

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. Two decades on, concerns remain about fragmented implementation across policy areas and institutions at EU and national levels. The European Parliament regularly assesses its own progress in this area, and a FEMM committee report on gender mainstreaming in Parliament is scheduled for debate in plenary during January.

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 the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy, legislation and spending programmes, 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, or 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, whilst in [development cooperation](#), the Commission is working towards a [target](#) of mainstreaming gender actions across 85 % of all new initiatives by 2020. 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 [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, with implications for future climate policy. The European Parliament, amongst others, has highlighted the importance of gender-sensitive responses to the challenges of [migration](#), [development](#), [trade](#), [climate change](#), and [digitalisation](#). As the [2017 EU gender equality index](#) shows, there are many remaining gender gaps in the EU, which require gender-sensitive policy responses.

This is an updated edition of an ['at a glance' note](#) published in March 2016.

What is the EU approach?

Gender mainstreaming was [established internationally](#) as the major global strategy for gender equality at the [United Nations 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, who might have little experience or interest in gender issues. Each EU 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, adopting a [resolution](#) in 2003 on incorporating the approach in its own work and organisation and establishing a [High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity](#) to promote it. The main body responsible for implementing gender mainstreaming across policy sectors is the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality ([FEMM](#)). From the seventh term, gender mainstreaming amendments ([GMAs](#)) have allowed FEMM to introduce a gender perspective into the reports of other committees on specific issues. A gender mainstreaming network, chaired and coordinated by FEMM, links Members of Parliament and staff appointed to bring a gender dimension into the work of committees and delegations. Most committees have also now drawn up their own gender-mainstreaming [action plans](#). Regarding gender balance within the [Secretariat](#) ([EP intranet links](#)), in January 2017, the Bureau adopted a [report](#) assessing progress over the past decade, followed by a [roadmap](#) for action to be taken from 2017-2019.

Since [2011](#), Parliament has undertaken regular assessments of its gender mainstreaming policy, which was also evaluated in studies in [2014](#) and [2018](#). A first [resolution](#) of this term was adopted in 2016. FEMM adopted a second [report](#) on gender mainstreaming in the Parliament, on 27 November 2018, which takes stock of work over the past two years and makes recommendations for the 2019-2024 parliamentary term. The report, due to be discussed during the January plenary session, stresses the importance of improving the [current gender balance](#) in political and administrative posts and the need to make Parliament's gender-mainstreaming system more effective, for example by improving coordination between the various internal bodies involved, applying gender budgeting, providing regular gender-mainstreaming training for Members of Parliament, assistants and staff, and further cooperation with other EU institutions and external stakeholders.

How effective has it been?

Prior to the EU [Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019](#), there was considerable [discussion](#) on the implementation of gender mainstreaming across the EU and contribution to the concrete achievement of gender equality. The consensus was that, despite high-level commitment to the policy, implementation remained fragmented in the EU institutions and in Member States, and that there was too little evaluation and accountability. Assessments of take-up in different policy areas [found](#) that the commitment to gender equality and gender mainstreaming was not reflected in spending, and that gender-responsive budgeting needed to be [extended](#). [Stakeholder consultations](#) identified the measures that would have the most positive impact on gender mainstreaming as: setting targets for policy areas and monitoring results (44.2 %), gender budgeting (36.3 %) and integrating gender perspective into impact assessments (33.4 %). Gender mainstreaming was included as a priority in the Strategic Engagement. However, the European Parliament, amongst other things, has expressed [concerns](#) about its [weak status](#) and called for a stronger instrument. The Commission's 2018 [report](#) on equality between women and men concludes that gender mainstreaming is not yet as robust as intended, whilst recent academic evaluations [argue](#) that it remains less embedded in the institutional fabric of European decision-making than comparable instruments, such as evaluation.

Own-initiative report: [2018/2162\(INI\)](#); Committee responsible: FEMM; Rapporteur: Angelika Mlinar (ALDE, Austria).

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