

# EU Civil Society Strategy

## *EIGE's Contribution to the Call for Evidence*

The European Institute for Gender Equality (hereafter referred to as 'EIGE') is a decentralised agency of the European Union, established to contribute to and strengthen the promotion of gender equality, including gender mainstreaming in EU policies and the resulting national policies by providing technical assistance to EU institutions, in particular the Commission, and the authorities of the Member States<sup>ii</sup>. The Agency also aims to raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality. EIGE has become the knowledge centre and the primary source for information on gender equality in the European Union.

EIGE contributes to making the European Union become a Union of Equality, where women and men, girls and boys in all their diversity are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our societies.

As the EU agency for gender equality, we welcome the European Commission's initiative to build on its toolbox to support and involve civil society organisations by establishing an EU civil society strategy. Civil society plays a pivotal role in advancing civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. It empowers marginalised voices, promotes active participation in governance, and holds authorities accountable. EIGE's latest reports highlight an increasing backlash against CSOs, including threats to their funding. Despite existence of formal consultation mechanisms, the involvement of CSOs in policy development is often ad hoc and under-resourced, lacking regularity and follow-up mechanisms. Indeed, in some Member States, CSOs reported a noticeable decline in recent involvement in policy development, attributed to national political shifts and structural changes in consultation bodies. This decline has weakened the role of CSOs in co-designing public policies and reduced their influence on gender equality initiatives. The absence of follow-up mechanisms to ensure that CSO input is considered and acted upon further diminishes the meaningfulness of their participation. This limits the effectiveness of the policies and hinders the inclusion of diverse perspectives.

**This strategy should contribute to the EU's Union of Equality and the Democracy Shield. It should acknowledge the indispensable role of civil society in all its diversity in fostering democratic engagement, promoting gender equality and safeguarding human rights. The strategy should provide a robust and coherent policy framework that enables, supports and protects civil society.**



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**It should lead to strengthened public consultations on policies and legislation, ensuring broader participation from stakeholders, including women’s and gender equality organisations, in policymaking across all areas and funding programmes. Ensuring sustainable funding for CSOs working on gender equality and intersecting inequalities would facilitate the promotion of long-term transformative changes in gender equality and contribute to the Union of Equality and a more democratic EU.**

## **Tackling the challenges**

According to paragraph 350<sup>iii</sup> of the Beijing Platform for Action, governments should play a role in strengthening the capacity of NGOs to mobilise resources for gender equality. The European Commission’s 2020–2025 gender equality strategy aligns with this goal by emphasising the ‘joint responsibility’ required to achieve gender equality in the EU, which necessitates collaboration between EU institutions, Member States and civil society. NGOs play a vital role in implementing gender equality policies and programmes in the EU by advocating for gender equality and equality more broadly, providing essential services, raising awareness, holding governments accountable and ensuring that the voices of diverse communities are included in policymaking processes.

### ***European civil-society organisations contribute to a more just, gender equal Europe – but they are under threat***

The Beijing Platform for Action (BpfA) highlights the involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs), especially women’s organisations, in implementing gender mainstreaming. CSOs are critical drivers of gender equality, upholding the rule of law, and driving social, environmental and economic progress in the EU. This includes specialist CSOs working to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, who deliver frontline services such as shelters, crisis centres, helplines, counselling, legal aid, and protection. These organisations are essential to meeting EU and Member State obligations under the Victims’ Rights Directive and the 2024 Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence. EIGE’s research also shows that GBV CSOs are often the only point of support/contact for victims of GBV during times of crisis, including for victims of GBV fleeing the war in Ukraine and during COVID-19 “lockdowns”<sup>iv</sup>.

According to EIGE’s 2025 report “Beijing Platform for Action +30: Impact driver - Marking milestones and opportunities for gender equality in the EU”<sup>v</sup> and FRA’s 2025 submission to the European Commission in the context of the preparation of the annual Rule of Law report<sup>vi</sup>, many CSOs and activists face a growing backlash, including funding cuts, abusive lawsuits, property damage, surveillance by law enforcement, excessive administrative controls or audits, online verbal abuse or attacks, or even violent attacks on activists.

