



ENGAGE

**Research Snapshot Series
No. 1 | February 2024**

Gender Mainstreaming in the EU's External Action

**ENVISIONING A NEW
GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE
FOR A GLOBAL EUROPE**



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 962533.



Gender Mainstreaming in the EU's External Action

This research snapshot is an adapted version of the appendix to Damro et al. (2023 ([ENGAGE Working Paper 21](#))), compiled by Anna Fonts Picas, Mateu Tomi and Marie Vandendriessche.

Research takeaways

1. While gender mainstreaming has made inroads in CSDP, CFSP and other external action policies such as trade, humanitarian aid or development, it remains limited in traditionally internal policies that have external effects, such as climate or health.
2. Despite the Treaty of Amsterdam including a formal obligation to mainstream gender in all policy areas, women remain underrepresented in key areas of external action policymaking, such as CSDP missions or higher-ranking positions in the European External Action Service (EEAS).
3. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is the main instrument through which gender is mainstreamed in EU external action. However, given its framing as linked to human rights, its importance in foreign and security policy remains somehow diluted.
4. Other factors limiting the holistic implementation of gender mainstreaming in EU external action policy include inconsistent levels of attention devoted to gender issues by the EEAS, limited power by the EU to exercise normative leadership and the high multiplicity of actors involved in external action policymaking.

Introduction

The origins of gender equality policies in the EU can be traced to the foundational Treaty of Rome, wherein Article 119 established equal pay work among women and men (Guerrina, 2018). The inclusion of this right, however, followed a conception of gender equality from a labour policy standpoint; market rationalities and fears in France over possible social dumping were chief reasons for the creation of this provision. Gender equality as a principle was established not as a goal in itself – it was tied to economic growth and the functioning of the common market (Guerrina, 2018).

Gender mainstreaming (GM) was adopted at the United Nations following the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women as a strategy to integrate gender perspectives in each step of the policymaking process, with a view to promoting equality between men and women. The GM agenda was also rapidly given impetus in the EU, boosted by the 1995–1999 Santer Commission and the recent Nordic enlargement (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000; Guerrina, 2018). As such, the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam formally included a gender mainstreaming principle, which was intended to spark the inclusion of a gender dimension in all policy areas (David & Guerrina, 2013). The 2007 Treaty of Lisbon further emphasises the principles of non-discrimination and gender equality by including them among the EU's core aims (arts. 2–3, TFEU). By



granting the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU the same legal status as the founding Treaties, the Treaty of Lisbon further reinforces “equality between men and women” as a fundamental right binding on EU institutions and Member States (art. 6.1. TEU).

In light of the above-mentioned legislation establishing obligations to mainstream gender across all policies, gender-sensitive policymaking should be found across all layers of the EU’s external action. However, as noted by Kirby (2020), the EU has applied gender sensitivity selectively in external action. One key site where the EU has engaged with gender in external policymaking is through the so-called [Women, Peace and Security](#) (WPS) agenda (Wright & Guerrina, 2020). This agenda, which was initially formalised through UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and follow-up resolutions, acknowledges the need to promote women’s participation in peacebuilding efforts and address conflict-related sexual violence to achieve sustainable peace and security. Because of its focus on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, the WPS agenda is restricted in its scope and therefore does not ensure GM in every sphere of external action. However, the 2018 Council conclusions on WPS highlight the EU’s intent to give the WPS agenda “effect in all external action” (Council of the EU, 2018, p. 3 emphasis added), therefore implementing it beyond peacebuilding and peace-making to wider external action. Consequently, the question arises as to what extent gender mainstreaming and the WPS agenda are implemented in the four layers of external action identified by the ENGAGE project (see Figure 1). This research snapshot provides an overview of GM efforts by the EU across these layers.

Main findings

The implementation of gender mainstreaming in external action is under the ultimate responsibility of the EEAS. Actions taken to ensure WPS implementation include the creation of an EEAS-chaired Informal Task Force on UNSCR 1325 in 2009, the creation of an EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender and UNSCR 1325 in 2015 and the issuing of a [2018 Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security](#) and its corresponding action plan. Likewise, GM is stated as an objective in several security-related policy strategies, most notably in the [2016 EU Global Strategy](#), where the commitment to “systematically mainstream human rights and gender issues across policy sectors and institutions” (EEAS, 2016, p. 51) is made. The Commission has furthermore adopted three Gender Action Plans (GAPs) where it has gradually introduced gender equality and women’s empowerment in different fields of external action, from development ([GAP I – 2010-2015](#)), to “external relations” ([GAP II 2016-2020](#)) and finally, to “external action” ([GAP III 2021-2025](#)).

