



Bolstering Women's Political Power Lessons from the EU's Gender Action Plan II

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In November 2020, the European Union released its third Gender Action Plan (GAP III), which lays out how the EU should promote gender equality in its external relations over the following five years. Just like its predecessor, the new plan highlights women's equal political voice and participation as one of the EU's central gender-equality priorities.

The EU's renewed commitment to women's equal political participation comes at a critical time. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic fallout have deepened existing gender inequities. At the same time, women in most societies—including in the EU—remain woefully underrepresented in political decisionmaking, particularly at the highest levels. Their continued marginalization violates women's rights to equal political citizenship and representation. It also weakens the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions: women bring distinct policy priorities to the table and raise the likelihood that political decisions respond to the needs of all citizens, including women and girls.

The third Gender Action Plan is a new opportunity for the EU to stand with advocates and reformers fighting for women's equal political power around the world. To help inform the plan's implementation process, this article looks at the past five years of EU support for women's political participation. It addresses the following questions: To what extent have the EU and its member states prioritized women's political empowerment relative to other gender-equality priorities, and what has their support been in practice? Have past EU efforts effectively tackled the primary barriers to women's equal participation and influence, and how could the EU's engagement be improved?

The analysis draws on the findings from four country case studies of EU and member state support for women's political participation and leadership under the second Gender Action Plan (GAP II), written by country experts and published by the European Democracy Hub.¹ The four countries—[Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Morocco](#), [Sri Lanka](#), and [Zambia](#)—were chosen to reflect regional diversity: the group encompasses countries in the EU's immediate neighborhood and beyond. They



also represent different political contexts. Whereas the Varieties of Democracy project classifies Sri Lanka and Bosnia and Herzegovina as electoral democracies, it counts Zambia (until the recent political turnover) as an electoral autocracy and Morocco as a closed autocracy.² Although these four cases are not representative of all EU partner countries, they allow us to identify several patterns that characterize EU support across different political and regional contexts.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EU'S GENDER ACTION PLANS

The European Union first articulated a commitment to gender equality in development cooperation after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.³ Ten years later, the European Commission launched its first Gender Action Plan, with the aim of bridging the gap between high-level policy and development practice.⁴ The plan set out a three-pronged approach: it mandated the EU and its member states to integrate gender equality into their political dialogues with partner countries, to mainstream gender equality across all policy areas, and to advance specific actions to reduce gender inequality.⁵ In practice, however, a lack of high-level political prioritization and insufficient internal gender expertise hampered the plan's full implementation.⁶

GAP II, adopted in 2016, retained the three-pronged approach but further required all new external EU actions to be based on a rigorous gender analysis.⁷ It also drew attention to women's and girls' voice and participation as one of three thematic priorities, besides women's and girls' physical and psychological integrity and their socioeconomic empowerment.⁸ GAP II specifically emphasized the need to increase women's participation in policy, governance, and electoral processes, to empower women's organizations and human rights defenders, to shift negative social and cultural norms, and to strengthen women's participation in environmental decisionmaking.⁹ Over the past five years, GAP II increased the EU's prioritization of and

funding for gender equality—even as implementation weaknesses persisted.¹⁰ We return to GAP II in more detail below and examine how the EU's focus on women's political participation played out in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Morocco, Sri Lanka, and Zambia.

GAP III is more ambitious in its goals and approach, even though it falls short of committing the EU to a feminist foreign policy.¹¹ "Advancing equal participation and leadership" remains one of the EU's core thematic priorities, though the plan as a whole puts more rhetorical emphasis on tackling the root causes of gender inequality, including traditional gender norms and intersecting social injustices that worsen the situation of marginalized women.¹² For the first time, the new GAP also foresees Country-Level Implementation Plans that are meant to ensure more coordinated action within the EU's partner countries. As EU delegations around the world move forward with these implementation road maps, it is crucial that they take into account the lessons learned over the past several years of EU engagement for women's political leadership.

EU SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION UNDER GAP II

The analysis of EU and member-state engagement for women's political participation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Morocco, Sri Lanka, and Zambia under GAP II reveals three overarching patterns.

First, EU gender-equality interventions in these four countries have not systematically prioritized women's participation in politics, relative to other gender-equality priorities. However, several member states have played more active roles in this area. Second, programs that have targeted political actors and processes often focused on "capacity-building" for women politicians or gender mainstreaming in state institutions. In contrast, initiatives that focus on political parties or the broader enabling environment for women in politics have generally been small. Third, the EU and its member states currently lack a broader theory of change linking

disparate interventions within partner countries. Instead, initiatives are often fragmented, short-term, and de-linked from political dialogue.

