



The European Union's new Gender Action Plan 2016-2020

Gender equality and women's empowerment in external relations

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1 Introduction

On 21 September 2015, the European Union (EU) released its new framework, *Gender equality and women's empowerment: transforming the lives of girls and women through EU external relations 2016-2020* – the new EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) for 2016-2020. This succeeds the 2010-2015 GAP, which suffered from weak institutional leadership, accountability and capacity. To date, gender equality received scant prioritisation in EU external action and a recent evaluation gave a scathing assessment of the EU's support in this area (Watkins et al, 2015). The new framework shows a marked shift in approach, with both the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP) declaring that gender equality is a priority.

Prepared by a Task Force composed of representatives from the European External Action Service (EEAS), EU Delegations, Commission services and Member States, it draws on consultation with Member States and civil society. As such, the new framework demonstrates significant shifts in thinking in a number of areas:

- It focusses on shifting the EU's institutional culture to deliver more effectively on its gender commitments and commits to report regularly on this culture change.
- It commits to a systematic gender analysis for all new external actions, and covers Commission services and EEAS' activities in all partner countries, including fragile and conflict-affected states.
- It promotes policy coherence with internal EU policies in full alignment with the EU Human Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2015b).

The new GAP outlines an ambitious approach to gender equality, women's and girls' empowerment, and the promotion, protection and fulfilment of women's and girls' human rights, thus meeting the mandate outlined in the 2014 Council Conclusions (Council of the European Union, 2014). It is narrow in focus, but broad in scope and engagement. It seeks to concentrate the efforts of all EU actors (EEAS, Delegations, Commission services and Member States) on four pivotal areas: one horizontal on shifting institutional culture, and three thematic areas: girls' and women's physical and psychological integrity, their economic and social rights, and voice and participation.

While the new framework offers a real opportunity to enhance EU action on gender equality, its strengths rely on success in addressing the areas of potential risk and weakness. Seizing this opportunity requires sustained leadership from the Commission and the EEAS, as well as greater knowledge, capacity and commitment across all staff.

2 Strengths of the new framework

The framework is clear and solid, and if implemented fully, would greatly increase women's and girls' opportunities to improve their lives, to enjoy and exercise their full human rights and seek redress when these rights are denied or abused.

2.1 Ownership, scope and responsibility

The combined ownership of the framework by the EEAS and the Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) sends a clear message to Commission, Delegation and Member State officials that gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment are central to the EU's external relations. Its application to the whole of the EU's external relations policy agenda is a welcome shift in mind-set. It opens the way for meaningful efforts to ensure that what the EU does in the arenas of macro-economic policy, trade, foreign policy, security, migration and climate, for example, promotes and supports gender equality and respect for women's and girls' human rights. Responsibility for implementing the framework rests with the EEAS, Delegations and Commission services, working in collaboration and coordinating with Member States. Its alignment with the goals of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN General Assembly, 2015) will boost the EU's contribution to a reinvigorated global endeavour to tackle poverty and inequality.

2.2 Understanding gender equality and inequality and the context

The framework recognises that gender equality is a matter of human rights, the foundation of democracy and good governance, and the cornerstone of inclusive, sustainable development. This is not a new appreciation, but in contrast to the GAP 2010-2015, it demonstrates a broader view of gender equality and inequality. It acknowledges the underpinnings of gender inequality, namely the unequal gender power relations and gender-biased social norms that discriminate against women and girls, marginalising them from the benefits of social, economic and political change. It accepts that the promotion of gender equality is about building conducive environments within which all people can enjoy greater opportunities and improve their lives: women and girls, men and boys, and those who identify and express their gender differently. It also recognises that gender inequality intersects with others inequalities, such as those based on disability, age, caste, ethnicity and sexual orientation, resulting in multiple layers of discrimination.

This broader perception of gender inequality leads to an understanding of the critical importance of gender analysis and disaggregated data in seeing how gender inequality plays out in each context, how it intersects and reinforces other forms of inequality, and how it manifests differently over a person's life cycle. This creates the necessity of integrating or mainstreaming rigorous gender analysis throughout

EU external actions to progress towards the transformative change to which the EU is committed. Gender analysis includes early consultation with diverse groups of those whom the EU's support intends to assist (mindful of social differences). Random and occasional use of gender analysis, and tick-box consultation, will result in missed opportunities and piecemeal, short-term activities.

