

# EUROPE'S MOMENT: Aligning Budget and Ambition for Global Gender Equality

## Position Paper

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The EU is negotiating €200.3 billion in external action funding for 2028–2034, alongside the development of its new Gender Action Plan (GAP IV). These two parallel processes are a defining opportunity to align gender equality rhetoric with real resources, or to deepen the gap between political commitment and programmatic reality. This paper sets out what is at stake, what the negotiation timeline requires, and what genuine feminist funding looks like in practice.

## 1. The Stakes: A Critical Moment for Gender Equality Funding

Progress on gender equality has stalled or reversed across many regions. Women's rights organisations (WROs), recognised for their role in upholding democracy, promoting fundamental rights, and delivering life-saving services, face shrinking civic space, chronic underfunding, and increasing threats from rising and well-funded anti-rights movements. Conflicts, climate crises, and economic instability disproportionately affect women, girls, and marginalised groups, making gender-responsive EU external action not optional, but essential.

The share of foreign aid committed to gender equality objectives was already declining. Among DAC members, it fell from 45% in 2019–2020 to 42% in 2021–2022. Preliminary new OECD data show that from 2023 to 2024 foreign aid with gender equality objectives fell by 13%, reaching the lowest volume since 2021. In 2025, major European donors scaled back foreign aid commitments, announcing reductions totalling EUR 30 billion over the next four years, with gender equality budgets among the hardest hit.

The proposed Global Europe Instrument (GEI), the regulation governing external action funding, has removed existing gender spending targets from its current draft. This directly threatens long-standing accountability commitments at the very moment when stronger, not weaker, action is required.

## The funding gap is acute:

- Gender equality aid fell from 45% to 37% of DAC member aid in just four years (OECD, 2023)
- Less than 1% of EU gender equality foreign aid was allocated directly to WROs in 2020–2021 (OECD, 2023)
- The Alliance for Feminist Movements estimates annual losses of \$2.83 billion to the women's rights sector from 2026 onwards

## 2. Gender Equality Is a Strategic Investment

Gender equality is not at odds with the EU's economic, security, and stability priorities, it advances all of them. The European Investment Bank reports that action to advance gender equality could add \$13 trillion to global GDP by 2030. In the EU specifically, improving gender equality would lead to a 6.1 to 9.6% increase in GDP per capita and an additional 10.5 million jobs by 2050. UN Women's 2025 Gender Snapshot estimates that accelerated action could unlock USD \$342 trillion by 2050.



Feminist funding is also cost-effective peace infrastructure. Women's participation demonstrably leads to more durable peace agreements that address root causes. A landmark study by [Htun and Weldon](#) tracked 70 countries over 30 years and found that autonomous feminist movements were the single strongest predictor of progressive policy change on violence against women outperforming left-wing government, women in parliament, and national wealth as explanatory factors.

With the [V-Dem Institute's 2024 Democracy Report](#) recording the most sustained decline in democratic freedoms in over a century, and the [CIVICUS Monitor](#) documenting that feminist organisations are consistently among the first targeted through restrictive legislation and defunding, investing in feminist civil society is among the highest-leverage choices available to democratic actors. To defend democracy without defending the organisations that sustain it from the ground up is to protect the edifice while neglecting its foundations.

Flexible, long-term, and core funding models are especially critical, allowing organisations to respond to shifting political environments, retain experienced staff, and engage in strategic advocacy. This is supported by evidence from the [Global Fund for Women](#) and echoed in [OECD guidance on civil society enabling environments](#).

## \$13 trillion

Added to global GDP by 2030 through gender equality action ([EIB](#))

## \$342 trillion

Economic value unlocked by 2050 with accelerated action ([UN Women, 2025](#))

## <1%

Share of total ODA reaching women's rights organisations ([OECD, 2023](#))

### 3. The EU's Role and Global Leadership

Gender equality has been a fundamental EU value since its foundation and has shaped its global commitments since the 2000s. In 2021–2022, EU institutions and Germany provided the world's largest volumes of foreign aid with gender equality as a principal or significant objective, with [\\$12.3 and \\$12.1 billion](#) respectively. The EU's share of gender equality aid has been consistently above the DAC average over the last decade.

