

EU Action Plan for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in EU External Action

Victim Support Europe

Gender inequality is not an abstract imbalance, but a palpable reality that systematically exposes individuals to violence, limits their autonomy, and restricts their ability to exercise their rights. In this context, victimisation in any of its forms has profound and long-lasting consequences, affecting not only immediate safety but also long-term wellbeing, access to justice, social inclusion, and economic independence.

Whilst acknowledging that victimisation can occur across all genders, certain forms of violence disproportionately affect different groups, reflecting diverse gender experiences and intersecting vulnerabilities. For instance, women and girls are affected at higher rates by domestic violence, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, and exploitation, including trafficking and domestic servitude. Whereas gender diverse individuals might be exposed to higher rates of hate crime or targeted violence, to further the example.

Beyond the individual, victimisation carries wider societal consequences. It perpetuates cycles of inequality, undermines trust in institutions, and creates significant barriers to participation in social, economic, and political life. On top of this, many victims face compounded challenges, including societal stigma, fear of retaliation, financial dependency, and systemic barriers to reporting or access to support services. These dynamics are further exacerbated in contexts of shrinking civic space and backlash against gender equality, where protections are weakened and support systems are under strain.

Addressing gender equality in EU external action, therefore, requires an explicit focus on preventing victimisation, protecting victims, and ensuring that all individuals can safely access their rights. It further requires that the Union's commitment to equality and fundamental rights is carried through in its external action, informing how it engages with and support partners globally. Empowerment must be understood not only as participation, but as the ability to live free from violence and to access justice, support, and opportunities on equal terms.

Rights-based approach to gender equality

A robust external action on gender equality must be grounded in a rights-based approach that fully recognises the intersection between gender and other forms of discrimination. An intersectional approach is essential to ensure that responses effectively address the overlapping and compounding vulnerabilities experienced by victims. Similarly, as to how it is a cross-cutting priority across all GAP III pillars, this requires recognising and responding to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including those linked to migration status, disability, age, gender, or other characteristics. In practice, this means tailoring support to the specific needs of victims who may face layered barriers to accessing their rights, while also ensuring that services are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to diverse experiences.

To adequately respond to the lived experiences of individuals, holistic systems of support should be designed around the needs, rights, and agency of victims. For this, it is essential that they are gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and victim-centred. A gender-sensitive approach should be understood as one that acknowledges the diverse needs and lived experiences of women, men, and non-binary people, ensuring its integration across policy programmes. It aims to provide equal opportunities through tailored support mechanisms, inclusive of individuals in situations of heightened vulnerabilities, while addressing the power imbalances, structural inequalities, and systemic barriers. Particular in this approach is that it reflects a commitment to equality of outcomes in the exercise of victims' rights, with necessary adjustments made to account for their specific circumstances (see 2G4V framework, pending publication in 2026).

Gender equality remains one of the European Union's core values, *vital to building fair, inclusive, prosperous and peaceful societies everywhere*. It is an endpoint, as well as a foundational condition for sustainable development. Yet, despite this commitment, significant challenges persist in its realisation.

The European Union has made strides in the last number of years with the revision to the Victims' Rights Directive and the combatting Trafficking in Human Beings Directive, as well as the adoption of the Violence Against Women Directive. For the EU External Action, it is imperative that the standards that are being set in the region, are promoted abroad.

This includes promoting alignment with key EU legislative frameworks such as the Victims' Rights Directive, the Directive on Combating Violence Against Women, and the Directive on Trafficking in Human Beings. EU external action should support partner countries in adapting these standards to local contexts, ensuring that victim protection, access to justice, and support services are progressively strengthened in line with international human rights obligations.

Access to fundamental rights such as justice or support remains uneven, and, in many contexts, insufficient. For example, in situations of domestic violence, financial abuse can be used as a means of control, leaving many women without independent access to the resources required to report crimes or seek assistance. As such, the rights enshrined in EU law should not be viewed solely as protective mechanisms, but as key tools of empowerment. Bridging the structural barriers which impede the exercise of rights in practice can enable individuals to regain autonomy, access protection on their own terms, and ultimately break cycles of vulnerability and victimisation.

Addressing these gaps requires sustained efforts towards economic empowerment, including measures to tackle the gender pay gap and promote independence through education and financial literacy programmes. Strengthening economic autonomy is essential for individual resilience, but so are broader measures that address structural inequalities, ensure equal access to opportunities, and enable meaningful participation in society. In its external action, the EU can support this through the promotion of gender-sensitive considerations into cooperation initiatives (e.g. trade, governance, investment in education/skills development), ensuring that inclusion is systematically reflected across policies and partnership with third countries.