The fourth objective under Institutional Culture Shift (Annex 1) is fundamental: 'Robust gender evidence used to inform all EU external spending, programming and policy making'. It proposes several positive measures, for example: gender equality training (including for Heads of Mission), including gender equality in job descriptions, and consultation with national gender equality mechanisms and civil society organisations across programme sectors. The framework emphasises the value of consulting with civil society organisations working for gender equality and women's and girls' rights. However, it will also be necessary to support the core work of these organisations. More than any other endeavour, it is the collective action by women and girls that strengthen their voice, agency and influence on the policy agenda and brings positive empowerment outcomes.¹ These issues are revisited in Section 4.

2.3 Four pivotal areas

A strong point of the framework is the identification of four pivotal areas – thematic and horizontal – for EU External Relations' attention and action in order to deliver tangible results and outcomes for women and girls. The three thematic areas address central dimensions of women's and girls' empowerment and gender equality. This accepts the diversity of EU actors and leaves scope for different actors to concentrate development assistance in the area or areas most pressing in each context. It also allows Member States to continue support to areas already prioritised in their aid strategies while contributing to the overall EU effort. Each EU actor must select at least one thematic area for action. Taking action to shift institutional culture is mandatory for all EU actors.

Taking action and transforming lives through four pivotal areas

- 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
- Shifting the Commission services' and the EEAS' institutional culture to more effectively deliver on EU commitments

As mentioned, the prioritisation of transforming the EU's institutional culture demonstrates a more robust approach to delivering on its gender equality and empowerment commitments than in the 2010-2015 GAP. The new framework sets out an ambitious programme to transform institutional culture. This contains six objectives, with accompanying activities, indicators and actors: coherence and coordination; leadership; resources; robust gender evidence; results; and partnerships (at international, national, local and civil society levels). The aim is for all elements of the EU's external relations to foster and support gender equality. It addresses a key conclusion of the 2015 Evaluation that the EU's weak delivery

¹ See, for example, Andrea Cornwall (2014) Women's empowerment: What works and why? WIDER Working Paper 2014/104

against its gender equality and women's empowerment commitments 'is primarily an institutional rather than a technical problem' (Watkins et al, 2015: 98).

Transforming the EU institutions requires leadership at several levels: high-level political, Head of Delegation/Embassy, director and middle management. Visible and persistent leadership will be decisive. Section 4 contains practical suggestions to strengthen leadership.

2.4 Financial resources: using all instruments and modalities

The framework states that all EU actors will continue to use the full range of the EU's means of implementation to promote gender equality, namely, political dialogue, targeted activities, budget support, and mainstreaming. This is important. It promises that the mid-term review of financing instruments and reviews of multiannual programming documents (or equivalent), scheduled for late-2017, will 'work out how results for girls and women of all ages can be improved'. However, this is vague and comes too late in the financial and programming cycle.

The thematic objectives outlined in Annex 1 are all specific initiatives for women and girls. These are much needed and important, but to be effective and sustainable require changes in the broader social, economic, political and environmental context. It is here in the 'mainstream' that EU external action can make a real contribution – if/when it is gender-aware and responsive.

2.5 Compulsory reporting on results

In contrast to the voluntary (and rather cumbersome) and narrative-biased reporting mechanism of the 2010-2015 GAP, the new action plan stipulates that the EEAS and Commission services will report annually on results achieved in at least one thematic area and on shifting institutional culture. Member States will report on their selected thematic priority or priorities, and feed-in their own internal reporting on institutional culture shift. The alignment and integration of reporting on the action plan with the EU International Cooperation and Development Results Framework should assist in bringing gender activities into the mainstream. The reports will be synthesised by Unit B1 of DG DEVCO. Yet, it is not clear who (and at what level within the EU institutions) will review and scrutinise the synthesised report.

3 Potential risks and weaknesses of the new framework

The successful implementation of the framework from January 2016, and closing the gap between the EU's commitments to gender equality, social justice, non-discrimination and human rights and its practice, will depend greatly on consistent and persistent high-level political and senior management leadership across all EU actors. Resolute, high-level political and management leadership is essential to provide legitimacy and urgency to the commitment, drive the transformation of institutional culture, allocate the necessary resources, and monitor progress. It will also ensure coherence with the EU's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019 (European Commission, 2015b), the forthcoming policy on equality between women and men in the EU after 2015, and the SDGs. Without this leadership, it is likely that the framework will lose momentum over the next five years and fail to deliver on its objectives. It is clear from the 2014 Implementation Report on the 2010-2015 GAP that where change is happening, it is because of management and political leadership at middle and top levels (European Commission, 2015a).