European institutions have been warning about an increasing anti-gender backlash for some years. On 8 March 2022, the European Parliament adopted a Report<sup>vii</sup> on the shrinking space

for civil society in Europe. This Report highlights that CSOs and (women) human rights defenders ((W)HRDs) working on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), women's rights, LGBTI rights or gender equality, are among those who are the most targeted and affected by the shrinking civic space. They are deliberately attacked, by state and non-state actors, in the EU to prevent them from defending SRHR and gender equality. They face legal (strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)), administrative and fiscal harassment, criminalisation and negative rhetoric aimed at stigmatising and delegitimising CSOs and draining their capacity to carry out their work, hate speech – both online and offline – and verbal and physical harassment and attacks. The Report affirms that these attacks are not isolated, but rather function as a premeditated and gradual dismantling of fundamental rights, and constitutes part of a larger political agenda of ‘anti-gender’ campaigns. On 6 December 2022, the European Commission (DG JUST Fundamental Rights Unit) published its Annual [Report](#)<sup>viii</sup> on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, focused on civic space. In this Report, the European Commission acknowledged that civil society organisations working on women’s and sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTI rights are among those most affected by attacks and harassment, including SLAPPs.

According to FRA’s upcoming report on its Civic Space Consultation<sup>ix</sup>, CSOs working on human rights in the EU continue to face various forms of threats and attacks against their organisation, their employees and volunteers. Since 2018, FRA’s annual consultations have shown that online verbal threats and attacks, and negative media reports and campaigns are the most frequently experienced types of incidents. A clear majority of EU-based CSOs often or sometimes had such experiences in 2024 (online verbal threats and attacks: experienced by 67%; negative media reports and campaigns: experienced by 60%). Politically motivated funding cuts and withdrawals (39%), and excessive administrative controls or audits (36%) have been frequent or occasional experiences for more than one third of the EU-based respondents.

The emergence of new actors, including conservative anti-gender movements, has also been identified as a significant challenge by CSOs. These movements are well-funded, strategic, and have gained social and political influence, hindering efforts towards substantive change in gender equality.<sup>x</sup> Particularly on topics such as SRHR, including comprehensive sexuality education, same-sex marriage and LGBTIQ+ rights, there is an increasingly polarised environment, in which advocates face significant opposition and political obstacles. This situation creates a chilling effect on civil society and reduces policymakers’ ambition to tackle gender equality issues. It takes a significant amount of CSOs’ time, capacity, and resources to monitor and counter these retrogressive initiatives; resources that could have been invested in achieving progress for gender equality.

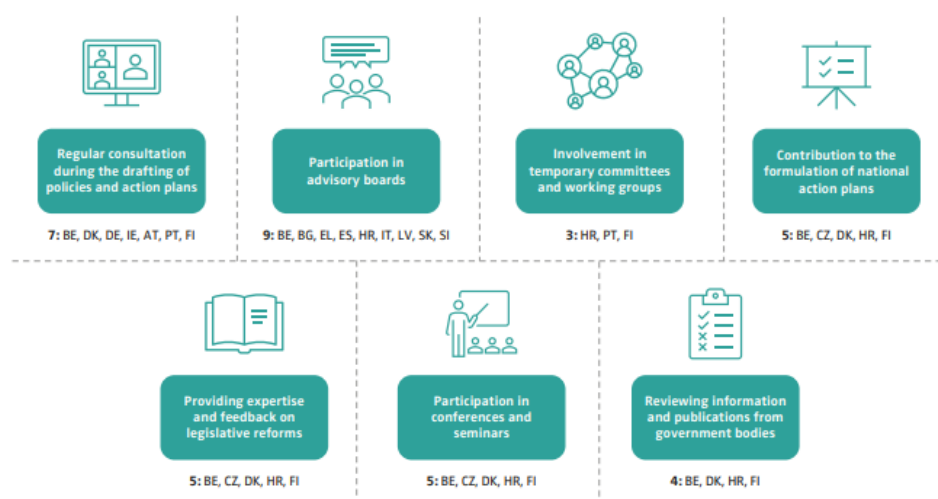
**Civil society organisations need an enabling environment that fosters meaningful engagement and provides them with further support, if they are to carry out their work and contribute to EU policies. They should be able to pursue their activities without interference. The EU should act to promote and protect civic space and those active within it.**

## Accountability and formal consultation mechanisms need to be structured and inclusive

The actions identified for governments under Area H of the Beijing Platform for Action (BpfA) include ensuring the involvement of a ‘diverse range of institutional actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors’. In addition, BPFa paragraph 201 (b) mentions the following precondition for the effective functioning of these bodies: ‘Institutional mechanisms or processes that facilitate, as appropriate, decentralized planning, implementation and monitoring with a view to involving non-governmental organizations and community organizations from the grass-roots upwards’ (United Nations, 1995).

