



## Civil Society Dialogue Member State Meeting

### EU Approach to Women, Peace and Security: Lessons Identified and Way Forward

Wednesday 14 December 2022, Stockholm, Sweden

#### Meeting Report

##### Background

Conflict and war have devastating consequences for people around the world. Given the diversity of humankind, the experiences of conflict differ and intersect with other social factors and aspects of identity. Conflict, war and fragility impact gender roles and often go hand in hand with violations of the rights of women and vulnerable groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated gender and other inequalities.

The EU is committed to promoting gender equality as a key political objective in its external action and common foreign and security policy (CFSP)<sup>1</sup>, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is one of the focus areas of the EU's third Gender Action Plan (GAP III)<sup>2</sup> adopted in 2020. The implementation of GAP III runs parallel to the programming under Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe (NDICI-GE). Implementation of these commitments is a constant challenge, and results achieved cannot be taken for granted. As GAP III states, 'there is not a single country in the world that is close to achieving by 2030 gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls'.

The role of the EU Member States in implementing the EU commitments is important. Sweden has expressed its commitment to the promotion of gender equality in its external action, as well as to ensuring the implementation of the WPS agenda through GAP III. Sweden and Spain have proposed an 'EU year of Gender Equality' in 2023. Furthermore, support to and co-operation with civil society, including women-led civil society organisations (CSOs), is fundamental to the implementation of the WPS agenda.

During 2023, a mid-term review of the GAP III is expected, and a mid-term review of NDICI-GE will take place in 2024. These two reviews will be important mechanisms for assessing the EU's level of implementation of its objectives and values related to gender equality and women's empowerment in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> [EU GENDER ACTION PLAN \(GAP\) III – AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN EU EXTERNAL ACTION](#) (online)

<sup>2</sup> The GAP III combines gender mainstreaming, targeted actions and political dialogue. Gender inequality is understood as a root cause and driver of conflict and fragility.

The following key points and recommendations emerged from the discussions.

#### *Reflections on the EU approach to women, peace and security*

- The EU should prioritise support to women-led civil society organisations in its external action. Women's movements are critical drivers of progress in gender equality and peacebuilding. Gender mainstreaming is connected to the historical and ongoing struggle for equality. This is a highly political effort today, as shown by the continued decline in global space for women peacebuilders.
- The EU should take a gender transformative approach. Implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III and its WPS Strategy is dependent on three core principles, one of which is the importance of a gender-transformative approach. It means examining, questioning, and challenging gender norms and imbalances of power which disadvantage women and girls. This includes an explicit focus on understanding and transforming the root causes of structural violence. Transformative approach could mean the EU promoting change in social attitudes, actively engaging men, boys and young people as drivers of change, and building strong partnerships and dialogue with local communities. It would mean focussing actively on the individuals, groups and structures that inhibit women's active and full participation. Masculinities is one of the issues to be addressed.
- The EU should invest more in preventing conflict. The EU and other international actors should bear in mind that WPS agenda is an agenda for peace. Instead of focusing too much on military and deterrence, more investment should be made in preventing conflict.
- The EU and international actors need to support women-led and intersectional civil society to achieve sustainable peace. Women are often at the forefront of response in crises, providing specific and essential support to their communities. In Ukraine, women are the main providers of information about the needs and advocating for the rights of LGBTQI+ people, for example.
- Any response by the international community to conflict and crisis and any conflict prevention efforts need to incorporate the special needs and perspectives of women and LGBTQI+ persons. The EU until recently approached LGBTI+ people in its external action through the lens of human rights dialogue. Specific impacts of conflicts on LGBTQI+ people are often overlooked.
- EU programming needs to be conflict, gender and trauma sensitive. The EU should be aware of intersectionality aspects in its engagement i.e. understanding gender, age, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation aspects – there is real risk of doing harm if these are not appropriately taken into account.
- The EU and other international actors should create effective ways to pressure repressive, undemocratic governments (such as the Taliban) that violate women's and girls' rights. One solution can be creating access to local civil society to engage with international community on security related discussion on high political level.
- The EU should follow up on its good policies with concrete action plans for WPS.

