

# **Integrating the EU Gender Action Plan 2020-2025 into the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighborhood - A New Agenda for the Mediterranean**

## **Opportunities, challenges, and recommendations from the perspective of Civil Society Organizations in the Southern Mediterranean region.**

**Authors:** Samar Zughool, director of Reka Si research and art institute and Darine Daouthy, Social worker at Cultural Club Ali Belhouane, Tunisia

### **Executive Summary:**

Given the ongoing humanitarian crises in the southern Mediterranean region, which are increasing inequalities within and between countries, the EU's third Gender Action Plan, GAP III, appears to be a promising strategy for incorporating intersectional, transformative, and human-rights principles into all EU external actions, such as the renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean. However, putting these principles into action remains difficult because gender mainstreaming is a concept that requires more practical and structured tools to realize its full potential. Furthermore, the shrinking spaces for CSOs in Southern Mediterranean countries impede inclusive channels for human development and gender equality, which are present in political dialogue, a core approach in GAP III. Therefore, this policy paper examines best practices and qualitative research on opportunities and recommendations from the perspective of CSOs as critical partners in mainstreaming gender equality based on GAP III in the five key policy areas of the New Agenda for the Mediterranean. In addition to desk research, the study used participatory research methods, which involved twenty CSOs and groups in Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Egypt. The paper concludes with recommendations, such as:

- Include the tool of gender rapid analysis as part of granting criteria, which is beneficial as both an initiating and monitoring tool for gender mainstreaming in programming and is based on full ownership and engagement of women's rights groups and CSOs.
- Support social media advocacy, public awareness, and misinformation detection pieces of training to empower local and grassroots groups in amending and promoting international women's rights treaties.
- Support the establishment of residents' assemblies and the establishment of safe digital platforms for dialogue, such as Decidim,
- Integrating the gender indicators from the first report by the Intergovernmental Monitoring Mechanism on Gender Equality for the UFM into the "Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours" while adding the impact of gender equality on socio-economic development.
- Support social media advocacy that includes diaspora feminist, LGBTQIA+ and women's rights groups in the Mediterranean region.

- Add a decolonial approach to GAP III through concrete practices such as investing in decolonial participatory research about the history of gender equality and sexual rights in the region and supporting research on sensitizing the language in international cooperation from a decolonial lens.

## **Introduction:**

According to the factsheets published by EuroMed Rights (2023), women in the Mediterranean region are subjected to intersectional discrimination based on ethnicity, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, disability, and age. Some of the main sources of discrimination are personal status laws and penal codes that restrict women's rights to child custody, marriage, nationality, and inheritance. Moreover, women face barriers to accessing protection against gender and sex-based violence. For example, according to the World Health Organization (2024), marital rape is not explicitly criminalized in most countries in the Southern Mediterranean region. Women also suffer from the gender pay gap and unequal opportunities in the labour market, as they are often confined to low-paid and part-time jobs in the care sector. Further, research indicates that women and girls are among the most vulnerable groups affected by humanitarian crises because they face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, violence, and vulnerability that put them at a higher risk of harm and suffering (Lafrenière et al., 2019). In 2023, the Southern Mediterranean region experienced several humanitarian crises, including the ongoing escalation of crises in Gaza. Since October 7, 2023, the bombardment of the Gaza siege has reportedly killed over 11,000 people, injured over 27,000, and displaced 1.6 million people, with thousands still trapped under rubble (UN Human Rights Office, 2023). The UN Women published in January 2024 a gender alert about the gendered impact of the crises in Gaza. Key gender considerations greatly impacting women include food security, shelter, protection, and lack of access to adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities for menstrual hygiene management (Gender Alert: The Gendered Impact of the Crisis in Gaza, 2024). Hence, it is crucial to mainstream gender equity<sup>1</sup> and gender equality in all programming and policy dialogue processes because of existing violations of women's rights, gender inequalities that intersect with other factors, and the gendered consequences of humanitarian crises.

Therefore, the EU's third Gender Action Plan, GAP III, comes as a promising plan with its transformative, intersectional, and human rights-based approaches to mainstream gender perspective in all the EU's external actions, such as the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean. The European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted GAP III on November 25, 2020. The plan aims to accelerate progress on empowering women and girls and safeguard gains made on gender equality during the 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "gender equity" refers to the practical needs assessment that involves putting policies in place to close gaps brought about by gender inequality and gender-based discrimination, such as having a gender budget for women and girls. It does not necessarily address strategic needs for long-term status quo change; however, it is an important step towards gender equality for a transformative approach in GAP III, where gender equality is the desired long-term and strategic need to change the status quo based on gender and other intersecting factors.

This is by mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external actions. Less than a year after the GAP III, the European Commission and the High Representative presented the proposal of the New Agenda for the Mediterranean, which was endorsed by the Council in 2021. The New Agenda includes a dedicated Economic and Investment Plan to spur long-term socio-economic recovery in the Southern Neighbourhood. It focuses on five policy areas: 1. Human development, good governance, and the rule of law 2. Resilience, prosperity, and digital transition, 3. Peace and security, 4. Migration and mobility, and 5. Green transition: climate resilience, energy, and environment. The Agenda emphasizes integrating gender equality in all its policy areas in line with GAP III. It also aims to enhance the political dialogue and cooperation across the Mediterranean and to involve civil society, women, and youth in the partnership.