EIGE’s latest report “Institutional mechanisms that deliver on gender equality and gender mainstreaming”<sup>xi</sup> identified issues in relation to the accountability mechanisms of institutional frameworks for gender equality and the role of CSOs in contributing to gender equality policy development and monitoring.

Formal consultation mechanisms at national level exist, such as advisory councils, national platforms and consultative bodies, which help integrate their insights and ensure that gender equality policies are comprehensive and effective. Despite their existence, consultation and involvement of CSOs in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies, laws or programmes is often ad hoc and under-resourced, lacking a systematised and regular consultation process and follow-up mechanisms. This limits their effectiveness and hinders the inclusion of diverse perspectives.



Source: EIGE, data collection on institutional mechanisms.

Though most Member States provide funding to CSOs, the lack of long-term, sustainable funding represents a structural barrier to the involvement of CSOs in policymaking, limits their capacity to provide essential services (including to GBV victims and marginalised communities), and hinders their ability to foster long-term transformative changes in gender

equality. This highlights the **need for structured and inclusive funded consultation processes, and enhanced resources for CSOs.**

The lack of transparency and inclusivity in consultation mechanisms hinders the inclusion of marginalised groups. In addition, the lack of clear selection criteria for CSOs to participate in consultation processes was identified as an important issue and often resulted in favouring larger and better-known organisations over smaller and/or regionally located organisations. It is easier for well-established and well-known organisations to use ‘unofficial channels’ to interact with government bodies. In contrast, smaller CSOs mentioned that they struggle to be heard and to contribute due to their lack of connections within government bodies. Marginalised groups of women are often represented by smaller CSOs. Their limited access to consultation platforms hinders the inclusion of an intersectional approach in gender equality policies, as the voices of marginalised groups are not adequately represented, leading to a lack of diverse perspectives in policy development. **Involving CSOs in a transparent and inclusive manner is a crucial way to ensure a broad range of expertise and lived experiences inform the development and success of gender equality policies.**

### ***Funding for CSOs needs to be adequate and consistent***

For its report on Institutional Mechanisms, between 7 May and 20 June 2024, EIGE conducted a total of 91 interviews across the 27 Member States with CSO representatives active in gender equality and gender mainstreaming to gather the perspectives and experiences of CSOs. The report highlights the fact that there are limited resources available, and equality-related CSOs may be forced to compete rather than cooperate with each other. Limited resources create reliance on unpaid contributions from CSOs, which can have a detrimental operational impact, meaning that collaboration and consultation with the government can be time-consuming and financially burdensome. This financial insecurity limits the number of participating CSOs, particularly smaller CSOs, which become reliant on uncertain and competitive sources of funding, an issue that has been reported in several countries.

The lack of long-term, sustainable funding represents a structural barrier to the involvement of CSOs and hinders their capacity to foster long-term transformative changes in gender equality. In almost all Member States, CSOs reported that consultation mechanisms rely on CSOs’ unpaid contributions, which is particularly burdensome for smaller organisations that lack the necessary resources to participate. Although funding for CSOs has increased in some Member States, it is often provided on an annual basis, making it difficult for these organisations to implement long-term, sustainable actions towards transformative change. Insufficient funding (as well as the regulations governing such funding) has a negative impact on CSOs’ performance, human resources and ability to participate in advisory activities for the state. It also means that governments do not sufficiently use the expertise and capacity of CSOs to implement gender equality and gender mainstreaming policies. For CSOs working on GBV, unpredictable and short-term funding directly undermines service provision for victims. Specialist GBV CSOs often operate as the sole providers of shelters, crisis centres,

helplines and other essential services – particularly in times of crisis - yet remain financially insecure.

**Recognising, supporting and funding the work of CSOs that focus on gender equality and wider equalities, with an intersectional perspective, includes providing financial support, capacity building and giving them a platform. This is vital to strengthen social cohesion, foster participatory democracy by enabling direct citizen involvement in policy, and providing crucial services and support to communities. A flourishing civil society also enhances social trust and resilience and ensures a more stable and equitable future for Europe, where no one is left behind.**

