

INVEST IN WHAT MATTERS: PUTTING GENDER EQUALITY, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, CARE AND HUMAN SECURITY AT THE CORE OF THE NEXT EU BUDGET

A substantive approach to gender equality is missing and must be reinstated and strengthened

The European Commission's proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 marks a worrying shift in the EU's approach to promoting gender equality through its budget. While new horizontal provisions on expenditure tracking and monitoring are proposed, the overall framework represents a step back from the current dual approach that combines targeted action and gender mainstreaming. This means the EU's commitment to gender equality is being **de facto weakened**, and the proposed MFF will most likely have **negative effects** on gender equality, contributing to backsliding on commitments promote gender equality, women's rights and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and thus weaken human security. Strikingly, external action remains the only area where gender equality objectives and gender mainstreaming obligations are systematically integrated into the draft programme regulation.

1. Shift of funding priorities towards security, defence, and competitiveness undermines social and gender equality objectives

The proposed MFF channels substantial resources into **“security”, defence, and competitiveness**, with significant increases compared to the current MFF. In contrast, the share of funding dedicated to **gender equality, social priorities, and people-centred policies**, will decline sharply. This shift means **less funding for initiatives that further comprehensive security, benefit women and promote gender equality**, and means **more resources for male-dominated sectors**. It risks reversing progress toward the EU's gender equality and women's rights commitments, including the SDGs and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and risks increasing inequalities.

2. Absence of gender equality objectives in most programme regulations risks sidelining equality in EU funding

Most draft funding programme regulations **lack explicit gender equality objectives**. Without such objectives, programmes are unlikely to allocate funding to activities that promote equality — undermining the EU's commitments to maintain and advance gender equality. Because programme objectives determine funding allocation, the absence of gender equality objectives **undermines a holistic gender budgeting approach**. The proposals suggest that gender equality is increasingly treated as a mere **principle to be “taken into account”** rather than a **goal to be funded and achieved**. Only in the Global Europe instrument — covering external relations — is gender equality systematically included as an objective.

3. Risk of window dressing: Gender mainstreaming reduced to tracking and monitoring

The proposed *Expenditure Tracking and Performance Framework Regulation* introduces new horizontal gender mainstreaming (GM) requirements focused on tracking expenditure. It mandates breaking down performance indicators by gender “where appropriate” — but **fails to define indicators to measure actual gender equality results**. This narrow focus does **not amount to a comprehensive gender mainstreaming approach**, which should extend from programming to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The new requirements also do not compensate for the detailed gender mainstreaming provisions found in the current MFF (2021–2027), which are now being removed. There is a clear risk that the new system becomes **mere window dressing**, institutionalising partial gender mainstreaming in form but not in substance, thereby undermining existing programme-level practices and contributions to strengthen gender equality.

THE WAY FORWARD: STRENGTHENING GENDER EQUALITY IN THE MFF 2028–2034

Gender Equality and Women's Rights are a key pillar of Peace, Security and Prosperity in Europe.

Europe stands at a crossroads. The next EU budget can either lock in an outdated, failed model, or it can **invest in true sources of resilience: equality, care, democracy and participation**. Shifting resources towards Europe's commitments to peace, and towards financing human security, including gender equality and human rights. Invest in what matters: Prioritise and earmark investments for gender equality, women's rights, care, social priorities, and human security generally, towards peace, security and prosperity in Europe and beyond. Programmes critical for advancing gender equality, such as *AgoraEU* (the main instrument for promoting equality and combating gender-based violence) and *Global Europe* (linked to the forthcoming *Gender Action Plan IV and Woman Peace and Security Action Plan*), must have dedicated and sufficient resources.

Include gender equality objectives in all funding programme regulations.

The *Roadmap for Women's Rights* and the *Declaration for a Gender-Equal Society* (adopted by the European Commission in March 2025 and endorsed by other EU institutions in fall 2025) provide a sound basis for formulating gender equality objectives in the next EU budget. Without explicit gender equality objectives in programme regulations, the EU budget cannot deliver on its equality commitments, as funding allocations depend on the objectives set. In external financing, commit that 85% of all funding will contribute to gender equality, 20% will have gender equality as a principle objective, and 5% will be earmarked to support women's rights groups as proven leaders in furthering gender equality.

Integrate comprehensive gender mainstreaming provisions in the MFF.

GM should follow established standards, covering all stages of the budgetary process — from preparation and design to implementation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation. A dedicated provision should be added to the *Performance Framework Regulation* to complement the limited expenditure-tracking rule, and specific mainstreaming articles should be included in each programme regulation, building on best practices from the 2021–2027 MFF. Similar to the other horizontal priorities (climate and biodiversity target and the social target), the MFF should contain an ambitious explicit target for gender equality expenditures.

Strengthen monitoring for gender equality results and improve tracking expenditures on gender equality objectives.

Revise the monitoring framework to measure results towards EU gender equality goals and track financing towards it. Revise Annex I of the *Performance Framework Regulation* to ensure that the list of interventions classified as “score 2” (with gender equality as a principal objective) accurately reflects financing for EU gender equality goals.

Ensure compliance with Treaty obligations (Article 8 TFEU).

The EU is bound to eliminate inequalities and promote equality between women and men in all its activities. Annex IV (and Article 7(1)) of the *Performance Framework Regulation* which limits the list of programmes aiming to support gender equality should therefore be deleted or amended to bring the proposal into compliance with Treaty obligations.

Embed gender equality in National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs).

Gender equality objectives should be a key requirement in NRPPs, and **independent gender equality bodies** must have a formal role in their elaboration. This should be explicitly required in the NRPP regulation.

Let's set the course towards a peaceful, prosperous and equal Europe!