Regarding the involvement of civil society, the Arab NGO Network for Development (2021), in its position on the new Agenda for the Mediterranean, expressed concern about the lack of meaningful participation and consultation of civil society actors in formulating and implementing the Agenda. The New Agenda for the Mediterranean states that it is indicative and not exhaustive, which means that it will be constantly revised based on monitoring and evaluation during the implementation process. Therefore, civil society actors can still shape and influence the Agenda if there are inclusive channels for monitoring and evaluation where civil society can play a meaningful part. Similarly, the mid-term evaluation report by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (2023), which covered Palestine from the Southern Mediterranean region, indicates that there is still room for improvement in including the CSOs and Women's Rights Groups in implementing GAP III. Consequently, mainstreaming gender equality into all five policies of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean and in line with the GAP III requires the inclusion of CSOs and women's rights groups, which remains both a challenge and a need to enhance gender equality in the southern Mediterranean region.

Therefore, based on previous research findings, this paper focuses on policy recommendations for more inclusive channels to include CSOs, women, and feminist groups in policy dialogue and programming. Specifically, through desk and participatory research, it highlights the opportunities, challenges, and recommendations from the perspective of CSOs and women's rights organizations in the Southern Mediterranean region on incorporating the three approaches and principles of GAP III into the renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean, with civil society as a key actor in the process.

### **Methodology:**

The research combined desk research, literature review, an online qualitative questionnaire, one-to-one online interviews, and focus groups with Civil Society Organizations and women's rights groups in the southern Mediterranean region.

The first stage aimed to define the participatory research questions, and it consisted of a literature review of two primary and several secondary resources. The primary resources are 1. the EU Gender Action Plan 2020-2025 and 2. the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighborhood - A New Agenda for the Mediterranean 2021-2027, which consists of the Joint

Communication on a Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood and the dedicated Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours which includes a series of preliminary flagship initiatives and projects that could be financed under the 'Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation instrument NDICI, and that address the national, local, multi-country and regional needs and opportunities of the Southern Neighbourhood partners.

The literature review of secondary resources included the mid-term evaluation report of GAP III by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (2023), published research on the role of Civil Society Organizations in the implementation of the five policy areas of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean, and published reports and case studies of gender equality, civil society, and sustainable development in the Mediterranean region.

The second stage consisted of an online questionnaire and participatory research methods that investigated the challenges and opportunities faced by civil society organizations in the southern Mediterranean region who work on gender equality within the five thematic areas of the New Agenda for the Mediterranean and benefited from programs under the framework of NDICI.

Twenty organizations and groups took part in the participatory research. Nine organizations completed the online questionnaire. Eleven organizations participated in the online interviews and focus groups. The participants are located and working in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia.

The questions tackled the three approaches of GAP III, the support provided by the EU within the framework of NDICI, the flagship initiatives in the new Agenda for the Mediterranean to extract the opportunities, challenges, and further recommendations for the support of the EU in the inclusion of CSOs and women's rights group to mainstream gender equality in policy dialogue and programming for sustainable development in the southern Mediterranean region. The research outcomes combine the findings of the desk and participatory research.

### **The principles and approaches of GAP III in the context of the southern Mediterranean region:**

The three principles that guide GAP III's approach are gender-transformative, intersectional, and human rights-based. The GAP III approach combines gender mainstreaming, targeted actions, and political dialogue.

Gender mainstreaming entails incorporating a gender perspective into all policies and actions, ensuring that they promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Thus, gender mainstreaming aims to achieve equality for all people, including women, LGBTQIA people, and men. The EU GAP III is based on the EU's gender equality strategy and LGBTQIA rights agenda, both of which are key policy frameworks in the EU. As a result, GAP III includes the externalization of EU internal policies. However, GAP III is also intended to account for the perspectives and realities of non-EU countries and regions, such as the Southern Mediterranean. According to the GAP III document, the EU engaged in extensive and inclusive consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders, including EU institutions, EU Member States, partner countries, international organizations, civil society organizations, local governments, the private

sector, academia, and think tanks. The consultation solicited comments and feedback on the previous GAP II's successes and challenges, as well as the priorities and goals for the new GAP III. Furthermore, the document states that GAP III is not a prescriptive document but rather a tool to assist the EU and its Member States in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through external actions. Similarly, the New Agenda for the Mediterranean is an evolving document which means it can provide numerous opportunities for consultation with CSOs and women's rights organizations on gender mainstreaming in all flagship initiatives of the renewed partnership with the southern neighbourhood. As a result, both documents—the GAP III and the New Agenda for the Mediterranean—are critical for CSOs in the Southern Mediterranean region because they express the principle of involving various members of civil society in the adaptation process, which is required for the transformative approach of gender mainstreaming. However, gender mainstreaming is a concept that is still under progress and this brings both challenges and opportunities especially when looking into the five policy areas of the New Agenda of the Mediterranean and the huge gap of inequalities that is increasing in countries and between countries, while the MENA region is the most unequal region in the world (World Inequality Report, 2022).