As a result of these documents, the EU holds an obligation to integrate gender equality considerations in CDSF operations (EEAS, 2022), for example by including a gender advisor, providing gender training for mission employees and periodically reporting on the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Despite this, scholars point to CSDP and CFSP as fields that remain largely blind to gender analysis (Guerrina et al., 2018). These statements may point to the fact that despite these rhetorical commitments, the actual operationalisation of gender mainstreaming varies considerably across missions, and women remain highly underrepresented in them (Sabatino et al., 2023). In addition, gender concerns are mostly framed under humanitarian and human rights conceptions, indicating that they are not a key norm in the EU’s external relations (Chappell & Guerrina, 2020). The intertwining of the human rights and gender agendas is illustrated by the fact that gender advisors in CSDP missions usually hold a “double-hatted” position of both gender and human rights advisors, making them interchangeable and deprioritising the gender component



(Sabatino et al., 2023; Chappell & Guerrina, 2020).

GM has, to different extents, also permeated the third layer of external action in our project's conceptualisation, namely trade, development and humanitarian aid policies. Even before the WPS agenda was formalised, gender mainstreaming had begun making inroads into external action through development policy, starting when sexual and reproductive rights considerations were included in the 1997 Council regulations on aid for developing countries (Barbé & Badell, 2022). The implementation of the WPS agenda in external action has taken gender considerations further into the humanitarian aid field. In the [European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid](#), for instance, the EU highlights the importance of “integrating gender considerations” into humanitarian policymaking (Council of the EU, 2008, para. 23), which mostly occurs when introducing policies on sexual and gender-based violence in the context of emergencies (Council of the EU, 2018)¹.

Trade policy is another area where gender mainstreaming has, to an extent, made inroads. Gender equality is slowly becoming a common consideration in free trade agreements (FTAs), with countries such as Canada championing the inclusion of gender-related provisions in its trade agreements (Monteiro, 2018; Bahri, 2020). The EU has contributed to this trend, with both the European Parliament and the Commission committing to address trade-related gender considerations in future agreements (European Commission, 2020a). For instance, the [EU-Central America Association Agreement](#) contains provisions to address violence against women and improve women's maternal and sexual and reproductive health (Bahri, 2020). However, the extent to which implementation efforts reflect the spirit of gender mainstreaming remains to be seen, particularly when considering that the focus is mostly on women as economic actors instead of aiming for a truly transcendent gender agenda (García, 2021).

The outer layer of EU external action refers to traditionally internal policies that have external effects. The intersection between gender and climate lies in the economic and societal inequalities that lead to disproportionate effects of climate change on women. If climate policy ignores the gendered effects of climate change, it will lose the ‘just’ component of the green transition, as it risks exacerbating and perpetuating gender inequalities, and not fully capitalising on women's potential to be impactful agents in climate action, especially climate adaptation (Allwood, 2020). However, when connecting climate change with external action, experts warn that framing climate change as a technical problem with foreign policy implications can obstruct links to a “people-centred approach” that could empower “gender-sensitive responses” to the issue (Allwood, 2014, p. 9).

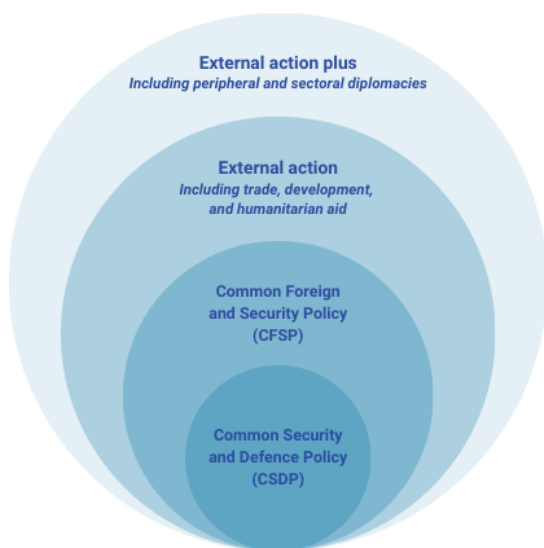
The gendered impacts of health policy, in turn, are mostly considered in health-related areas within humanitarian and development policy. GAP III focuses on the “humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus” (European Commission, 2020b, p. 5), and as such, considers gendered health concerns that are relevant to the fields of development and humanitarian aid. The plan specifically recognises the unequal havoc wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic on gender-based violence and the burden of unpaid care work, as well as the need to ensure access to sexual and reproductive information and universal health coverage, giving particular attention to women and girls with disabilities. The recently adopted Global Health Strategy