The EU's values-based approach from the Gender Action Plans to human rights strategies has set global standards and is widely welcomed by international partners. As highlighted by [ODI Europe's stakeholder consultation](#), this credibility is especially significant as the US retreats from traditional global commitments. A consistent, well-resourced EU position on gender equality sends a powerful signal to partners, including those facing domestic pressure from anti-rights actors.

The EU has already seen feminist funding work in practice. In Kosovo, the EU Delegation co-developed the national Gender Equality Action Plan with local women's groups, producing a model of participatory policymaking that strengthened both ownership and implementation. In conflict-affected regions, women's funds have reached grassroots peacebuilders that formal EU mechanisms could not access.

The [GAP III mid-term evaluation](#) demonstrated what genuine civil society engagement yields: CSOs gained capacity to draft laws, advise governments, and sit at decision-making tables as credible technical partners directly shaping national legislation in Kenya, Nepal, and Nigeria. Structured dialogue mechanisms produced co-created priorities and mutual accountability. Village Savings Associations, fintech tools for informal workers, and digital land rights instruments reached women that traditional finance excludes. However, the evaluation also showed these gains remain modest in scale, uneven, and fragile, underscoring that genuine engagement only works when backed by long-term funding, political will, and a willingness to cede real power.

### 4. The Case for Women's Rights Organisations and Women's Funds

WROs play a critical role in promoting democracy, gender equality, and fundamental rights. Being embedded in local, national, and regional settings means they offer [contextual knowledge](#) that external actors including international agencies lack and would struggle to build. As noted by [Njeri and Daigle \(2022\)](#), this grounding means WROs are uniquely aware of 'gaps, needs, risks, norms and power relations' within their communities, and are well-positioned to address the intersecting needs of marginalised groups.

Yet WROs remain chronically underfunded globally. According to [OECD data](#), DAC donors committed \$574 million in foreign aid to WROs in 2020–2021, down from \$581 million in 2018–2019. Support to WROs further [fell by \\$100 million](#) from 2023 to 2024.



This represents less than 1% of total foreign aid with gender equality objectives. Even among the EU's largest and most gender-progressive donors, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden, less than 0.6% of EU gender equality foreign aid reached WROs directly in 2020–2021.

The evidence is clear: when women's organisations receive adequate funding, they deliver results. Women's funds' participatory grantmaking approach has proven particularly effective in reaching marginalised groups, providing rapid crisis response while building long-term resilience. Their contextual knowledge and trusted relationships enable support to reach actors in conflict-affected regions where formal channels fail.

## Women's Funds as Strategic Intermediaries

A major barrier to directly funding grassroots WROs is their perceived limited capacity to absorb large-scale funding within standard EU procedures. One practical solution is for the EU to scale up cooperation with women's and feminist funds, which can act as intermediary grant-makers enabling a cascading model of financing similar to that already employed by some EU Delegations through umbrella CSOs or larger INGOs.

Partnerships with women's funds offer clear advantages:

- They reduce the risks and administrative burden of managing many small grants.
- They ensure funding reaches organisations with the deepest contextual knowledge and community trust.
- They enable rapid crisis response with community-led decision-making on allocations.
- They reach unregistered groups and organisations working on issues that larger donors consistently overlook.
- They strengthen local ownership and legitimacy, directly countering the 'foreign interference' rhetoric used by anti-gender actors.

The current distribution of gender equality aid is structurally misaligned. According to the OECD (2023), of funds channeled to civil society in 2021–2022 having gender equality objectives, only 11% reached CSOs based in partner countries, while 22% went to international CSOs and 66% to CSOs based in donor countries. This is not just inefficient, it is a strategic failure that excludes the frontline defenders of rights and democracy.

## 5. The Opportunity Ahead: GAP IV and the Global Europe Instrument

### Understanding the Frameworks

Two parallel processes will shape the EU's approach to gender equality in external action for the next decade. The Global Europe Instrument (GEI), consolidates €200.3 billion across development cooperation, humanitarian aid, crisis response, and civil society support for 2028–2034. GAP IV serves as the strategic framework guiding how these resources advance gender equality, determining which approaches receive priority, what indicators measure success, and which structures enable implementation.