According to different gender analysis models such as the Moser model (Oxfam, 1999), when mainstreaming gender equality, it is important to recognize two forms of needs: 1. Practical needs and 2. Strategic needs. The practical needs are essential needs which exist due to gender inequalities, they are the technical arrangements that should be ensured for the active participation of women and girls without necessarily challenging or aiming to change the status quo, while strategic needs are the needs that aim for a transformative, long term and systematic change towards gender equality. Therefore, it is difficult but critical to address both gender equity and gender equality in the gender mainstreaming process. Gender equity refers to specific measures such as the practical needs to rebalance an unequal structure caused by gender inequalities, whereas gender equality refers to changing the status quo that created gender inequalities and the need for gender equity in the first place. In the migration context for example some integration policies may reinforce gender stereotypes by orienting women for fields that are considered for females, such as education, health care, social services, and agriculture. In a long run these policies lack a systematic change for gender equality where gender roles and norms are not limiting the career choice and professional development of women (Brussino & McBrien, 2022).

Targeted actions in GAP III refers to implementing specific measures and initiatives that address the needs, challenges and opportunities of women and girls and promote their rights and interests. The GAP III proposes targeted actions in different regions and countries, based on their specific contexts and needs. The approach of targeted actions is also present in the New Agenda for the Mediterranean in the dedicated Economic and Investment Plan to spur the long-term socio-economic recovery in the Southern Mediterranean including preliminary flagship initiatives. These initiatives are designed to be implemented at different levels: regional, multi-country and country level. On a multi-country level, the EU listed supportive actions for CSOs to take an active part in the reforms under the flagship of human rights, the rule of law, and modern, effective administrations, governance, and accountability. The supportive actions combine the capacity building of civil society organizations, build up the leadership skills of civil society and

strengthen work with civil society to, inter alia, tackle disinformation and support the green and digital transition. When it comes to human rights, in several southern Mediterranean countries there are laws that explicitly discriminate against women and gender and sexual minorities. For example, according to the Human Rights Watch World Report (2023), despite 2017 amendments to Article 98 of Jordan's penal code, judges continued to impose mitigated sentences under Article 99 if female victims' families did not support prosecutions of male family members who committed femicide. Further, article 340 of the penal code also allows a man to receive a reduced sentence if he kills or attacks his wife or any of his female relatives in the alleged act of committing adultery or in an "unlawful bed." More examples are the custody laws that are discriminatory against women in several southern Mediterranean countries including Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria. Thus, empowering civil society based on the approaches of GAP III and through the New Agenda for the Mediterranean is an urgent matter for human rights in the region.

Political dialogue in GAPIII refers to the engagement with partner countries and other stakeholders including civil society organizations and women's rights groups on gender equality issues and advocating for implementing international commitments and standards. According to the latest data from the IPU-UN Women Map of Women in Politics (Women in Politics: 2023, 2021), women political representation in different Arab speaking countries is as follow:

Country	Women Heads of State (%)	Women Heads of Government (%)	Women Cabinet Ministers (%)	Women Members of Parliament (%)
Algeria	0	0	9	22
Egypt	0	0	25	15
Jordan	0	0	9	12
Lebanon	0	0	6	5
Libya	0	0	0	16
Morocco	0	0	12	21
Palestine	0	0	10	26
Syria	0	0	0	13
Tunisia	0	0	36	36

Compared to the global average, the region has a lower percentage of women in politics in all categories. The reasons are socio-cultural, legal, political, and economic barriers. For example, women's representation in Lebanese politics is limited due to a complex system of patriarchal religious beliefs, patriarchal laws, and male-dominated political elites. These challenges can be divided into three categories: social factors such as cultural constructs and relationship patterns; economic factors such as electoral campaigns and "poverty among women"; and political factors

based on tribal, family, and sectarian structures (Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation, 2017). In Jordan a report published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2020) document violence incidents against women political candidates. The report elaborates the social harmful norms that hinder women from political candidacy while giving concrete examples of women political candidates in the cities of Zarqa and al Karak.

In Tunisia, the electoral law of 2016 for gender parity in political presentation led to a positive change by increasing women's political representation in 2018 (UN Women, 2018). However, in 2021, President Kais Saied declared a state of emergency under Article 80 of the Constitution, which was a flashback for democracy. Saied enacted multiple laws that circumvented the nation's political system and constitution, and he declared he would rule by decree. Later, he abolished the quota system for women. Moreover, the new laws that limit public funding for political campaigns and the need for 400 signatures make it harder for women to get involved in politics. Women represented only 15% of the candidates in the 2022–2023 parliamentary elections, compared to 48% in 2014 and 47.5% in 2019 (Khellaf, 2024). As a consequence of Saied's policies, activists noted an increase in violence against women politicians via digital platforms (Ben Said, 2023). The example of Tunisia shows that legal reforms, democracy, and socially harmful norms against women in politics are strongly interdependent.

Therefore, political measures such as quota systems or political reforms are important yet not sufficient to fulfil the transformative principle of GAP III. The integration of GAP III approaches into the new Agenda for the Mediterranean could bridge the gap of women representation in politics by including the women's rights groups and feminist groups in policy dialogue, like the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda which is integrated into GAP III. The transformative approach of GAP III could ensure that gender equality is not only about having women in political dialogue but to have a feminist leadership that aims to change the status quo for a systematic long-term change towards gender equality and democracy.