¹ This is illustrated, amongst others, by DG ECHO's involvement as an active partner of the [Call to Action on protection from gender-based violence in emergencies](#) (Council of the EU, 2018).



takes a similar approach, by linking health to gender when referring to reproductive health rights and gender-based violence (European Commission, 2022). In other words, the strategy does not explicitly broaden the scope of the gender-health nexus to other areas of external action. In sum, while the gendered impacts of climate and health policy are recognised, more research is warranted on gender mainstreaming in the areas of climate and health as external action.

Figure 1: Overview of gender mainstreaming efforts across all layers of EU external action



External action plus

While the gendered impacts of climate and health policy are generally recognised, more research is warranted on gender mainstreaming in the EU's climate and health policies understood as external action.

External action

Development: Sexual and reproductive rights have been mainstreamed in EU external action since the introduction of Council Regulations in 1997.

Humanitarian action: The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, in line with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, recognises the importance of gender mainstreaming in humanitarian action.

Trade: gender is a common consideration in EU Free Trade Agreements (FTAs).

CFSP & CSDP

The EU's endorsement of the WPS Agenda implies a commitment to promoting women's participation in peacebuilding efforts and addressing conflict-related sexual violence.

CSDP

The EU holds an obligation to integrate gender equality in CSDP missions (although its operationalisation differs considerably across missions).

Source: own elaboration

Overall, the limited mainstreaming of gender beyond certain areas of EU external action can be traced to several factors. As the main instrument through which gender is being mainstreamed in EU external action, the WPS agenda has enabled the consideration of gender dimensions in CFSP and CSDP. However, given the framing of WPS agenda as linked to human rights, its importance in foreign and security policy has to some extent remained diluted. Likewise, the extent to which the EU is acting as a norm exporter in gender equality is called into question. While some authors highlight the role of the EU as a normative leader "seeking to upload gender values into multilateral institutions" in the human rights area (Barbé & Badell, 2022 p. 6), others claim that the EU is not a normative gender power given the inability of the EEAS to embed gender in its core values (Guerrina & Wright, 2016).

Experts on gender in EU external action signal that the attention given to gender mainstreaming in external action by the EEAS varies. Under former HR/VP Mogherini, for example, the first-ever EU-EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender was appointed, a position held by Mara Marinaki, who was considered by civil society actors to have shown strong leadership and paved the way to advance gender equality in EU external action (Plan International, 2021). This position was later replaced by a Principal Advisor on Gender and Diversity under HR/VP Borrell, which experts argue has diluted the gender focus of the portfolio. More broadly speaking, analysts also point to an underrepresentation of women in higher-ranking positions at the EEAS (Chappel & Guerrina, 2020; Almqvist, 2021).



Additionally, a holistic implementation of GM can be hindered by the multiplicity of actors engaged in external action policymaking (Geyer & Lightfoot, 2010). CSDP and CFSP work under an intergovernmental approach in which Member States play a paramount role. Given that certain aspects of gender mainstreaming – such as sexual and reproductive health rights – constitute schisms among members, an all-encompassing mainstreaming of gender proves challenging.

In conclusion, and despite the formal principle enshrined in the treaties to mainstream gender across all policy areas, the implementation of gender mainstreaming in various layers of EU external action remains uneven. In particular, there seems to be a lack of both research and holistic EU action focusing on GM in traditionally internal areas with external effects, such as climate or health policy. As the EU seeks to strengthen its role as a normative leader in gender equality, incorporating considerations about the gendered effects of these policies will be crucial to achieving comprehensive and impactful gender mainstreaming in all facets of external action.



