

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Intermediate Evaluation of the Implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021-2027)



PURPOSE AND THEMATIC SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION:

To provide an independent evidence-based assessment of the implementation of the European Union’s Gender Action Plan III (GAP III). The evaluation focuses on three areas of engagement: i. Green transition, ii. Digital transformation and iii. EU support promoting gender equality and women empowerment (GEWE) through engagement with, and support to, women’s rights organisations (WROs) and other civil society organisations (CSOs), with a specific focus on conflict, post-conflict and other fragile contexts.

TEMPORAL SCOPE:

January 2021 to December 2024.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE:

All partner countries and regions under DG INTPA, DG ENEST, DG MENA, FPI and the EEAS, including: the Enlargement region, Neighbourhood South and East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, South and South-East Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY:

The evaluation used a theory-based design aligned with the EU approach for thematic evaluations, the EU Better Regulation Guidelines and the OECD-DAC criteria. It is grounded in three theories of change, one per thematic area, and structured around a set of evaluation questions, each detailed with judgement criteria and indicators. A mixed-methods approach—combining quantitative and qualitative evidence—was applied, with triangulation across tools, data sources, and stakeholder perspectives to validate findings and strengthen the robustness of conclusions and recommendations.

	Documentary review	Extensive review of EU policy documents , ROM Gender Mainstreaming consolidated analysis, CLIPs, EU project documents, EFSD+ guarantees, etc.
	Mapping of EU actions	Inventory of EU fundings related to GAP III based on three distinct datasets, for Green, Digital, and Support to and through CSOs.
	Review of EU Interventions	52 interventions funded by EU : 47 in country case studies + 5 regional projects
	Interviews and Focus group discussions	800+ persons consulted at HQ (32) and field level (796)
	Regional consultations with CSOs	200+ CSOs and WROs engaged in three regional consultations (Africa & Middle East; Eastern Neighbourhood & Asia-Pacific; Latin America & Caribbean)
	GAP III Structured Dialogue & WPS Task Force	Consultations with GAP III Structured Dialogue Steering Group and Women-Peace-Security task force
	Country Case Studies	10 countries (7 visited: Nepal, Armenia, Kenya, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Lebanon, and Nigeria; and 3 remotely: Bolivia, North Macedonia and Somalia)
	Thematic case study	EU Engagement with and through CSOs in Fragile Contexts to Advance GAP III

source: ADE

CONCLUSIONS

STRATEGY

- C1** **GAP III's three-pronged approach combining gender mainstreaming, gender targeted actions and political dialogue has contributed to more coherent and strategic EU support to GEWE, but it remains insufficiently integrated across the digital and green areas of engagement.** GAP III's combination of mainstreaming, targeted actions and policy/political dialogue offers a coherent and comprehensive approach to advance GEWE, but in the green and digital sectors these dimensions often operated in parallel rather than as mutually reinforcing, reducing strategic leverage and limiting transformative potential.
- C2** **The EU's comparative advantage in promoting GEWE lies in its convening power and ability to link local interventions with policy dialogue, yet this potential remains underused.** Where the EU effectively leveraged its convening power—linking local interventions and national/global policy influence—results were more inclusive and better aligned with GAP III objectives. However, inconsistent coordination and limited use of diplomatic influence in several contexts prevented full realisation of this comparative advantage.
- C3** **EU gender mainstreaming capacity gaps at country level hindered the EU's gender transformative ambition.** EU gender-responsive leadership and staff capacity proved decisive for GEWE performance under GAP III, with significant variation across EU Delegations. Reliance on individual champions, rather than institutionalised systems and resources, limited consistency and sustainability, particularly in fragile contexts.

DELIVERY AND RESULTS

- C4** **Gender mainstreaming has reached scale but remains uneven in quality and depth.** Although the EU consistently met and exceeded its gender equality target (85% of actions that have gender equality as an objective) in the areas under review, the qualitative depth of integration varied widely across sectors and instruments. In technically driven interventions, particularly in the green and digital sectors and in EFSD+ investments and guarantees, gender mainstreaming was often treated as a compliance exercise rather than a driver of change.
- C5** **Intersectionality was increasingly acknowledged, though only partially translated into practice.** Intersectionality features in country implementation plans (CLIPs) and some action designs, yet operationalisation remains partial. Many interventions continue to treat women and girls as a homogeneous group, failing to recognise the intersecting aspects of a person's identity – such as gender, disability, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation – and how these can shape the discrimination they experience. Where intersectional approaches were intentionally applied—often through CSO- or WRO-led projects—results were more equitable, context-sensitive, and sustainable.
- C6** **The EU's support has produced tangible results advancing GEWE and laid entry points for transformative change in some contexts.** Across all sectors and modalities under review, the EU has delivered visible output- and outcome-level results, with potential for systemic change. Yet these gains remain largely localised and fragmented. Gender targeted actions (with a gender marker G2) and actions (G1) with dedicated gender components were more likely to deliver transformative change, especially where strong gender analysis, long-term engagement, and local ownership converged.

KEY RESULTS ACHIEVED UNDER GAP III IN PRIORITY AREAS UNDER REVIEW

THE GREEN TRANSITION

- Reduced women's health risks, workloads and improved access to essential resources such as water and energy.
- Increased women's participation and agency in sustainable agriculture, value chains and climate-related activities.
- Enhanced women's skills, income, resilience to climate change, and emerging leadership and decision-making power.

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

- Strengthened women's digital literacy and employability.
- Increased financial inclusion and economic resilience through digital tools and services.
- Improved safety in digital and public spaces and strengthened awareness and access to justice.
- Enhanced recognition of women's rights, participation in governance and visibility in digital policymaking.

ENGAGEMENT WITH AND SUPPORT TO CSOS AND WROS

- Strengthened the capacity, leadership and influence of national, local and grassroots CSOs and WROs in service delivery, community mobilisation and gender-responsive policy engagement.
- Reinforced inclusive networks and coalitions, enhancing collective influence.
- Contributed to challenging and transforming harmful gender norms and attitudes through participatory and culturally adaptive approaches.
- Strengthened women's economic resilience and empowerment by facilitating access to livelihood opportunities and income-generating activities.

CONTEXT FIT

C7 **Partnerships with local CSOs and WROs were central to advancing GEWE but limited by structural and procedural constraints.** CSOs and WROs played a central role in advancing GEWE, especially in fragile settings, yet their contribution was constrained by short funding cycles, administrative burdens and limited access to core or flexible funding. Local and grassroots organisations were often excluded from direct funding and policy dialogue, limiting localisation, continuity and the consolidation of transformative gains.

C8 **GAP III is relevant in fragile contexts, but delivery mechanisms need further adaptation to fragility.** GAP III helped maintain GEWE priorities in fragile and conflict-affected settings. However, translating this strategic relevance into sustained change requires delivery mechanisms (instruments, funding modalities, and operational arrangements) that are better adapted to fragility. Coherence and effectiveness were strongest where the EU aligned instruments and actors through Team Europe approaches, and used flexible, partnership-based delivery via UN and CSO channels. However, progress on localisation in relation to support to GEWE was limited.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING

C9 **The EU’s monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems remain inadequate to demonstrate gender transformative change and support adaptive management.** EU and partner MEL systems continue to focus on outputs and participation, providing limited evidence on empowerment, agency or normative change. Inconsistent use of GAP III indicators and scarce intersectional data constrain aggregation, learning and accountability.

C10 **The EU support has generated valuable lessons and best practices on promoting GEWE, but lacks mechanisms to systematise, share, and scale them.** The evaluation identified valuable practices to advance GEWE—such as cascade funding, gender-smart financing and multi-stakeholder coalitions—but these remain isolated. Without a coordinated knowledge-management and peer-learning framework, the EU’s capacity to replicate and institutionalise these approaches remains limited, constraining their transformative potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGY

RECOMMENDATIONS		WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?
R1	Strengthen leadership, accountability and data systems to support learning and adaptive management under GAP III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise visible leadership and accountability at all levels • Improve the quality and use of indicators and data systems for learning and adaptive management
R2	Strengthen Team Europe’s leadership on GEWE by scaling up proven cooperation models and TEIs and reinforcing shared accountability through structured coordination and collective advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage Team Europe’s collective strengths by scaling up proven cooperation models and TEIs with gender equality as an objective • Reinforce EU leadership and shared accountability for gender equality through structured coordination and collective advocacy in multilateral, global, and regional forums

DELIVERY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING

RECOMMENDATIONS		WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?
R3	Embed and operationalise gender-transformative and intersectional approaches across EU external action through clearer definitions, stronger capacities, and strategic partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define, contextualise and apply gender-transformative and intersectional approaches • Build technical and leadership capacity for transformation and intersectionality • Partner strategically with local actors

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... DELIVERY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING

RECOMMENDATIONS		WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?
R4	Reinforce and integrate the three-pronged approach of mainstreaming, targeted action and political dialogue to achieve transformative and sustainable GEWE results through high-quality CLIPs, stronger gender mainstreaming, expanded targeted actions and dialogue, and enhanced institutional capacity and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen integration of mainstreaming, targeted actions and dialogue through high-quality, coherent CLIPs • Strengthen institutional capacity, accountability, and learning for effective gender mainstreaming • Expand gender-targeted actions and policy dialogue in green and digital sectors to accelerate transformative impact
R5	Further embed GAP III in EFSD+ operations to ensure gender-responsive and inclusive investments in the green and digital sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further strengthen gender accountability, safeguards and monitoring in investment operations • Leverage technical assistance as a driver of GEWE innovation and change • Promote transformative models and peer learning on gender-smart investments

CONTEXT FIT

RECOMMENDATIONS		WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?
R6	Strengthen localisation by providing sustained, predictable support and institutionalised partnership and dialogue with local and grassroots CSOs and WROs to advance GEWE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalise inclusive dialogue and co-creation, and strengthen CSO/WRO leadership • Safeguard civic space and protect women human rights defenders • Adapt funding models and ensure predictable and flexible support
R7	Adapt and operationalise GAP III for fragile, conflict and crisis-affected contexts through conflict-sensitive and flexible, locally grounded approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate gender-conflict sensitivity across GAP III • Make programming and financing more adjustable to evolving crises situations, and risk-informed • Strengthen partnerships and localisation for resilience and legitimacy

Disclaimer

This factsheet has been prepared by ADE as a product of its independent evaluation for the European Commission. It reflects the views only of the authors. The full evaluation report is available on the internet (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/monitoring-and-evaluation/strategic-evaluation-reports_en).