Simultaneously, considerable investment in staff capacity, in allocating financial resources, and in holding all EU actors at all levels to account, will determine effective implementation.

These are potential risks and weaknesses that may hamper successful implementation and allow the policy commitment to evaporate.

3.1 Status of paper

The new framework is a Joint Staff Working Document. The status of Communication – such as that accorded to the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy – would have given it greater political weight. Staff Working Documents are not discussed, agreed or reviewed at EU Council level. As such, the opportunity to exert Council-level political leadership and leverage, vital to ensuring work on gender equality is a top political priority, has been missed. Nevertheless, the Conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council in late October 2015 may compensate to some extent, and may open the way to keep the framework on the Council agenda as a regular rolling item.

3.2 Transforming EU practice: capacity to deliver

The framework acknowledges the gaps identified by the independent evaluation completed in early 2015² regarding institutional architecture and leadership, human resource capacity, and the integration of gender equality in monitoring systems and evaluation processes. It outlines steps to address aspects of the first and third of these gaps, but is weak on building human resource capacity, especially gender analytical capacity. It does propose some valuable measures, such as training and including gender equality in job descriptions. However, these cannot substitute for serious investment in high-quality gender analysis expertise and for a systematic human resources-driven plan to nurture and embed gender analytical capacity throughout EU institutions.

3.3 Making the best use of financial resources

There is little in the framework to indicate that the EU will urgently review commitments under the current EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 to determine how to put gender equality at the heart of external relations from early 2016. Valuable opportunities to integrate gender equality objectives into current programmes will pass by if nothing happens until after the mid-term review in late 2017. Programmes addressing, for instance, human rights, governance and democracy, or energy, agriculture or transport, are more effective and sustainable when designed to meet the diverse needs and interests of women and girls, alongside those of men and boys. Furthermore, it is probable that the scale of the specific initiatives in the three thematic areas may be limited given that no new money is forthcoming.

3.4 Reporting: by and to whom, and on what?

The new reporting requirements outlined in the framework are welcome, but there is a lack of precision about some aspects. For example, it does not specify who within EU Delegations will report, or at what level within the Delegation, the report will be reviewed and signed-off. It is imprecise also about who or what will drive Member States' endorsement of the thematic areas, or how their contribution and burden-sharing will be reported on and measured.

The thematic area indicators proposed in Annex 1 (to be revised to align with Agenda 2030 goal indicators in early 2016) are mostly quantitative. These are useful for measuring changes which are quantifiable, but do not capture the many qualitative aspects of empowerment, such as improvements in women's or girls' self-esteem and confidence, or shifts in gender power relations within the household, workplace and community. A focus on results, though helpful, is unlikely to reveal the complex processes of empowerment and track positive and negative changes in these power relations.

² Watkins et al, 2015

4 Some practical proposals for robust implementation

4.1 Strengthening leadership

4.1.1 High-level political leadership

High-level political leadership on the framework needs to be an ongoing dual role resting with the HR/VP – to ensure coherence across the EU’s external actions – and the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development – to drive the agenda forward. Visible and tenacious leadership by these two high-level champions would guarantee legitimacy and momentum, structure accountability from all EU actors, and harness energy and resources for robust implementation. It could make sure that efforts on gender equality and empowerment no longer operate on the margins of ‘business as usual’, but are centred consistently and coherently across EU external relations. For example, a whole-of-EU approach to putting gender issues on the agenda of political dialogue, instructed by the HR/VP, would send clear messages to partner governments, build their buy-in, and contribute to progress. In a welcome step, the EEAS has created a new function, an EEAS Gender Adviser, who will report to the Secretary General.

Placing the framework as a rolling agenda item at meetings of EU Directors General and at the Foreign Affairs Council (Development) Ministerial lunch would keep the spotlight on the progress being made on the four pivotal areas.

The EU Presidency should automatically take on the role of championing the new framework and integrating it fully in the rolling 18-month Presidency programme. This would guarantee that implementation of the framework is a priority and is on the agenda of the Working Party on Development Cooperation (CODEV) and the Foreign Affairs Council.