In an evolving geopolitical context marked by increasing instability and security threats, it is essential to ensure that gender perspectives are consistently integrated into security frameworks. This includes recognising the differentiated impacts of crisis, so that responses do not reinforce existing inequalities. For this, victim-centred crisis preparedness is critical, establishing a framework grounded in coordination across sectors and

continuity of care, while incorporating gender-responsive and trauma-informed planning from the outset. Such an approach not only strengthens societal resilience, but ensures that support remains accessible, timely, and adapted to diverse needs, even in complex and rapidly evolving emergency contexts.

In humanitarian and crisis contexts, where risks of gender-based violence are significantly heightened, EU external action should ensure:

- Integration of victim support services into humanitarian response frameworks
- Availability of safe spaces and specialised services
- Continuity of care across displacement and migration pathways

A victim-centred, gender-responsive approach in crisis settings is essential to prevent gaps in protection and ensure timely and appropriate support.

In accordance with the GAP III foundational pillars, gender-based violence should be firmly positioned as a core victims' rights issue within EU external action. This requires moving beyond its framing solely as a development concern and recognising it as a matter of protection, justice, and access to rights for victims. Accordingly, all actions addressing gender-based violence should systematically integrate victim support standards, including protection, assistance, and long-term recovery, to ensure a comprehensive and rights-based response. At the same time, in line with Pillar 1 on new challenges and emerging priorities, the EU must explicitly address technology-facilitated forms of gender-based violence. Online abuse, deepfakes, and other AI-driven forms of harm should be recognised as integral components of gender-based violence, requiring targeted responses. This includes investing in and supporting tools for safe reporting, effective evidence collection, and timely content removal, ensuring that victims of digital violence are equally protected and supported.

Artificial Intelligence and Technology-Facilitated Victimization

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and digital technologies is fundamentally reshaping patterns of victimisation. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including deepfakes, online harassment, identity manipulation, and AI-generated abuse material, is expanding both the scale and impact of harm, often with cross-border implications and limited avenues for redress.

At the same time, AI presents opportunities to strengthen victim support systems. AI-driven tools can improve early identification of victims' needs, enhance accessibility through automated translation and inclusive interfaces, support evidence collection, and strengthen case management and data analysis.

To ensure that technological developments contribute positively to victim protection, EU external action should promote ethical, human-rights-based AI applications, while addressing risks through:

- Support for safe reporting mechanisms and digital evidence preservation;
- Capacity-building for frontline services to respond to tech-enabled harm;
- Cooperation with platforms and private actors to ensure accountability.

Recommendations for a gender equality-focused EU External Action

EU external action has a critical role to play in translating global commitments on gender equality into concrete, context-sensitive action. Policies should go beyond reaffirming principles, ensuring their effective operationalisation across all areas of external engagement. This requires a sustained approach to gender equality that is embedded in diplomacy, cooperation initiatives, humanitarian assistance, and security policy, with a particular focus on strengthening resilience in the most vulnerable settings. This requires concrete commitments, adequate resourcing, strong accountability mechanisms, and meaningful engagement with civil society and victims themselves.

Firstly, EU external action must address the needs of citizens who become victims of crime outside the Union. For this to happen, strengthening coordination between external action services and relevant Commission services, including those responsible for justice, is essential. EU delegations should play a more active role in supporting victims abroad, including through enhanced consular protection mechanisms and access to information and support services. In doing so, it is crucial to ensure that victims of crime have access to support services either where they are based or in their home country.

Attention should be paid to cross-border and transnational forms of victimisation, including trafficking, online exploitation, and fraud, where jurisdictional complexity often limits access to justice and support. Strengthening cooperation between Member States, EU delegations, and partner countries is essential to ensure continuity of care, access to information, and effective referral mechanisms across borders.

A victim-centred approach must guide all EU gender equality interventions, ensuring that policies are grounded in the lived realities and needs of those affected. In line with this approach, the meaningful participation of individuals with lived experiences as well as grassroots organisations, should not only be part of the consultative policy process, but their voices recognised as essential contributors to the design and implementation of policies. This requires the establishment of structured, safe, ethically grounded participation frameworks, which incentivise co-creation. Women and girls, should be actively enabled as key agents of change, including in the leadership of prevention, mediation, and conflict-resolution efforts¹. For this to become a reality, it requires the establishment of direct and accessible funding mechanisms, particularly for frontline services that deliver essential, day-to-day assistance. In the context of ongoing negotiations on the EU Multiannual Financial Framework, where development funding is under increased scrutiny, safeguarding and prioritising such funding streams is crucial to maintain effective, responsive, and rights-based systems for victims.