### **The opportunities and challenges to integrate the principles and approaches of GAP III into the five key policy areas of the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighborhood - A New Agenda for the Mediterranean:**

The new Agenda for the Mediterranean covers five key policy areas and it includes policy dialogue and programming. Policy dialogue refers to the regular exchange of views and information between the EU and its Southern Neighbourhood partners on the priorities and objectives of their cooperation. Programming refers to the process of allocating and managing the financial resources that the EU provides to support the implementation of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean.

When it comes to gender sensitive programming both documents the GAP III, and the renewed partnership with the Mediterranean refer to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) gender equality policy marker. The DAC gender equality policy marker is used generally in the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood as a tool to measure and monitor the

EU's development assistance that aims to support gender equality and women's rights in the region. The EU has set a target to increase the share of its gender equality focused aid to the region to at least 85% by 2025. However, this does not mean that the DAC gender equality policy marker is used in all initiatives of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean, or that there is no room for improvement.

The DAC gender equality policy marker is based on a three-point scoring system, which indicates whether gender equality is the principal, significant, or not targeted objective of the project or program. The marker is based on donor intentions at the design stage, and does not reflect the actual implementation or impact of the project or program on gender equality and women's rights.

Therefore, the marker may not capture the full extent or quality of the EU's support for gender equality and women's rights in the Southern Neighbourhood, or the challenges and gaps that may exist in the field. Moreover, the DAC gender equality policy marker is a qualitative statistical tool that records development activities that target gender equality as a policy objective, but it does not provide information on the specific content, approach, or results of those activities. Therefore, the marker may not reflect the diversity and complexity of the gender issues and needs in the Southern Neighbourhood, or the best practices and lessons learned from the EU's interventions. For example, it may not show how the EU addresses the intersectionality of gender with other factors, such as age, disability, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, or how the EU engages with local actors, such as civil society, women's organizations, or human rights defenders, in the design and implementation of its projects or programmes. Therefore, there is a need for improvement in the use of the DAC gender equality policy marker in the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood - A new agenda for the Mediterranean. This starts by integrating the DAC gender marker in all policy and programming areas while supporting the marker with concrete tools for further gender and intersectional analysis.

### **Policy area one: Human development, good governance, and the rule of law**

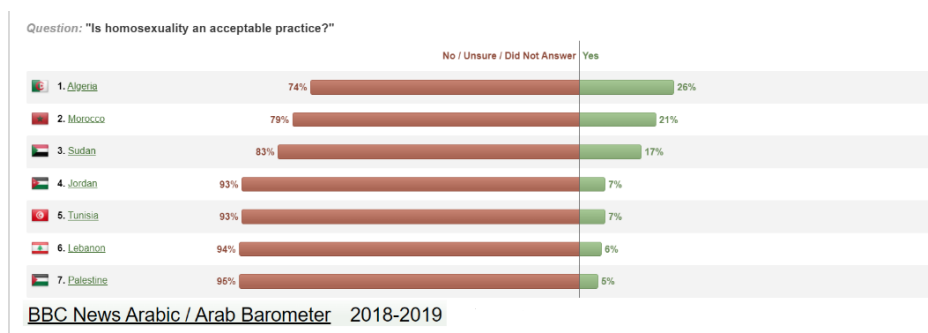
GAP III is regarded as the third step towards an EU feminist foreign policy in which gender equality is central to human development, good governance, and the rule of law (Impagliazzo, 2023). Since Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom first introduced the idea of feminist foreign policy in 2014, it has sparked contentious discussions and doubts (Bro, 2019). This controversy demonstrates the efficacy of feminist foreign policies in creating a just world in which inequalities and power dynamics are addressed and challenged.

The German Feminist Development Policy, based on the EU's GAP III, explicitly addressed colonial legacies and how they contributed to current intersectional inequalities, such as gender inequalities in former colonies. However, colonialization is not addressed in GAP III. This acknowledgement is significant because the findings of the participatory research address how feminist and women's rights organizations are frequently perceived and accused of having a "western agenda," due to several reasons, including the history of colonization. For example, in Jordan, those opposed to the CEDAW treaty refer to it and its local supporters as "agents of the west" (the mass movement to overthrow CEDAW, 2023). To break free from this fictitious "clash



of civilization," GAP III and the new Agenda for the Mediterranean must adopt a decolonial principle and approach, in addition to GAP III's existing principles of intersectionality, transformative change, and human-rights-based approaches. Previous research demonstrated that addressing colonial legacies rather than ignoring them will help achieve better-integrated societies based on the concept of partnership in order to break free from the fictitious "clash of civilizations" (Kapazoglou & Goris, 2022).