4.1.2 Senior leadership

Championing at the political level has to be accompanied by energetic and informed leadership at other levels throughout EU and Member State institutions: Heads of Delegations and Missions, directors, heads of units and other middle-managers. Overt leadership at different levels would indicate, more than any other measure, that thorough and genuine gender mainstreaming is happening throughout the EU institutions. In this regard, indicator 2.2.1 (Ratio of women as EU Heads of Missions (Baseline 2014: 24%)) attached to Objective 2.2 (Improve the position of women in decision-making positions within the EU) could be expanded to include other levels, such as director and head of unit. Rigorous scrutiny of reporting, including rejection of inadequate reports, should foster greater accountability at all levels.

4.2 Strengthening practice

4.2.1 Quality gender analysis

The use of gender analysis needs to be compulsory so that staff understand how gender inequality plays out in each context, and how to shape gender-responsive strategy, dialogue, and support. Investing in high-quality gender expertise must become a priority. In parallel, a systematic and comprehensive human resources-driven plan of action is required to build progressively gender analytical capacity among all staff engaged in strategy development, programme management, sector and general budget support, political and policy dialogue, and monitoring and evaluation. This would embed gender analysis across EU institutions and in country and regional strategy objectives, programme design, reviews and evaluations. Including gender equality in job descriptions is a valuable step forward, but it must also be included in performance appraisal to make certain that all staff members regard gender as their responsibility (which is not currently the case).

EU Delegations and Member States must find effective and reliable ways to share expertise (e.g. short-term secondments) and draw in expertise from international and national partners, academic institutions, women's organisations and other civil society organisations working on gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

Finally, strong gender analytical expertise would allow the EU to optimise the opportunities of political dialogue for promoting gender equality and women's and girls' rights. To date, these opportunities have been used erratically and poorly (European Commission, 2013: 4).

4.2.2 Supporting women's rights organisations

Structured dialogue with women's rights organisations must be central to the efforts of all EU actors. Such dialogue will provide access to hands-on experience and context-specific analysis, expertise and knowledge. However, EU actors should also increase support to the core business of women's and girls' organisations to strengthen their work.

4.2.3 Financial resources

Resources must be found now to invest in the three thematic areas, to shift institutional culture, and to apply quality gender analysis to current programming. Investment in implementing the new framework should not be seen as taking funds away from other areas, but rather as strengthening work in those areas by refocusing efforts for greater effectiveness, sustainability and equity.

4.2.4 Disaggregated data and qualitative indicators

Disaggregated data are vital to effective policy-making, programme planning, and monitoring. As one of the largest development players, the EU has the resources for a rigorous data monitoring system and so could lead the way in supporting national partners to collect, analyse and use data disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and other social differences. This would align well with the emphasis on data within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The EU also needs to pay greater attention to qualitative information and indicators to capture the non-countable aspects of social, economic and political change and women's and girls' empowerment.

4.2.5 Communicating and learning from practice

Successful implementation of the new framework requires much stronger communication between the different EU actors, particularly at partner country level, to share analysis, strategic thinking and lessons from practice. Twice-yearly 'deep dives' into EEAS, Commission and Member States progress in shifting the

institutional culture, as well as into Member States' activities on thematic areas, would provide opportunities for substantive peer learning and exchange. The findings could be presented to development partners, CODEV and EU Directorates General to maintain focus on the framework.

5 Conclusion

The new framework, *Gender equality and women's empowerment: transforming the lives of girls and women through EU external relations 2016-2020*, adopts an ambitious approach. It emphasises the necessity of shifting institutional culture and systematically using gender analysis in order to achieve equality, empowerment and rights outcomes. It covers all dimensions of the EU external relations in partner countries, provides a framework for concerted action on four pivotal areas by all EU actors using specific actions, mainstreaming and political dialogue, and stipulates obligatory annual reporting on results.

Overall, the new framework provides a real opportunity for the EU to close the gap between its stated commitments on gender equality, empowerment, and women's and girls' rights, and its practice. How the EU optimises this opportunity will depend on strong political and management leadership at all levels and coherent and consistent action across external relations. Success will be conditional on augmented knowledge, capacity and ownership across all staff, and sufficient financial resources. Coordination and collaboration – between EU actors, with international agencies, partner governments, and with women's and girls' human rights organisations – will be necessary to put policy into practice.

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