A Limited EU Focus on Gender Equality in Politics

The four countries examined in this study vary when it comes to women's representation in formal political institutions. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, women currently hold 26.2 percent of parliamentary seats, compared to only 5.4 percent in Sri Lanka.¹³ Yet all four countries share persistent barriers to gender parity in politics. These include male-dominated political parties that are reluctant to nominate female candidates, political violence and harassment targeting women political leaders, and patriarchal gender norms.

However, the four case studies highlight that the EU has not been a major player influencing these barriers to women's political participation. Instead, EU interventions under GAP II focused primarily on other challenges. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Morocco, EU support has centered on tackling gender-based violence, promoting women's economic empowerment, and supporting national gender-equality institutions. Between 2016 and 2020, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights funded only two civil society projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina focused on women's political empowerment. In Morocco, the EU currently funds only one initiative that explicitly targets women's political participation, namely a project on gender equality in the country's biggest political parties implemented by Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation.¹⁴

In Sri Lanka, the EU's gender equality priorities have included supporting victims of sexual and gender-based violence and strengthening women's economic participation in rural communities. Over the course of GAP II, the EU delegation funded two projects that specifically focused on women's political rights, all targeted at the local level.¹⁵ Lastly, in Zambia, the EU delegation spent €33.5 million on six gender equality programs

between 2016 and 2020, but none touched directly on women's political empowerment and leadership.¹⁶

Although the European Union's focus on women's political participation and leadership varies from country to country, cross-national data confirms the relative de-prioritization of the issue. For example, the EU's implementation reports for GAP II note that there have been significantly more projects focused on women's social and economic empowerment than on women's political voice and participation, and marginally more that focused on gender-based violence.¹⁷ OECD data further highlight that the EU institutions' total annual aid spending on democracy aid with a gender equality focus increased between 2010 and 2017—from \$137.7 million to \$1 billion—but decreased again in 2018 and 2019.¹⁸ Moreover, the positive trend over the past decade has largely been driven by projects with gender as a “significant” (that is, secondary) objective; in 2019, projects with gender as their “principal” objective still accounted for only 12 percent of total gender-equality aid in the government and civil society sector.¹⁹

A Few EU Member States Lead the Way

Globally, as of 2019, the largest EU member state donors of gender-equality aid in the government and civil society sector were Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, and Denmark.²⁰ Across the four case studies, Sweden, Germany, and Finland have played a particularly active role in promoting and supporting women's political empowerment. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) has been a prominent funder. It supports UNDP's “Women in Elections” project that seeks to strengthen women's political representation through capacity-building, gender mainstreaming, and advocacy, and previously co-funded a second initiative focused on advancing women's inclusion in high-level decisionmaking and in the EU accession process.²¹ Sweden has also funded local women's rights organizations in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Zambia.²²

Germany, on the other hand, often supports women's political participation through its political foundations. For instance, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has worked with the Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) and the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions to advance women's political rights in Zambia, and funded the "Mounassafa daba" (Parity Now) campaign by the Moroccan women's rights organization Jossour.²³ The German government has also supported Democracy Reporting International in carrying out trainings and dialogues for Sri Lankan women politicians.²⁴

Lastly, Finland has engaged on women's political empowerment in Sri Lanka and Zambia through the democracy-assistance organization Demo Finland. In both countries, Demo Finland has worked with local partners to train local women politicians, to strengthen their influence within political parties, and to bolster their cooperation across party divides.²⁵ Since 2020, Demo Finland has also partnered with Disability Rights Watch and ZNWL to advance the inclusion of people with disabilities in Zambian political parties.²⁶

However, existing research indicates that EU member states' funding for women's political participation—and for gender equality more broadly—has often been driven by their own development policies, rather than by GAP II. While the level of coordination between EU delegations and the embassies of EU member states varies across countries, not all member states even report their gender equality activities to the EU, partly because they have found the GAP II reporting process onerous and unhelpful.²⁷

Unpacking Programming Approaches

Where the EU or member states have focused on women's political participation and leadership, this support has taken three main forms: direct support to state institutions, most often to ministries focused on gender equality; support to international and local nongovernmental organizations; or direct funding for local women's organizations.