Equally, the design of external action policies should be upheld by inclusive partnerships, which enable their adaptation to the context-specific realities of different settings. Such partnerships may facilitate the development of more inclusive governance structures, by fostering the political and civic participation of women and girls, particularly in contexts where their voices remain underrepresented or excluded from decision-making processes. A way of operationalising such engagement can be through dedicated programmes that bring together civil society organisations, women's rights organisations, victim support

¹ Council on Foreign Relations, *Women's Participation in Peace Processes*, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/index.html>

services, academia, and private foundations, in order to strengthen both the quality and relevance of policy interventions.

International partnerships are equally central to advancing a coherent and impactful external action agenda. Gender equality and victims' rights should be systematically embedded across political dialogues, enlargement and neighbourhood policies, humanitarian responses, migration frameworks, and development cooperation instruments. In addition, public-private partnerships can help address persistent resource and capacity gaps, particularly in fragile and crisis-affected contexts, while ensuring innovation and scalability of support mechanisms.

In this context, the role of private actors, particularly technology companies and digital platforms, is critical. In line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, EU external action should promote:

- Corporate responsibility to respect human rights;
- Due diligence in preventing harm;
- Accessible and effective grievance mechanisms for victims.

Strengthening accountability of private actors is essential, particularly in addressing technology-facilitated violence and ensuring victims' access to remedies.

Another avenue for integration of gender equality and victims' rights considerations is in regards to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Its principles should be victim-centric, recognising that security decisions and interventions often have direct and immediate consequences for individuals affected by violence, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings. In this regard, gender equality is not only a human rights imperative but also an essential component of sustainable peace, security, and stability.

These commitments should be underpinned by gender-responsive and victim-informed leadership across EU institutions and external action services. This includes targeted training, capacity-building, and the development of accountability mechanisms that ensure gender and victim perspectives are consistently mainstreamed into planning, implementation and evaluation. Structured and regular engagement with women led and women focused organisations and victim support actors should be institutionalised to ensure continuity, trust, and relevance. Building on the pillars of local implementation and partnership within the GAP III, a victim-centred approach requires the systematic inclusion and sustainable funding of local civil society and victim support organisations. These actors are often best placed to identify needs, build trust, and deliver tailored support within communities, for which collaboration should move beyond ad hoc consultations. This must be accompanied by direct and accessible funding mechanisms, particularly for frontline services, to enable them to operate consistently and respond to evolving challenges.

Finally, translating commitments into meaningful change requires robust monitoring, evaluation and accountability frameworks. Clear targets, disaggregated data collection, and transparent reporting mechanisms are essential to ensure that gender equality and victims' rights objectives are not only articulated, but effectively implemented and measured across all strands of EU external action. Similarly as to how it is integrated within the framework of the current GAP III, monitoring, data collection and evaluation mechanisms must be designed to reflect victims' lived experiences, rather than focusing solely on policy outputs or institutional performance. This requires the development of victim-centred indicators that capture meaningful aspects such as access to support services, quality and responsiveness of assistance, levels of satisfaction, and longer-term outcomes for recovery and empowerment. In parallel, efforts should be strengthened to

improve data collection on underreported forms of violence, which often remain invisible in official statistics yet significantly impact victims.

To strengthen accountability, monitoring frameworks should include:

- Victim-centred indicators (e.g. access to services, time to support, satisfaction levels);
- Independent evaluation mechanisms;
- Regular public reporting on progress and gaps.

This would ensure that commitments translate into measurable improvements in victims' lives, rather than remaining at policy level.

Advancing gender equality in EU external action requires a clear and sustained focus on victimisation, its root causes, and its long-term impacts. Violence is both a manifestation and a driver of inequality, and responses must therefore go beyond prevention to ensure protection, access to justice, and comprehensive support for all victims.

A coherent EU external action must therefore bridge the gap between policy commitments and lived realities, ensuring that victim protection systems are accessible, integrated, and adaptable to emerging risks, including those driven by technological change.

About Victim Support Europe

Victim Support Europe (VSE) is the leading European umbrella organisation advocating on behalf of all victims of crime, no matter what the crime, no matter who the victim is. VSE represents 80 member organisations in 36 countries, providing support to around 3 million people affected by crime every year. Founded in 1990, VSE has been working for 35 years for a Europe, and a world, where all victims have strong victims' rights and services, whether they report the crime or not. We work towards this mission through advocacy to improve European and International laws, through research and knowledge development and through capacity building at national and local level.