Another important element of GAP III is that it is also aligned with the EU's internal gender equality strategy and the LGBTIQ equality strategy, which call for a gender-equal and inclusive Europe and world. This element brings both opportunities and challenges. The GAP III emphasizes that it should be read alongside the EU LGBTIQ+ equality strategy. Yet, the new Agenda for the Mediterranean overlooked LGBTIQ+ rights while addressing mainstreaming gender across cooperation programmes and target actions. In several southern Mediterranean countries, the LGBTIQ+ community and its allies face legal and social discrimination and harassment (EqualDex, 2023). Through the New Agenda for the Mediterranean, the EU offers tools for creating a cross-sectoral dialogue between government, private sectors and CSOs, which is vital to streaming gender into all aspects of policies. Yet, LGBTIQ+ rights are overlooked with the excuse of being a "sensitive topic." Indeed, public opinion on homosexuality as an example is not supportive in different countries in the southern Mediterranean region, as illustrated in the graph below, yet this should not be an excuse to neglect fundamental human rights.

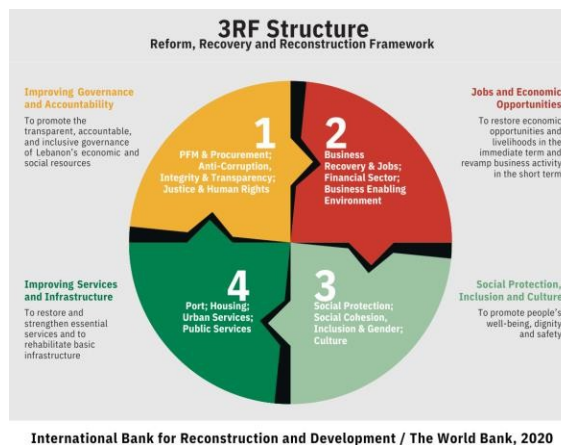


#### Findings of participatory research:

- Civil society plays an important role in democratizing and reforming governance. However, there are several challenges, such as the need for capacity building in civil society, including women's rights groups, on the topics of good governance and policy dialogue. Along with corruption and cyber-state repression, several participants addressed the shrinking spaces for civil society in several southern Mediterranean countries. All these factors hinder and block an active and meaningful impact and inclusion of women rights groups in the reforms concerning human rights, good governance, and the rule of law. These challenges addressed in the participatory research are also evident in the World Report of Human Rights Watch (2023).

## Policy area two: Resilience, prosperity, and digital transition

Among the flagship initiatives the EU support the "Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework, 3RF". In Lebanon within this framework the EU supported an innovative platform for civil society to shape and monitor the implementation of key reforms, to ensure better service delivery, to enhance political accountability and transparency. Even though this flagship initiative is under effective governance and accountability it is also implemented as an important tool for resilience. For example after the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020, the Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework 3RF, integrated gender aspect as part of 3RF framework as illustrated in the diagram below:



The 3RF methodological framework is valuable to extract further tools that fulfill the intersectional principle of GAP III and is inclusive to civil society including minorities and marginalized groups. However, to unleash its full potentials it could mainstream gender equality as both a desirable end goal and a tool. Gender perspective could be added in all pillars and not only in the social protection, inclusion and culture pillar. Further, gender equality could be used as a tool in achieving all goals in each pillar, for example gender parity to improve good governance and accountability.

Recognizing change and adapting to it is important for resilience. Cultures are fluid and change over time, as well as gender inequalities and power dynamics. Therefore, bureaucratic and slow institutional reporting and monitoring remain challenging for a transformative change where by the time a report is published, it may become inaccurate. Therefore the GAP III and the new Agenda should employ rapid tools for monitoring and evaluation. For example, gender rapid analysis is a tool that humanitarian organizations have developed, and it manifests a potential as a time-efficient tool that produces accessible knowledge not only in programming but also as a prerequisite in the granting criteria. The gender rapid analysis mechanism is valuable because it mainly focuses on qualitative data and is led by grassroots and local groups; therefore, it is based on intersectionality and in-depth analysis beyond statistical data (Quay, 2019).

Findings of participatory research:

- The mainstreaming of gender equality is not fully integrated into the work for resilience; this comes from the common perception of gender equality as a goal rather than a tool for resilience.
- Access to information is limited for grassroots organizations, particularly those advocating for women's rights. The majority of information about funding sources and support is still concentrated in larger organizations with limited access to marginalized communities and groups.

### **Policy area three: Peace and security**

The Women, Peace and Security Agenda, WPSA is integrated into the EU's gender action plan III. GAP III proposes to support the implementation of WPSA in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, by providing technical assistance, capacity building and funding for civil society organizations and women's rights defenders. GAP III also aims to promote the participation and leadership of women in political, economic and social spheres, as well as in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, by supporting dialogue platforms, networks and initiatives that foster women's empowerment and gender equality. Furthermore, GAP III intends to strengthen the protection and assistance of women and girls affected by conflict, violence, and displacement, by enhancing the prevention and response to gender-based violence, supporting the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, and ensuring access to education and livelihood opportunities. GAP III also prioritizes aligning reporting on WPSA and encouraging joint reporting by the European Commission, EU delegations, the European External Action Service and EU member states.

In the context of the renewed partnership with southern neighbourhood, the EuroMed feminist initiatives (2022) prepared the regional guidelines for the implementation of WPSA in the south Mediterranean. They are a set of recommendations for the Southern Neighbourhood countries to adopt and implement the WPSA in their national contexts. The guidelines are based on a consultative process that involved various stakeholders, including civil society, academia, media, and decision-makers.