References

- Allwood, G. (2014). Gender mainstreaming and EU climate change policy. In: Weiner, E. & MacRae, H. (Eds.), *The persistent invisibility of gender in EU policy*. European Integration online Papers (EIoP), Special issue 1, Vol. 18, Article 6, 1–26. <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2014-006a.htm>
- Allwood, G. (2020). Mainstreaming Gender and Climate Change to Achieve a Just Transition to a Climate-Neutral Europe. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 58(S1), 173–186.
- Almqvist, J. (2021). *Rekindling the Agenda on Women, Peace and Security: can the EU lead by example?* Real Instituto Elcano. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/rekindling-the-agenda-on-women-peace-and-security-can-the-eu-lead-by-example/>
- Bahri, A. (2020). Women at the Frontline of COVID-19: Can Gender Mainstreaming in Free Trade Agreements Help? *Journal of International Economic Law*, 23(3), 563–582.
- Barbé, E., & Badell, D. (2022). Chasing gender equality norms: the robustness of sexual and reproductive health and rights. *International Relations*, 00(0), 1–24.
- Chappell, L., & Guerrina, R. (2020). Understanding the gender regime in the European External Action Service. *Cooperation and conflict*, 55(2), 261–280.
- Council of the European Union. (2008). *The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid*. Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission. Official Journal of the European Union, 2008/C 25/01.
- Council of the European Union. (2018, December 10). *Women, Peace and Security – Council conclusions*. 15086/18. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/37412/st15086-en18.pdf>
- David, M., & Guerrina, R. (2013). Gender and European external relations: Dominant discourses and unintended consequences of gender mainstreaming. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 39(July), 53–62.
- European Commission. (2020a). *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*. COM(2020) 152 final. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=EN>
- European Commission. (2020b). *EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III – An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action*. JOIN(2020) 17 final. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0017&from=EN>
- European Commission. (2022). *EU Global Health Strategy*. In COM (2022) 675 final. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7153
- European External Action Service. (2016). *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf
- European Union External Action Service. (2022). *Report on the Follow-up Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality into the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy*. EEAS(2022) 405. 9198/22. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9198->



[2022-INIT/en/pdf](#)

- García, M. (2021). Trade policy. In Abels, G., Krizsan, A., MacRae, H., & van der Vleuten, A. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics* (pp. 278–289). Routledge.
- Geyer, R., & Lightfoot, S. (2010). The strengths and limits of new forms of EU governance: The cases of mainstreaming and impact assessment in EU public health and sustainable development policy. *European Integration*, 32(4), 339–356.
- Guerrina, R. & Wright, K. (2020). Gendering normative power Europe: lessons of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. *International Affairs*, 92(2), 155–174.
- Guerrina, R. (2018). From Amsterdam to Lisbon and beyond: reflections on twenty years of gender mainstreaming in the EU. In B. Vanhercke, D. Ghailani, S. Slavina & P. Pochet (Eds.), *Social policy in the European Union 1999 – 2019: the long and winding road* (pp. 125–142). Etui.
- Guerrina, R., Chappell, L., & Wright, K. A. (2018). Transforming CSDP? Feminist triangles and gender regimes. *Journal of common market studies*, 56(5), 1036–1052.
- Kirby, P. (2020). Sexual violence in the border zone: the EU, the Women, Peace and Security agenda and carceral humanitarianism in Libya. *International Affairs* 96(5), 1209–1226.
- Monteiro, J.A. (2018). *Gender-related provisions in regional trade arrangements* (Staff Working Paper ERSD-2018-15). World Trade Organization.
https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/reser_e/ersd201815_e.pdf
- Plan International. (2021, February 8). *A seat left empty – to achieve a gender equal world, it needs to be filled*. <https://plan-international.org/eu/news/2021/02/08/principal-advisor-on-gender/>
- Pollack, M. A., & Hafner-Burton, E. (2000). Mainstreaming gender in the European Union. *Journal of European public policy*, 7(3), 432–456.
- Sabatino, E., Mesarovich, A., Väisänen, A., Schintzler, G. & Santopinto, F. (2023). *Case Studies of the EU's CSDP Activity*. ENGAGE Working Paper 19. ENGAGE H2020 project. <https://www.engage-eu.eu/publications/case-studies-of-the-eus-csdp-activity>
- Wright, K. A., & Guerrina, R. (2020). Imagining the European Union: Gender and digital diplomacy in European external relations. *Political studies review*, 18(3), 393–409.