EU assistance to national gender-equality institutions often integrates women's participation and leadership as a cross-cutting goal. However, it is not always clear what this mainstreaming approach translates into in practice. In Morocco, for instance, the EU has provided budget support for the government's national gender-equality plan. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the EU has established a Gender Equality Facility that supports state institutions in applying the EU's gender-equality acquis. Although project documents state that women's political participation was mainstreamed into these efforts, the EU has released few details about the activities that have been conducted or the results that have been achieved in either country.

In addition, the EU and member states have funded international and local nongovernmental organizations to carry out advocacy, capacity-building, and awareness-raising activities. Across the four cases, many of these programs have focused on training women candidates and elected officials.²⁸ Such training efforts generally assume that gender inequities in society leave women with fewer of the resources, networks, and role models needed to engage in politics. By bolstering women's confidence and skills, they seek to encourage more women to run for office or help them exert greater influence in political institutions. However, unless they are combined with other initiatives, such training programs are not set up to address the structural and institutional barriers to women's political power, such as a lack of financing, gender-targeted political violence, and undemocratic candidate selection processes. In fact, they tend to shift the onus of change onto women, while leaving exclusionary systems intact.²⁹

A few projects implemented under GAP II have sought to tackle these entrenched barriers, yet they have generally been small. For example, several EU and member-state programs supported coalitions between women in local or national politics, typically to advance broader gender-equality reforms.³⁰ Others combined training for women politicians with public debates and media engagement focused on promoting women's political leadership.³¹ Yet only one EU-funded initiative

targeted gender equality in political parties—the “Get Involved!” project implemented by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Morocco that included advocacy and training for women and men on best practices for drafting gender-sensitive party manifestos and policies.³² In Zambia and Sri Lanka, Demo Finland has also focused on gender inclusion in political parties, mostly by supporting their women’s wings, mapping their internal gender equality policies, and fostering cross-party collaboration between women.³³ Overall, the marginal focus on political parties is striking given that the four case studies point to patriarchal party structures and nontransparent candidate-selection processes as major impediments to women’s political representation.

Several additional gaps stand out. Across the four cases, almost no projects focused on the specific needs of marginalized women—one exception being Demo Finland’s support for disability inclusion in Zambian political parties. Moreover, despite GAP II’s focus on changing social norms, there were few efforts to target male politicians, religious authorities, or other influential leaders in order to challenge patriarchal gender norms, a pattern that is also reflected in studies of EU support in other countries.³⁴ The EU and member states also did not prioritize violence and harassment against women in politics or financial barriers to women’s political engagement, despite both being major impediments to gender equality in politics.

Aid Programs in Search of Strategy

Beneath these gaps lies a broader shortcoming: the EU currently lacks a clear theory of change that embeds women’s political empowerment into a broader vision for gender-equality change. Instead, current EU and member-state interventions often take the form of small, relatively disconnected actions.³⁵ This fragmentation is exacerbated by the lack of coordination among European actors and insufficient consultations with local women’s rights activists and movements.³⁶

The fragmented nature of EU support manifests itself in different ways. First, the lack of a theory of change is evident in the heavy focus on capacity-building, which fails to account for broader institutional, political, and sociocultural barriers to gender equality in politics and to democratic inclusion more broadly. For example, candidate-training programs that focus on skill-building may be ill-suited in contexts where political parties are clientelistic rather than democratic actors, and where women who are most likely to make it into positions of leadership are those with close ties to male political leaders.

Second, the lack of comprehensive political strategy fuels a tendency toward short-term initiatives that are not sustained throughout the election cycle. In particular, the EU still provides little core or long-term support to grassroots women’s organizations and women rights defenders. In this domain, it lags behind member states such as Sweden and the Netherlands, which have made such support a greater priority.³⁷ Particularly in contexts where democratic space is limited or where formal legal frameworks are not implemented in practice, women’s activism in civil society is often an important avenue for change. Globally, feminist movements have also been central in pushing governments to adopt and strengthen gender quotas and ensuring that women are educated about their political rights.³⁸

Finally, the case studies of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sri Lanka illustrate how the EU’s assistance for women’s political participation and leadership at times remains disconnected from its broader political engagement with partner countries. In political and policy dialogues with Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the EU has consistently neglected to use its political leverage to push for women’s inclusion in high-level negotiations. The EU has similarly been hesitant to press for the meaningful inclusion of women in its political dialogues with Sri Lanka’s government. Although high-level engagement on gender equality has been greater in some partner countries, the EU could do more to ensure that women’s rights and political inclusion are systematically integrated into trade, security, and political negotiations, as part of a broader focus on democratic reform.³⁹



RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis suggests four main ways in which EU support for women's political participation and leadership could be strengthened.