#### *Prioritizing the WPS Agenda in EU external action*

- Prioritizing of WPS is needed in urgent conflicts. WPS agenda and women's rights get pushed down on the agenda when crises hit. This shows in which meetings are given priority and which are cancelled; which funding is reallocated and withdrawn. To be able to trust that the WPS agenda is being implemented during crises is important.
- Women's political perspectives are invaluable in policy making in conflict-affected contexts. Women civil society actors have a wealth of expertise that they can bring to various discussions – not only on women's issues and gender. The Political and

Security Committee (PSC) should identify ways to ensure that the WPS agenda is integrated and mainstreamed into all political and security dialogues.

- The EU should lead by example and thereby also examine its internal structures and the implementation of its policies. For successful engagement, the EU needs partnerships with civil society, among others.
- The EU should invest in identifying leadership within local security actors (i.e. military, police) who can act as agents of change in their institutions. Gender guidelines and trainings for security sector reform are useful, but without the buy-in of the leadership, these do not trickle down.
- The European Commission should create a system of gender advisors who can connect gender focal points and to advise them.
- EU should create an internal accountability mechanism to ensure proper follow-up of gender transformative leadership programmes that CSDP personnel and European Commission personnel have attended. Such learning programmes support institutional approach, but often times no staff work time is actually reserved for staff to attend such trainings. Gender mainstreaming needs to be done by all and cannot be achieved by individual efforts.
- EU civilian CSDP seems to be more gender-responsive in its action than the military CSDP. Military side is weak on gender expertise. This should be strengthened for better conflict prevention and resolution by investing more in training and human resources. EU Member States should come together to push for this.
- There should be a requirement for EU Special Representatives and their offices to be sensitized to gender issues.

#### *EU as a partner to civil society actors*

- Women's participation requires understanding their needs including domestic and caregiver roles and allowing funding to cover these properly. Participation can also be hindered by international migration policies and visa, and the EU and Member States should ensure that these do not hinder the participation of civil society activists from conflict affected contexts into international fora and thereby keeps them "local". Participation should also go beyond engagement with local elites.
- Most EU Member States are like-minded and committed to the WPS Agenda, but practical implementation and buy-in of the WPS agenda is lacking at the EU level. Gender equality and women's empowerment should not be left only at development policy level, but should be addressed also at foreign and security policy levels i.e. at Foreign Affairs Council and Political and Security Council, and the various EU working groups working on conflict-related issues.
- Capacity building of CSOs should be based on their needs and their ability to be agents of change in their own contexts. Capacity building should not be done to have CSOs act as service providers to the EU.
- EU delegations need to balance to not only to engage with the host government, but also with local civil society and be open to listen to their concerns particularly in contexts where civil society spaces are closing.

#### *Engagement with civil society and local communities*

- Policy level need to be connected to local voices and requires preparing both the international community to listen to them, and also preparing local civil society on how to engage in policy discussions. EU actors (delegations and others) should be aware that engagement with them can be risky and time-consuming for local civil society actors, and ensure proper feedback loops following engagement.

- Often Brussels-based EU discussions happen with Brussels-based civil society, and not with civil society actors directly affected by conflicts. Brussels-based actors should think of ways to include local civil society better.
- The EU should address the needs of women in protracted conflict settings which erode the possibilities of women to engage in peacebuilding.
- EU should make consultations with local civil society mandatory in conflict-affected contexts. EU institutional actors in Brussels rely on EU delegations for discussions with local civil society but Brussels-based actors should think of ways to enhance local civil society participation at headquarter level, too.
- Often gender focal points at EU Delegations are focused on development cooperation and are less informed about WPS issues. The EU should make sure that women-led CSOs get a chance to talk to political sections in the EU Delegations, too.
- EU delegations should be more proactive and structured in their engagement with women-led CSOs and ensure proper feedback loops with civil society. There is too much variation between EU delegations in their approach, and EU delegations could learn from each other's good practice of engaging with not only with urban (male-dominated) civil society but also with rural civil society actors and women-led movements.
- The EU should ensure that EU civilian monitoring missions engage with civil society representatives, and that civil society gets a chance to understand if the mission is working in a gender responsive manner.
- EU GAP III mid-term review should include consultations with local women-led organisations.