Some of the challenges to integrate the guidelines as addressed by the EuroMed feminist initiative are:

- The lack of political will and commitment from the governments and institutions to adopt and implement the WPSA, as well as the limited coordination and collaboration among different actors and sectors. This includes the lack of sufficient knowledge of WPSA and its relevance for all countries, not only for those directly impacted by war, the continued silence around VAWG, the killings of women and girls in all the countries, and the need of gender sensitizing constitutions and the persistence of discriminatory laws, and where laws do exist, the gap between the laws and their implementation.

- The persistence of patriarchal norms and values, as well as the rise of conservative and extremist movements, that undermine women's rights and participation in public and private spheres.
- The insufficient funding and resources for the WPSA, as well as the lack of reliable and disaggregated data and indicators to monitor and evaluate its progress and impact.

In addition to the challenges above the mid-term evaluation report by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (2023) on implementing WPSA in Palestine addressed the following challenges:

- The limited political space and influence of women's rights organizations and activists in the Palestinian context, due to the fragmentation of the civil society, the lack of coordination and cooperation among different actors, and the shrinking civic space under the Israeli occupation and the internal political division.
- The insufficient implementation and monitoring of the Palestinian National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325, due to the lack of political will and commitment from the Palestinian Authority, the inadequate allocation of financial and human resources, and the weak accountability and reporting mechanisms.
- The persistent gender inequalities and discrimination in the Palestinian society, due to the prevalence of patriarchal norms and values, the lack of legal and policy reforms to ensure women's rights and protection, and the limited access to justice and services for women and girls, especially those affected by conflict, violence, and displacement.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences, which have exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities and risks of women and girls, especially those living in Gaza, Area C and East Jerusalem, and increased the cases of gender-based violence, poverty, unemployment, and school dropouts.

Fundings of participatory research:

- In terms of the EU's support for civil society and feminist and women's leadership for peace and security in the region, the politicized and polarised positions taken by EU member states in response to the escalated conflict and humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip erode the EU's role as a supporter of civil society for gender equality, peace, and security. Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, for example, voted against the UN resolution calling for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip.
- Financing support for civil society remains a challenge due to the long bureaucratic processes and requirements. These processes do not favour direct partnership with marginalized civil society organizations that work with marginalized communities yet have fewer financial and international partnership references. Participants in the online focus group highlighted precisely the granting schemes through INGOs and public institutions as a challenge where most of the funding goes for bank and administrative costs instead to the beneficiaries in need.

When it comes to funding the new Agenda for the Mediterranean follows a multilateral approach for CSOs. However, this does not exclude the possibility of bilateral funding from individual EU

member states or other donors when aligned with the goals and priorities of partner countries. Published research indicates that bilateral funding may have lower administrative and transaction costs, as it involves fewer intermediaries and less bureaucracy. However, it may also be more influenced by the political and strategic interests of the donor country, and less aligned with the needs and priorities of the recipient country. In the other hand, multilateral funding may have higher administrative and transaction costs, as it involves multiple actors and layers of coordination. However, it may also be more impartial and transparent, as it follows the rules and standards of the multilateral organization, and less susceptible to the political and strategic interests of individual donors (Huč & Zughool, 2023). Thus, both forms of funding are equally important based on the context and the relation between partners.

- The misinformation through social media impacts directly women's rights groups where false news spread around important UN treaties such as CEDAW. The continues misinformation that aims to politicize important international treaties for gender equality and dehumanize women's rights are a big challenge for the aspect of political dialogue and political reforms in GAP III and renewed partnership with the Mediterranean. For local and grass-root groups to take ownership over the process of amending and promoting international treaties for women's rights remains a challenge and a need.
- The polarized, dehumanized, and biased forms of media reporting during conflict creates a challenge and a need for alternative forms of journalism through civil society and women's intersectional feminist leadership for peace and the saving of humans' lives.
- Gender rapid analysis is an immediate need and challenge in the current escalation of humanitarian crises in Gaza

#### **Policy area four: Migration and mobility**

This policy area in the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood addresses a comprehensive approach to migration and mobility, based on dialogue and cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean partners, and in line with the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum. It addresses gender in several ways that responds to the GAP III approaches and principles such as: recognizing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls. However, in practice there are still gaps in inclusion and empowerment of women facing vulnerability between theories and practices. For example, a study by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (2021) that examines the shortcomings of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum from an intersectional feminist perspective identifies the lack of a clear and consistent definition of who constitutes "vulnerable groups" and what criteria are used to identify them, leading to ambiguity in the application of the concept and the lack of intersectional and gender responsive responses and measures to support people facing vulnerability. The same study suggested similar potential opportunities occurred in the participatory research about the important role that diaspora communities including women's rights groups and feminist groups can take to integrate the three approaches of GAP III into the migration and mobility policy area in the new Agenda

for the Mediterranean for both integration policies and dealing with inequalities in the cause roots of migration. Moreover, according to published research integration and migration policies in the case of family reunification remain gender blind in different EU member states such as in Slovenia. Family reunification policies create dependency on the person who is identified as the householder which is more likely to be a male due to gender repressive regimes. Thus, some migration and integration policies such as in family reunification maintain and even widen gender inequalities among migrant communities (Faces of Migration, 2021).