First, women's political rights and participation needs to be integrated into high-level policy and diplomatic engagement. The EU has a variety of political tools at its disposal, including trade and association agreements, the General Trade Preferences scheme, and regular political and human rights dialogues with partner countries. Leading by example also matters: the EU should continuously prioritize greater diversity within its own high-level leadership and within EU delegations.

Second, the EU needs to provide more targeted support for women's political participation, in the form of initiatives that have gender equality in politics as their primary goal. Such support needs to be sustained over longer periods, rather than focused exclusively, say, on the year before a national election takes place. Although gender mainstreaming in broader governance and democracy programs is important, it needs to be linked to specific activities, indicators, and objectives in order to be effective, and it should be complemented with stand-alone initiatives.

Third, EU support to partner countries needs to be embedded in a context-specific theory of gender-equality change, articulated in the new Country-Level Implementation Plans. Such a theory should be developed in consultation with diverse women's rights activists and organizations, and specify potential linkages between women's political empowerment and other gender-equality priorities, such as women's economic and financial security. It should also foreground the broader ecosystem that hinders women's equal political participation and influence, rather than women's individual skills and capacity.

What would a more holistic approach look like in practice? Future initiatives should foreground obstacles that are currently neglected, including political violence

targeting women candidates and politicians, campaign-finance hurdles, and media narratives about women in politics. Moreover, more programs should specifically target political parties, which often act as gatekeepers to broader democratic inclusion. These efforts could take the form of advocacy for party reform, workshops targeting party leaders, or heightened external regulation and oversight over party primaries and political financing.

Cross-national research also shows that coalition-building between women politicians—for example, through women's caucuses—can strengthen women's collective political influence and advance institutional reforms, and that these efforts tend to be more effective if reinforced by women's independent activism in civil society.⁴⁰ Finally, although capacity-building can be helpful, particularly for women who lack prior political experience, it should be carefully designed to fit local political realities, including with regard to candidate selection. Best practices include reaching beyond urban centers, offering practical and sustained campaign support, and involving male party members, traditional and religious leaders, as well as women politicians' family members.

Fourth, the EU needs to provide more core support for feminist movements and organizations, rather than just short-term project support. It could institute new mechanisms for this purpose: one model could involve partnering with regional feminist funds as intermediaries that can pass on EU funding to grassroots actors, using resources from the Human Rights and Democracy thematic pillar of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, for instance. As more and more governments are closing democratic space or co-opting women's political representation to advance illiberal policies, continued resourcing for bottom-up mobilization is essential.