These frameworks are mutually reinforcing. GAP IV functions as the instruction manual for how Global Europe resources advance gender equality; Global Europe gives GAP IV its financial muscle. As ODI Europe's research highlights, the absence of a 'financial arm' significantly limits the effective implementation of GAP commitments. The shift from GAP II to GAP III showed progress when the NDICI, a binding regulation, committed to gender targets. GAP IV must build on this foundation, pushing for stronger earmarks and enforceable requirements rather than retreating to optional guidance.

### Timeline

July 2025	Commission proposes MFF 2028–2034 and the Global Europe Instrument
March 19 2026	GAP IV public consultation opens, first major window for civil society and researchers to shape priorities
April–May 2026	EP DEVE/AFET rapporteurs present draft reports; MEP amendments due
September 2026	DEVE and AFET Committee vote on amended Global Europe report
October 2026	Full European Parliament votes to establish its official position
2027 (1st half)	Trilogue negotiations; GAP IV formal proposal presented by the Commission; MFF earmarks locked in
1 January 2028	New budget period begins; EU Delegations develop Country Level Implementation Plans

# What is at Stake

In the Global Europe Instrument, the key questions are: Will there be dedicated budget lines for women's organisations? Will regulations allow multi-year grants and simplified procedures that organisations actually need? Will conflict-affected regions receive a proportionate share of gender equality resources?

In GAP IV, the priorities that will define EU gender equality support for a decade are being set now. Which thematic areas - Women, Peace and Security (WPS), economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), climate justice, etc - will be prioritised? Will binding targets - such as requiring that at least 20% of funding be invested in initiatives with gender equality as the principal objective, and that at least 10% of that funding flow through the feminist ecosystem - be included? Will LGBTQI+ rights, disability, and other intersections be explicitly addressed?

Alignment between these two frameworks is not automatic. Civil society needs to push for it. Without this alignment, commitments become unenforceable:

- If GAP IV commits to channelling 20% of funding to gender-equality-principal initiatives, with at least 10% of that funding routed through women's organisations, but the Global Europe Instrument lacks dedicated budget lines, such commitments risk becoming unenforceable and amounting to little more than window dressing.
- If GAP IV promises flexible, long-term funding but Global Europe mandates 18-month project cycles with 40-page proposals, most grassroots organisations cannot access funding under these conditions.
- If GAP IV mandates civil society engagement but Global Europe provides no budget nor mandate for Gender Focal Points in Delegations, implementation collapses
- If GAP IV creates monitoring systems but Global Europe funding does not reach feminist organisations, the accountability loop breaks entirely.

There are opportunities to showcase and consolidate evidence in the negotiation ahead. Researchers and CSOs are best placed to provide the context-specific information that turns broad commitments into workable policy. This includes case studies demonstrating where the absence of direct funding has stalled implementation; documentation of how simplified or multi-year grant procedures have enabled, or their absence has hampered, women's organisations in fragile contexts; and country-level data that EU Delegations can draw on when developing Country Level Implementation Plans in 2028. Engaging early, particularly in the GAP IV consultation phase launched in March 2026 and renewal of the EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2028–2034), offers the clearest opportunity to shape both the political framework and the financial architecture.



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## 6. What Feminist Funding Looks Like in Practice

Feminist funding is not simply gender-sensitive programming. It is a distinct approach with four core principles that must be reflected in both the GEI and GAP IV:

- **Power redistribution:** Resources are controlled by those most affected, not distant donors. This means funding WROs directly and supporting women's funds as strategic intermediaries with decision-making authority, not just delivery channels.
- **Flexible, long-term support:** Multi-year core funding for organisational sustainability, not short-term project cycles. Unrestricted grants allow organisations to respond to emerging needs, retain experienced staff, and build movement infrastructure, this is especially critical in crisis contexts requiring rapid response.
- **Trust-based partnerships:** Simplified procedures and proportionate due diligence that recognise local expertise rather than treating grantees as compliance risks. Women's funds have developed participatory grantmaking models, rapid deployment mechanisms, community-led allocation decisions, trust-based reporting, that reach organisations traditional EU funding excludes.
- **Holistic support:** Resources for protection, mental health, capacity strengthening, and institutional resilience. Organisations cannot deliver impact if their teams face burnout and physical, digital, legal, and psychological threats, risks that are escalating as civic space shrinks globally.

