUR in guarantees, which is expected to deliver 135 billion in investment. In the NDICI-GE, the EU has placed emphasis and prioritisation to gender equality and this should be reflected also under the EFSD+, in line with the idea to mobilise EU external action around the 'policy first' principle. The targets in NDICI-GE on gender equality also apply to EFSD+. Thus, EFSD+ will be key in making the EU's commitments to gender equality a reality and the opportunity to target women and girls through these investments cannot be missed.

Mainstreaming gender in innovative financing has been a longstanding challenge for the EU, in line with more general trends on blended finance.³ For instance, in 2021, 65% of new EU blended finance actions had gender equality as either a primary or a significant objective, meaning that there is still work to be done to reach the 85% target by 2025 (EC 2022b). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the share of (approved) blended finance proposals with gender as a primary objective has remained low so far but there is a drive in the DG INTPA to make EFSD+ more gender-responsive compared to its predecessor. The funds under the EFSD+ have not yet been disbursed, and the implementation will start only in the course of 2023. Therefore, it is too early to assess its implementation.

European Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) have shown interest in gender equality in recent years and have actively collaborated to mobilise funds for gender financing (Ahairwe and Bilal 2020). For example, several DFIs have contributed to promoting GEWE by embracing the [2xChallenge](#), an initiative challenging DFIs and private sector to join forces to mobilise funding for GEWE. The initial USD 3 billion target of 2xChallenge has been revised upwards to USD 15 billion since 2018. Both EBRD and EIB have updated strategies on gender equality which include several interesting points. The EIB is building internal systems, capacities and the ability to implement its Gender Action Plan (EIB 2022). The EBRD plans to increase the share of its operations with a gender equality component from 18% to 40% by the end of 2025 ([EBRD](#)). For both banks, these are steps forward compared to the past and indicate an increasing awareness of gender equality in these institutions.

To ensure that gender equality objectives are integrated in actions funded through the EFSD+ in a meaningful and impactful way, DG INTPA, DG NEAR and European Development Finance Institutions (EDFIs) have established a working group with the objective of making EFSD+ financing more gender-responsive and improve gender mainstreaming. DG INTPA has also invested in screening EFSD+ project proposals to ensure that they are gender-responsive. There are already some positive examples of EFSD+ guarantee schemes which make dedicated efforts to adjust the loan products they offer to the needs of women. This is the case, for instance, of the new [MSME platform](#), which is the first joint guarantee facility under the EFSD+, open to 11 EDFI members from EU countries. It's designed to enhance lending capacity of local financial intermediaries (including microfinance institutions) that fund micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), supporting jobs, economic opportunities, skills and entrepreneurship (Poncelet 2022). In Africa, women make up 58% of the self-employed population, but their profits are lower and their businesses smaller compared to male-led ones (WB 2019). In that vein, the MSME platform will focus on underserved MSMEs that are often owned by women, youth, migrants or people in other vulnerable positions (EDFI 2022).

There is thus a lot of interest to effectively mainstream WEE in innovative financing, and many good steps have been taken. Yet, further progress should be made to achieve a transformative impact. Supporting women entrepreneurs and job creation needs to be coupled with policies on employment and basic services (such as childcare) as well as comprehensive efforts to tackle social norms and power structures that discriminate against women. To this end, cooperating and having dialogue with government and civil society to advance gender equality is crucial. Enhancing the link between policy dialogue and innovative financing interventions is a vital point for better impact on gender equality (Ahairwe and Bilal 2020). Financing interventions should also be coupled with increasing technical assistance to financial intermediaries to raise awareness and understanding of the benefits of gender equality in investments, drawing from existing practices.⁵ Enhancing coordination and building synergies between financial investments, technical assistance and policy dialogues is a challenge that requires bringing together all Team Europe actors. But it is a necessary step towards enhanced implementation of GAP III and WEE as a part of it.

Conclusions and recommendations

GAP III is an ambitious and inspirational document and WEE is one of its areas of action. This study looked in particular at the mainstreaming of women's economic empowerment, when looking at the EU programming process, the TEIs and the EFSD+. Our research shows that, while there is great variation between how extensively the delegations approach gender equality and WEE, gender is consistently mentioned in the programming documents. This means that there is a certain awareness around gender equality as a whole. Furthermore, previous research has indicated that there is increasing interest in and awareness of gender mainstreaming in EU delegations (Sergejeff et al. 2023).