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NOTES

- 1 See case studies by Biljana Spasovska on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ghita Tadlaoui on Morocco, Pradeep Peiris on Sri Lanka, and Nalukui Milapo on Zambia under the title "EU Support for Women's Political Participation and Leadership Under the EU's Gender Action Plan," European Democracy Hub, 2021.
- 2 V-Dem Institute, "Autocratization Goes Viral: Democracy Report 2021," March 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/files/25/DR%202021.pdf>.
- 3 Helen O'Connell, "Implementing the European Union Gender Action Plan 2010-2015: Challenges and Opportunities," Overseas Development Institute, March 2013, <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/8305.pdf>.
- 4 European Commission, "EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development 2010-2015," August 3, 2010, p. 6.
- 5 Rather than identifying specific thematic priorities, it sought to strengthen the EU's overall capacity and expertise related to gender; for example, by requiring that EU-funded projects use gender-disaggregated data and performance indicators. O'Connell, "Implementing the European Union Gender Action Plan 2010-2015," p. 5.
- 6 Francis Watkins et al., "Evaluation of EU Support to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Partner Countries," European Commission, April 2015, and O'Connell, "Implementing the European Union Gender Action Plan 2010-2015."
- 7 Gill Allwood, "Transforming Lives? EU Gender Action Plan II From Implementation to Impact," CONCORD, 2018, https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CONCORD_GAP_report_online_2018.pdf, p. 3.
- 8 The plan also includes a fourth horizontal priority, namely "shifting the Commission services and the EEAS institutional culture to more effectively deliver on EU commitments." Helen O'Connell, "The European Union's New Gender Action Plan 2016-2020," European Development Cooperation Strengthening Programme, October 26, 2015, <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/9926.pdf>, p. 3.
- 9 "Joint Staff Working Document. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020," European Commission, September 21, 2015, p. 11.
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- 13 International Parliamentary Union, "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments," accessed on November 13, 2021, <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2021>.
- 14 European Union, "How to Empower Female Politicians: The Case of Morocco," October 18, 2020, <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/articles/how-empower-female-politicians-case-morocco>. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation project is part of broader EU-initiative titled "Get Involved!" that also focuses on women's political empowerment in Benin.
- 15 Both projects have been implemented by the local organization Chrysalis. See Chrysalis, "Building Inclusive Communities and Promoting Women's Leadership," <https://www.chrysaliscatalyz.com/project/building-inclusive-communities-and-promoting-womens-leadership-transform/>, and Nucleus Services, "Final Evaluation of the Network Engage Transform (NET) Project," November 2018, <http://carevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Final-Evaluation-of-the-Network-Engage-Transform-NET-Project.pdf>.
- 16 European Commission, "Evaluation of the EU's External Action Support to Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment (2010-2018): Final Report, Volume IV - Case Studies," November 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/gender-evaluation-2020-final-report-volume-4_en.pdf.
- 17 In 2019, there were 1,039 reported projects that focused on women's voice and participation, compared to 1,062 that focused on gender-based violence and 1,853 that focused on women's economic, social, and cultural rights. However, more stakeholders reported actions in this area in 2019 than in previous years. European Commission, "Annual Implementation Report 2019: EU Gender Action Plan II, Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Transforming Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020," November 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/eu_gap_2019_web_0.pdf. See also Particip et al., "Evaluation of the EU's External Action Support to Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment (2010-2018)," November 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/evaluation-eus-external-action-support-area-gender-equality-and-womens-and-girls-empowerment_en.
- 18 These figures capture spending across the following six sub-sectors coded by the OECD: "democratic participation and civil society," "elections," "legislatures and political parties," "media and free flow of information," "human rights," and "women's rights organisations and movements, and government institutions." OECD.Stat, "Aid Activities Targeting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (CRS)," accessed November 14, 2021, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DV_DCD_GENDER.
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- 27 Allwood, “Transforming Lives? EU Gender Action Plan II From Implementation to Impact,” p. 9, and Chloe Teevan, Lidet Tadesse Shiferaw, and Mariella Di Ciommo, “Taking the Gender Agenda Forward in EU Programming,” April 2021, <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Taking-Gender-Agenda-Forward-EU-Programming-ECDPM-Discussion-Paper-297-2021.pdf>.
- 28 In Zambia, for instance, Demo Finland has worked with ZNWL to train local women councillors. The Non-governmental Gender Organizations’ Coordinating Council has also used half of its Swedish funding to carry out candidate trainings. In Sri Lanka, an EU-funded UNDP local-governance program, the EU-funded “Transform” project, and Democracy Reporting International have all carried out capacity-building for local women politicians elected through the country’s new gender quota. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, SIDA has funded the UNDP program “Women in Elections” that provides capacity-building for women leaders, among other activities. See the country case studies for further details on these activities and data sources.
- 29 Jennifer M. Piscopo, “The Limits of Leaning In: Ambition, Recruitment, and Candidate Training in Comparative Perspective,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7, no. 4 (2019).
- 30 Examples include the joint SIDA and EU Special Representative project “Include Women in Change Processes” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation’s support for the Jossour campaign for gender parity. In Sri Lanka, the EU-funded NET project focused on building local networks and advocacy alliances focused on fighting sexual and gender-based violence.
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- 35 Partecip et al., “Evaluation of the EU’s External Action Support to Gender Equality and Women’s and Girls’ Empowerment (2010-2018),” European Commission, November 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/gender-evaluation-2020-final-report-volume-2_en.pdf, p. 114.
- 36 Allwood, “Transforming Lives? EU Gender Action Plan II From Implementation to Impact,” 9, and Teevan, Tadesse Shiferaw, and Di Ciommo, “Taking the Gender Agenda Forward in EU Programming,” p. 10.
- 37 Kelli Rogers, “Inside Sida’s Approach to Gender Equality Funding,” Devex, April 2, 2018, <https://www.devex.com/news/inside-sida-s-approach-to-gender-equality-funding-92449>.
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