Recent research reveals the human cost of underfunding women's movements. Many groups focus on organisational survival rather than movement building, creating a vicious cycle where isolation undermines collective power. When donors stop treating civil society as a compliance checkbox, as documented by the GAP III mid-term evaluation, transformation is possible: coalitions linking grassroots mobilisation to institutional reform paved the way for Bolivia's women politicians contesting power collectively, and Nigeria's permanent Gender and Inclusivity Department. But these gains require three things to align: sustained EU political dialogue, long-term investment in local action, and genuine willingness to cede power rather than invite civil society to observe decisions being made top-down.

## 7. Recommendations



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The following structural changes are needed to turn EU gender equality commitments into enforceable, well-resourced reality.

### In the Global Europe Instrument

- **Restore and strengthen gender spending targets:** Include a binding requirement to allocate a minimum share of external action funds to gender equality objectives, building on the NDICI precedent rather than retreating from it.
- **Create dedicated budget lines for WROs and women's funds:** Without specific lines, commitments in GAP IV are unenforceable and EU Delegations lack infrastructure, incentives and mandate to implement gender equality action.
- **Enable multi-year grants and simplified administrative procedures:** Accessible to smaller organisations and those in conflict-affected or fragile contexts.
- **Ensure proportionate resourcing for conflict-affected regions:** Gender equality resources must reflect the heightened need in humanitarian and post-conflict settings.

### In GAP IV

- **Set binding targets:** Including a requirement that at least 20% of relevant funding has gender equality as primary objective and at least 10% reaches women's organisations and women's funds directly.
- **Name priority thematic areas explicitly:** WPS, economic empowerment, SRHR, climate justice, LGBTI+ rights, and disability must be identified as priority areas, not subsumed into generic 'inclusive development' language.
- **Require meaningful accountability mechanisms:** Civil society participation in monitoring, not just in the consultation phase; independent review of progress against clear targets.
- **Resource implementation:** Require and enable EU Delegations to have dedicated Gender Focal Points with sufficient budget, human resources, mandate and technical capacity.

### On Funding Modalities

- **Scale up partnerships with women's and feminist funds:** As strategic grant-makers with proven participatory grantmaking models that reach the organisations excluded by mainstream EU funding.
- **Adopt responsive, participatory grantmaking principles:** Including emergency and rapid-response grant mechanisms deployed through women's funds.

- **Shift toward core, unrestricted funding:** That builds organisational sustainability and movement infrastructure rather than short-term project delivery.
- **Apply trust-based due diligence:** Proportionate to organisation size and context; administrative requirements must not exclude organisations with the deepest community trust.

## The Bottom Line

The upcoming budget cycle is not just another negotiation. It coincides with a global rollback of gender equality funding, rising anti-rights movements, democratic backsliding, and the retreat of major donors from long-standing commitments. The EU has both the political profile and the financial weight to step up its game, but only if it aligns enforceable targets with adequate and accessible funding modalities, as well as genuine partnership with feminist civil society.

The feminist funding principles outlined in this paper are not aspirational ideals. They are evidence-based practices developed over decades of feminist grantmaking, tested in some of the most difficult operating environments in the world. Redirecting resources through women's funds, ringfencing dedicated gender equality financing, and committing to the funding modalities that work for grassroots organisations are the concrete steps that will determine whether EU commitments to women's rights survive this difficult political moment.

Feminist movements have always done more with less. But they cannot be expected to sustain and advance rights under conditions of deliberate resource strangulation. The time for pilots, side-streams, and gender mainstreaming as a substitute for dedicated investment has passed. What is needed now is political will, clear commitments, protected budgets, and genuine partnership with the feminist movement infrastructure that has proven, time and again, that it can deliver transformative change for entire communities.



# About us

The **Walking the Talk** Programme aims to strengthen the adoption of Feminist Foreign Policies (FFP) and promote equitable financing for gender equality in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the European Union. The consortium is composed of Hivos, Equipop, Restless Development, ODI Europe, and the Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung (DSW).

**Women's Funds Europe (WFE)** is a coalition of 13 Women's Funds based in 11 countries led by and for women, girls, trans, intersex, and non-binary people in all their diversity. Our core values are feminist and rooted in justice, equality, respect, freedom, and accountability, expressed through an intersectional lens. Together, in 2020, our organisations mobilised 29 million euros across 76 countries, providing grants to organisations and activist initiatives working towards gender equality, and strengthening women's rights groups and movements on the continent and worldwide.