## Recommendations

### *Protection*

- **Ensure a vibrant civic space in which a wide spectrum of civic space actors can freely and actively participate in public processes, including those that bring a feminist perspective.** EU Member States must fulfil their obligations under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Charter) and international human rights law, including in relation to the freedoms of assembly, association and expression. Member States should refrain from undue interference with the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and ensure that any restrictions to these rights meet the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality.
- **Safeguard the operating spaces of activists and CSOs, including those working for women’s rights and gender equality.** Ensure a safe environment for activists and civil society by strengthening their protection against online and physical violence and harassment. This should include measures to protect GBV service providers, such as shelters and crisis centres, which face targeted harassment and threats due to their work with GBV victims.
- **Promote networking and the development of collaborative strategies** to counter the influence of conservative anti-gender movements and ensure that gender equality initiatives are not undermined by misinformation and regressive agendas. Continue to **fund European projects that develop sustainable solutions to tackle the effects of anti-gender discourses**, and practically counteract anti-gender equality and anti-feminist discursive strategies and backlash tactics.

### *Participation*

- **Engage in meaningful and systematic consultations** on strategic policy processes across all policy areas and funding instruments (beyond those specifically dedicated to gender equality) **with CSOs working on gender equality, human rights, equality and women’s rights.** Member States should ensure that policies and legislation are compatible with gender equality and women’s rights obligations, including through broad public consultation that foresees sufficient time for a meaningful contribution.

- **Develop regular and transparent processes for consultation, including clear criteria to ensure diverse representation of CSOs working on promotion of gender equality, including smaller and regional groups.** Establishing formal structures and protocols for engagement involving forums or umbrella associations of CSOs that include smaller organisations helps promote an intersectional approach by ensuring that the voices of various marginalised and underrepresented communities are heard. They should provide for measures that support participation of people in vulnerable situations, including people with disabilities and members of ethnic, racial and religious minorities, as well as their representative civil society organisations.
- **Set up follow-up mechanisms to act on CSOs' input and provide feedback on their inputs, to enhance transparency and accountability.** These mechanisms should include clear transparent procedures for documenting CSO contributions, assessing their feasibility and incorporating them into policy decisions where appropriate. Follow-up mechanisms ensure that the consultation process is not merely symbolic but leads to tangible actions and improvements in gender mainstreaming and gender transformative policymaking.

## Funding

- **Ensure sustainable multi-year funding for CSOs, women's rights organisations, specialist GBV CSOs, and other relevant bodies working on gender equality,** that is both adequate and predictable to ensure their capacity and financial security. This will expand their capacity to champion policy reforms, to fully participate in all stages of processes, from planning to evaluation, and promote long-term transformative changes in gender equality.
- Ensure **appropriate financial and human resources** are allocated for the implementation of integrated policies, measures and programmes to prevent and combat all forms of violence covered by the scope of the **Istanbul Convention**.
- Ensure that the successor to the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme provides **increased EU funding for women's rights and gender equality organisations and those promoting intersecting perspectives.**
- Build strategic partnerships as part of innovative funding structures, simplify the procedures, adjust for inflation, and **reserve funding for awareness raising and the provision of advice, services and support on gender equality and gender mainstreaming.**

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<sup>i</sup> Established by the European Parliament and of the Council Regulation (EC) No 1922/2006 of 20 December 2006 (OJ L 403/9 of 30.12.2006)

<sup>ii</sup> Article 2, Idem 2

<sup>iii</sup> Beijing Platform for Action (1995), paragraph 350: “Non-governmental organizations, the private sector and other actors of civil society should be encouraged to consider allocating the resources necessary for the implementation of the Platform for Action. Governments should create a supportive environment for the mobilization of resources by non-governmental organizations, particularly women's organizations and networks, feminist groups, the private sector and other actors of civil society, to enable them to contribute towards this end. The capacity of non-governmental organizations in this regard should be strengthened and enhanced.”

<sup>iv</sup> EIGE. (2024). *Women fleeing the war: Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. [Women fleeing the war: Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive | European Institute for Gender Equality](#); and EIGE. (2021). *The Covid-19 pandemic and intimate partner violence against women in the EU*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. [Women fleeing the war: Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)

<sup>v</sup> EIGE (2025). [Beijing Platform for Action +30: Impact driver - Marking milestones and opportunities for gender equality in the EU](#). Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

<sup>vi</sup> See the [Fundamental Rights Agency's submission to the European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report](#) for data.

<sup>vii</sup> [European Parliament resolution of 8 March 2022 on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights: 2022 annual report looks at role of civil society and underlines need to increase support](#)

<sup>ix</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (forthcoming), Civic Space Consultation covering 2024

<sup>x</sup> EIGE (2025), [Institutional mechanisms that deliver on gender equality and gender mainstreaming](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid