

Gender mainstreaming in the EU: State of play

When the European Union endorsed 'gender mainstreaming' as its official policy approach to gender equality, it was seen as a potentially revolutionary means of accelerating progress and achieving real equality between the sexes. Twenty years on, there are concerns about fragmented implementation across policy areas and institutions at EU and national levels, and a possible downgrading of its status.

What is gender mainstreaming?

In some areas, such as education and employment, the gender dimension is evident. In others, such as trade or climate change, it may be less immediately apparent. Yet, across the spectrum, including in these seemingly 'neutral' fields, policy may have different impacts on women and men, and may inadvertently perpetuate inequality or discrimination. One of the tools that has been developed to ensure that these impacts are considered is 'gender mainstreaming'. As [defined](#) by the European Commission in 1996, it means 'not restricting efforts to promote equality to the implementation of specific measures to help women, but mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality'. Gender mainstreaming is not *just* about women, but about ensuring that women's as well as [men's](#) experiences and concerns are built in to policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and that both individual rights and structural inequalities are addressed. It also entails looking at institutions and how they work, including gender representation within policy areas and decision-making structures.

How does it work?

A [range of methods](#) have been developed to put the principles of gender mainstreaming into practice, including a cycle of [gender analysis](#), [impact assessment](#), [budgeting](#) and [evaluation](#). In order for these to function effectively, there is a need for comprehensive [gender-disaggregated statistics](#) and [gender indicators](#). Beyond the 'technical' aspects, the views of gender experts, women's organisations and other stakeholders need to be built into the process. Other [prerequisites](#) for ensuring that gender mainstreaming is systematic and effective include high-level commitment, staff training, coordination across policy areas, and commensurate funding. However, gender mainstreaming is not a policy goal in itself but a tool to advance gender equality, by bringing equality issues out of a narrow ghetto into the broader policy arena.

Why does it matter?

Incorporating gender can make the difference between addressing or failing to address people's needs, and between good or ineffectual, and even counter-productive, policy. In the area of humanitarian aid, for instance, the European Commission [stresses](#) that aid that is gender- and age-insensitive is less effective, and risks not reaching the most vulnerable people or failing to respond adequately to their specific needs. The Commission has adopted [guidelines](#) and a [Gender-Age Marker](#) to ensure that a gender perspective is systematically included in this sector. The importance of doing so has been [highlighted](#) by the European Parliament's Committee on Gender Equality and Women's Rights, amongst others, in the current 'refugee crisis', where the lack of a gender-sensitive response and the resulting impact on refugee women and girls is a major concern. Gender-mainstreaming originated in the [development](#) and humanitarian sectors, and they have been forerunners in implementing it. However, its importance is also increasingly recognised in other policy areas. A recent [study](#) on EU trade policy concluded that better understanding of the gender dimension of trade agreements can help to protect both sexes from negative effects, and improve policy quality. Gender analysis also illustrates the different impacts of climate change on women and men, both outside and [inside](#) the EU, with implications for future climate policy. As the [2015 EU Gender Equality Index](#) shows, there are many remaining gender gaps in the EU, which require gender-sensitive policy responses.



What is the EU approach?

Gender mainstreaming was [established internationally](#) as the major global strategy for gender equality at the [UN Fourth World Conference on Women](#) in Beijing in 1995, where the concept was promoted by the EU. It became the official policy approach in the European Union and its Member States in the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), and the legal basis was strengthened in Article 8 TFEU, which commits both to eliminating inequalities and promoting the principle of equality between women and men in all their actions. The EU has adopted a [twin-track approach](#) of incorporating a gender perspective across all sectors, and specific positive action for women to eliminate, prevent or remedy inequalities, first set out in the 1996 [Communication](#) on incorporating equal opportunities for women and men into all Community policies and activities. On its introduction, it was [noted](#) that gender mainstreaming was not only a potentially revolutionary concept, but also an extraordinarily demanding one, which required the adoption of a gender perspective by all the central actors in the policy process, including Commission Directorates-General, sectoral Councils of Ministers, and Member State government officials who might have little experience or interest in gender issues. Each institution had its [own](#) system, and would have its own challenges.

How does it work at the European Parliament?

The European Parliament was an early supporter of gender mainstreaming, [backing](#) the original Commission proposal and adopting a [resolution](#) in 2003 on incorporating the approach in its own work and organisation. The main body responsible is the Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM). FEMM also chairs and coordinates the Gender Mainstreaming Network, set up in 2009, which comprises an MEP and an administrator from each parliamentary committee, appointed to bring gender mainstreaming into the work of their committees. Gender mainstreaming amendments (GMAs), introduced under the seventh legislature, allow the FEMM Committee to introduce a gender perspective into the reports of other committees on specific issues. To date, 15 GMAs have been introduced in the eighth legislature, on topics ranging from green growth and conflict minerals, to the EU budget and child poverty.

How effective has it been?

As a [new programming period](#) begins, there has been considerable [analysis and discussion](#) on how effectively gender mainstreaming has been implemented across the EU and how it has contributed to the concrete achievement of gender equality. The consensus amongst academic researchers and advocacy groups for women's rights is that, despite high-level commitment to the policy, implementation remains fragmented both in the EU institutions and in Member States, and that there is too little evaluation and accountability. Assessments of take-up in different policy areas have [found](#) that the commitment to gender equality and gender mainstreaming is not reflected in spending, and that gender-responsive budgeting needs to be [extended](#). According to the [stakeholder consultation](#) organised in 2015, the measures that would have the most positive impact on gender mainstreaming would be: setting targets for policy areas and monitoring results (44.2%), gender budgeting (36.3%) and better integration of the gender perspective into impact assessments (33.4%). Interestingly, mandatory training on gender equality was perceived to be more important for high-level EU decision-makers (27%) than for Commission staff (13.2%) There is also broader [concern](#) about a downgrading of gender mainstreaming and gender equality more generally, reflected in the fact that the 'Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019' is presented as a Commission staff working document rather than a full strategy. Significant support for a stronger instrument was also expressed in the [plenary debate](#) in the European Parliament on 2 February 2016.

Since [2011](#) the European Parliament has undertaken regular assessments of its gender mainstreaming policy, which was also evaluated in depth in a 2014 [study](#). The latest [report](#) (rapporteur: Angelika Mlinar, ALDE, Austria), which takes stock of work in the Parliament and broader progress towards gender equality in the EU, is due to be discussed in plenary on 7 March. It finds that although there is good practice in some areas, there is a need for further coordination, both within Parliament and between the institutions. Gender impact assessment is an area that merits further development and more training should be provided for both political and administrative staff. GMAs are working effectively, but the practice should be included in the Rules of Procedure, together with Gender Action Plans for committee work.

The update of the [2015 report](#) on Women in the European Parliament, assessing gender balance in political and administrative posts, will also be issued for International Women's Day – 8 March.