Overall, our research confirms past assessments that the main challenges lie in integrating gender considerations in a meaningful way into larger programmes and approaching WEE more holistically, i.e. tackling the prevailing social and cultural norms and economic and political bottlenecks that hamper women's economic empowerment.

TEIs bring many opportunities for the EU to advance gender equality and work together to promote WEE. TEIs can allow European actors to build relevant capacity and expertise, as well as share experiences and networks to scale up the support to WEE. Quality mainstreaming and ensuring the buy-in and accountability of member states on gender equality actions would be crucial for the transformative impact of the TEIs.

Important steps in mainstreaming WEE have also been taken in the EU's innovative financing modalities. While it is too early to assess the gender mainstreaming in the implementation of EFSD+, both DG INTPA and DFIs have ambition in making EFSD+ financing more gender-responsive than before. However, there is still progress to be made in coupling financing initiatives with political dialogue and technical assistance.

This research also provided some anecdotal evidence that more explicit attention should go into how to better leverage the three-pronged approach of GAP III to support WEE objectives. However, more research is needed to better understand how this three-pronged approach is working in the specific case of WEE. In that regard, the upcoming progress report on GAP III could provide further insights.

All three aspects, the implementation of the MIPs and CLIPs, the TEIs and innovative financing initiatives, are crucial components in ensuring that support to WEE is effectively implemented under GAP III. Moving forward, to strengthen Team Europe's work on WEE, the following recommendations could be considered:

1. Couple measures to support women's economic empowerment with comprehensive efforts to tackle social norms and power structures that discriminate against women, building on existing programmes that do so.

Beyond measures to support WEE, it is important to analyse and understand the context in which the measures take place, and what are the key barriers to women's economic empowerment and societal and cultural structures that disempower women and girls. Politically-informed approaches, utilising gender analysis, deepening and valuing the expertise of the gender focal points may increase impact. For instance, fostering WEE through rule of law programmes is a promising avenue.

2. Improve ownership of the WEE agenda in EU delegations, by strengthening gender awareness and expertise across all staff and the position of gender focal points, under a strong gender-responsive leadership.

Strengthening the expertise and awareness across staff will require adequate resources, time and incentives. Training is part of this process but on-the-job coaching and mentoring, clear signalling of gender as a priority from leadership and professional growth incentives also matter. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the retention of institutional memory and transferring knowledge as the staff rotates.

3. Effectively mainstream gender equality across the components of the TEIs

This could happen through the sharing of good practices, expertise and lessons learned on gender mainstreaming within and across TEIs and push for a stronger link between GAP III objectives, the CLIPs and TEIs implementation and monitoring. All the individual interventions under TEIs should be based on careful gender analysis, include specific objectives and indicators around gender, and monitor its progress against those. While TEIs can be large and

complex, and include several components, the delegations should strive to gain an overall picture of gender mainstreaming in the TEI.

4. Better leverage EFSD+ financing, especially to promote women's economic empowerment and gender equality as a whole, and better link financing to policy and political dialogue and technical assistance.

Supporting women entrepreneurs and job creation needs to be coupled with policies on employment and basic services and actions that tackle gender stereotypes and social norms that hamper gender equality. Financing for specific gender-focused programmes or mainstreaming of gender objectives in wider projects should be linked to sustained and meaningful political engagement with governments as well as civil society in all its forms – formal and informal associations and networks and movements, for example – as well as technical assistance.

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Endnotes

1. The other briefing notes of the series are: Di Ciommo et al. 2023; Salzinger and Desmidt 2023.
2. The countries included in the analysis are DRC, Congo, Central African Republic, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Chad, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.
3. Gender-responsive leadership is also part of GAP III and it was assessed in the first part in this series of papers.
4. In 2020, only 1 % of the blending finance assets under management (AUM) was dedicated to gender equality as the main objective, 65% integrate gender equality as a mainstreamed objective (OECD 2022) and only 24% of the historical international blended finance transactions are gender sensitive (Jalan 2020).
5. For instance, FMO has a ‘capacity development programme’ that has contributed €52 million in technical assistance to over 500 projects over the last ten years. One of the focus areas of this programme is indeed gender, and the programme has supported financial institutions to target women entrepreneurs or to offer training for sustainable investment (Gavas and Pleek 2022).