#### *Funding for WPS*

- The EU should consider different types funding instruments to better support women-led CSOs and women peacebuilders.
- The EU should support local CSOs with core funding that is conflict sensitive. More direct funding is needed for women-led organisations in conflict affected contexts: they often receive only a fraction of direct funding. Access to international funding is difficult and once received, it is often short-term, output focused, and not core funding focused on sustainability and growth that would allow local CSOs to be more impactful in the long-term.
- Funding a CSO's whole strategy period can be a useful way to give the civil society partner flexibility to implement the strategy and adapt to changing conflict context and thereby stay conflict sensitive. Earmarking funds can be counterproductive in achieving results.
- CSOs need better access to planning processes, with proper resourcing and funding to prepare and attend meetings. Smaller CSOs and informal actors in particular do not have the proper resources in place to allow their participation.

#### *Good practices for peacebuilding and dialogue*

- The EU should also create more "brave" spaces to discuss what peace and war means to civil society activists. Oftentimes the EU provides women spaces to discuss "safe" topics, such as gender equality and climate change and there is no space to discuss more sensitive and political issues.
- The EU should continue to support cross-border dialogue in contexts of inter-state conflicts, such as Armenia-Azerbaijan, where there are generations that have no experience of co-existence.

- The EU should ensure continued support to track 2 dialogues that may suffer when long-term conflicts escalate to allow civil society to discuss e.g. human security and people-centred approaches, and humanitarian aid.
- Depending on the context, barriers to women to having a collective voice and agency can include tribal and other affiliations – the EU should create safe spaces to bring women of various backgrounds together.
- Creating safe spaces for men and boys who have been victims of sexual violence and targeting of LGBTQI+ individuals can cause tension in the context of WPS agenda. This should not be seen as adding on another layer of victims or competition with or within the WPS agenda, and donors need to be mindful of that. Prevention of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) requires acknowledging the root causes for it, which are the deviation from gender norms or using toxic gender norms against individuals. International actors should do their due diligence on addressing these regardless of the victims’ identities.
- The EU should support creating advisory mechanisms to engage with civil society representatives and women in peace negotiations in particular in order for them to have access to formal peace negotiations.
- The EU should explore ways to integrate gender mainstreaming and WPS agenda into economic projects in conflict-affected contexts.
- The EU should understand and build the capacities of marginalised and vulnerable women and understand the absence of peacebuilding processes in certain areas (e.g. remote areas, non-government controlled areas) together with building understanding of how to engage women in male-dominated, patriarchal societies. Engaging women into peace processes requires linking women into male-dominated spaces and working with men.
- Colombia peace process provided a gender-sensitive peace agreement and women’s organisations were engaged in the drafting of the agreement for a long time. Due to civil society engagement, the negotiators were faced with the realities of the war impact, which impacted the drafting of the agreement. EU Special Representatives can create spaces for women to engage in political peace negotiations.
- EU should support women learning from other peace processes. For example, by bringing high-ranking women security officials from different conflict countries to exchange and learn from each other’s peace processes.
- It is important to recognise generational differences in different societies and support dialogue between different generations of women to reduce the chances of elder women acting as gate-keepers to peace processes for younger women.
- Male champions can have a role in creating access for women and without working with men, women’s issues get silo-ed.
- “Meaningful participation” needs to be well understood as what is meaningful in a given context. For example, participation in peace negotiations is often limited to the highest level which is often male-dominated, however, the preparatory phase of drafting briefing notes and legal advice allows shaping the agenda of the negotiations and can be a way for meaningful participation.

#### **Civil Society Dialogue Network**

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fourth phase of the CSDN will last from 2020 to 2023. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).