Further, statelessness is an essential gendered issue in several countries in the southern Mediterranean region. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022), by the end of 2022, the Middle East and North Africa hosted 370,300 stateless persons. Stateless women and girls experience gender-related barriers such as domestic violence, social repressive norms, and child marriage. At the same time, gender discrimination in nationality laws is a root cause of childhood statelessness (UNHCR, 2019). Policy dialogue is an important element in the new Agenda for the Mediterranean with tools that support intersectional dialogue between governments, CSOs and private sectors for inclusive policy making. Citizens' assemblies are important tools for policy dialogue across the Mediterranean region as well as within countries. However, the concept of citizenship is discriminatory and connects to different gender and socio-economic forms of discrimination.

#### Findings of Participatory Research:

- Throughout the participatory research several participants addressed the invisible legal barriers and inequalities that women who are refugees, stateless, asylum seekers or migrants face, especially in several southern Mediterranean countries such as Syrian women in Lebanon who face ethnic and gender-based discrimination along with other factors of discrimination such as age, disability, and educational backgrounds, further they identified the need for a participatory funding approach where community groups or organizations co-decide on the funding and activity approaches in response to their community members

#### **Policy area five: green transition: climate resilience, energy, and environment**

The Action Document for Fostering Biodiversity, Environment and Climate Action in the Mediterranean (2023) is a specific initiative that supports one of the key objectives of the new Agenda for the Mediterranean, which is to promote the green transition and address the environmental and climate challenges in the region. The Action Document recognizes the role of civil society and women's rights groups as key actors in achieving these objectives, and provides several opportunities for their involvement and participation, such as:

- Supporting the establishment and functioning of the Mediterranean Network of Environmental Journalists and Communicators, which aims to include representatives of civil society and women's rights groups, to raise awareness and disseminate information on environmental and climate issues.
- Supporting the implementation of the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development

2016-2025, which includes a specific objective on enhancing the role of women in environmental decision-making and actions and supporting the development and implementation of national and regional action plans on marine litter, which aims involve consultations and partnerships with civil society and women's rights groups, as well as other relevant stakeholders.

- Supporting the development and implementation of the Mediterranean Climate Change Adaptation Framework, which promotes gender-responsive and participatory approaches, and ensure the inclusion of civil society and women's rights groups in the adaptation process.
- Supporting the development and implementation of the Mediterranean Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development, which aims to foster the engagement of civil society and women's rights groups in the design and delivery of education and training programmes on environmental and climate issues.

Findings of participatory research:

- The restrictions on freedom of speech and free media are a challenge for women's rights groups to address gender inequalities and tackle important issues of corruption, transparency in connection to environmental protection.
- Including women's rights groups in environmental decision-making is a must due to the unequal representation of female politicians in most southern Mediterranean countries, yet CSOs who took part in the online focus groups addressed the challenge and the need to differentiate between women's presence in decision-making and the feminist approach that aims for climate justice and gender equality. As gender mainstreaming is more than just including women in environmental discourse, the transformative principle in GAP III could support a transformative process where women's rights representation should be for a long-term systematic change towards gender equality.
- Participatory budgeting needs improvement. A grassroots women's group in rural Tunisia addressed the rigidity of some EU-funded programmes, which allocate 20% for technical arrangements and 80% for implementation, which is not flexible or responsive to the diverse needs of women, such as single mothers and mothers with disabled children. The rigidity of the existing budgeting mechanism was a challenge, and participants called for participatory budgeting in all areas of working with vulnerable women.
- The CSOs involved in this study noted the dearth of inclusive outreach channels, such as grassroots associations and groups that speak for underprivileged and marginalized populations, like women employed in Tunisia's rural agriculture sector. Similarly, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (Sala, 2018) documented intersectional discrimination against refugee women from Sudan and Syria who worked on Jordanian farms. According to the report, these women experienced verbal and physical abuse, low pay, long hours, difficult conditions, a lack of contracts, social security, a lack of safety equipment, and a lack of transportation. The many causes and roots of gender inequality, including ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic background, make the integration of the intersectional and transformative approaches from GAP III both necessary and challenging.

## Policy recommendations

- Enhance the integration of the DAC gender marker as a monitoring mechanism in all five policy areas in the EU's renewed partnership with the Southern Neighborhood - A new agenda for the Mediterranean through the following actions:
  1. complement the marker with other tools or methods to assess the implementation and impact of the EU's projects or programmes on gender equality and women's rights, such as gender analysis, gender budgeting, gender indicators, gender audits, or gender evaluations.
  2. Enhance the quality and consistency of the application of the marker by the EU and its partners, such as by providing clear definitions and criteria, training and guidance, quality control and verification, or peer review and feedback.
  3. Increase the transparency and accountability of the reporting and use of the marker by the EU and its partners, such as by publishing and disseminating the data and analysis, engaging, and consulting with stakeholders, or monitoring and following up on the recommendations.
  4. Integrate the gender indicators from the first report by the Intergovernmental Monitoring Mechanism on Gender Equality for the UFM into the "Economic and Investment Plan for the Southern Neighbours", which is part of the EU's Agenda for the Mediterranean. And add indicators about the impact of gender equality on economic development; this will help to generate intersectional and rapid data that are helpful for CSOs to mainstream gender equality in the work on socio-economic development in the region.
- Integrate a decolonial approach along with the gender-transformative and intersectional approaches in GAP III and integrate it further into the new Agenda for the Mediterranean by:
  1. Address and acknowledge the impact of colonization on the accumulation of intersectional inequalities, including gender inequalities in former colonies. The GAP III should address colonization as the German Feminist Development Policy did.
  2. Revise language in international development cooperation through decolonial linguistic research, which includes feminist and women's rights groups. For example, replacing development with "reparations" can assist women's rights and feminist groups combating inequalities in the southern Mediterranean region.
  3. Invest in research that decolonizes the history of gender and sexual rights in the southern Mediterranean region. Going through colonization legacies in policy dialogue is essential to address the power dynamics between countries and within the partner country. Adapting a decolonial approach into GAP III and integrating this into the new Agenda for the Mediterranean should support decolonial research about gender and sexual minorities' rights in the southern Mediterranean region. For example, a decolonial approach should support research on the history of gender and sexual minority rights in Egypt and how



colonization enabled the accumulation of social stigmas and legal discrimination against female belly dancers and homosexuality (Shadeedi, 2021).

4. Enhance participatory funding mechanisms for end users. Where CSOs and women's rights group participate in the gender participatory budgeting in coherence with the communities they present and work with.
  5. Include the tool of gender rapid analysis as part of granting criteria, which is beneficial as both an initiating and monitoring tool for gender mainstreaming in programming. The tool assists with the transformative approach in GAP III due to its accessibility and reliance on qualitative data, engagement of local organizations and rapidity considering cultures as fluid and changing constantly and contextually. Considering that socio- cultural structures are both fluid and the leading cause of reproducing inequalities, the gender rapid analysis may also be employed as an up-to-date monitoring system to ensure the no-harm principles in international cooperation in the Mediterranean region.
- Support social media advocacy, public awareness, and misinformation detection trainings. To empower local and grassroots groups to amend and promote international women's rights treaties.
  - Support social media advocacy for dialogue that acknowledges and delivers the voice of LGBTIQ+ organizations and advocacy groups in the southern Mediterranean region, including diaspora LGBTIQ+ organizations. Social dialogue and awareness play a critical role in ending the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ rights under the excuse of "sensitivity". Media advocacy such as the "*Shababtalk*", which is a youth-oriented talk show produced by Deutsche Welle, is an example where the Arab LGBTIQ+ diaspora plays a crucial role in awareness raising with an impact which social media interactions can measure.
  - Support the creation of digital platforms such as Decidim for democratic dialogue to channel the voices of feminist and LGBTIQ+ diaspora groups from the southern Mediterranean region in the policy dialogue of Human development, good governance, and the rule of law. Including religious liberal leaders in policy dialogue is essential to advocate for LGBTIQ+ rights in the region. Action plans for policy dialogue on democracy and the role of law in the new Agenda for the Mediterranean should employ tools that create spaces for engaging regional and local LGBTIQ+ organizations in active and safe dialogue.

## **Conclusion:**

Finally, this policy paper explored the need for feminist leadership in the Southern Mediterranean region to promote gender equality and women's rights, especially in the face of humanitarian crises and the intersectional forms and core causes of discrimination. The European Union's Gender Action Plan, GAP III, and the New Agenda for the Mediterranean are both promising, but

civil society actors, particularly women's rights organizations, must be better included in policy dialogue and programming. Regional and local civil society and women's rights organizations have an important role in outlining opportunities, challenges, and recommendations for incorporating GAP III principles and techniques into the Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. This is why this study in addition to desk research included participatory research with twenty CSOs and groups based in Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Egypt. Some of the challenges addressed are the lack of structured approaches and mechanisms for gender participatory budgeting. Financing support for civil society is challenging due to bureaucratic processes and funding schemes that prioritize administrative costs over the needs of marginalized communities. The new Agenda for the Mediterranean includes both multilateral and bilateral funding approaches, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Misinformation through social media negatively impacts women's rights groups and hinders political dialogue and reforms. Biased media reporting during conflicts highlights the need for alternative forms of journalism led by civil society and women's intersectional feminist leadership. Additionally, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza requires an urgent gender analysis due to the significant number of affected displaced persons, including women and children. Further research addressed the need for a comprehensive approach to migration and mobility in the southern neighborhood, with a focus on gender and intersectional forms of vulnerability. It pointed out the gap between theory and practice in the inclusion and empowerment of women facing vulnerability. It also discusses the shortcomings of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in addressing intersectional and gender-responsive measures. It also emphasized the gender inequalities in family reunification policies and the gendered issues related to statelessness in the southern Mediterranean region. In conclusion, there are several opportunities and recommendations on enhancing the inclusion of CSOs in mainstreaming gender equality based on GAP III in the five key policy areas in the New Agenda for the Mediterranean. Among these are using gender rapid analysis as part of the criteria for grants, helping local and grassroots groups with social media advocacy, public awareness, and misinformation detection trainings to change and promote international women's rights treaties, setting up residents' assemblies and safe digital platforms for dialogue, including qualitative gender indicators in economic and investment plans, and encouraging feminist groups from around the world to get involved. These actions can help promote gender equality in all five key policies of the renewed partnership with the Southern Neighborhood and empower women's rights groups and CSOs in the region.

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